Reviewer’s report

Title: How do organisations implement research impact assessment (RIA) principles and good practice? A narrative review and exploratory study of four international research funding and administrative organisations

Version: 0 Date: 28 Aug 2019

Reviewer: Anders Brantnell

Reviewer's report:

Review of: "How do research organisations implement research impact assessment (RIA) principles and good practice? A narrative review and exploratory study of four international funders. HRPS-D-19-00165

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to review this interesting work. The paper deals with an important and timely issue. However, I have some concerns regarding the different sections. I will elaborate on these issues below.

General comments

1. Please use line spacing (1.5-2) and line numbering independent from page numbering. The text is difficult to read and comment as it is now.

2. Please go through the manuscript searching for spelling and formatting errors. Some such errors are present.

Background

1. The following meaning in the background (page 4, lines 35-39) does not make sense, please reconsider the phrasing "methodological approaches": "The International School on Research Impact Assessment (ISRIA) was set up by research and funding organisations who recognised a need for research impact strategies and associated assessment efforts to be given an explicit practitioner focus, while remaining grounded in robust, methodical approaches."

2. The following paragraph is lacking references (page 5, lines 13-20), please add references: "Many research organisations globally now attempt to set expectations around 'impact' - encouraging researchers to consider impact early in their planning, and requesting evidence of contributions to impact - in an attempt to maximise the benefits of their research investments, as well as provide accountability. However constituent organisations appear to vary in the levels of guidance they provide and their organisational approaches to supporting, evaluating and evidencing impact."

3. On page 4 lines 54-61 you write that "Essentially, RIA involves funders asking researchers to identify the impact of grants awarded (or proxy indicators representative of progress towards impact), and then using this information to conduct their own assessments, analyses and
evaluations. While many definitions of impact abound, national RIA exercises tend to define research impact as a change or benefit demonstrably realised beyond academia, as a result of research activity/ies (6). This short description of RIA does not problematize RIA in a sufficient manner. I suggest you to describe impact in a problematizing manner and discuss how to evaluate impact.

Methods

1. On page 7 lines 9-14 you write that "Studies of particular interest were those reporting on observational/participatory/operational/action research from the perspective of research organisations undertaking impact assessment." Did you exclude studies reporting on interviews with research organisations? Why?

2. In the methods section, I cannot see the timeframe for your search and a possible motivation to the selected timeframe. Please add this information.

3. In the methods section, I cannot see any details on the narrative literature review process and how data, from the review, was analyzed. These two parts are usually one paragraph each. Please add these paragraphs.

4. On page 7 lines 32-34 you write "The second stage involved an enquiry of a convenience sample of representatives from four large regional and national public research". Do you mean public research organisations?

5. In Table 1 it would be worthwhile to see whether the funders focus on basic or applied research or both. Please add this information.

6. On page 8 line 60 and onwards you write "As we hypothesised that there is limited research on research funding organisations themselves (as opposed to the organisations conducting research, types of constituent research they fund, or the health systems this research is conducted in), the methods we set out are by their nature exploratory, with a focus on inductive analysis, led primarily by interviewees' responses. Hypothesised is probably not a correct term with qualitative research. Also, I cannot see this part clearly in your background. You write very little about research funding organisations and their activities in the background. I am not convinced that there is limited research on funding organisations themselves based on your background. If you clarify your background regarding limited research on research funding organisations this paragraph could make more sense. However, I would change the word hypothesized. Another concern I have regarding this paragraph is that you seem to give a little attention to your review. Why did you conduct this review if it is not part of your analysis? Please reconsider this part of the paragraph."
Results

1. It would be helpful if you could show your five included cases in a table with some important variables concerning their activities.

2. On page 9 lines 12-15 you write "Given this, we have presented our findings under three broad headings relating to the structures, processes and outcomes relevant to organisations' various RIA activities." This statement is not completely correct. You have not followed this structure with your reporting from the review. Please rephrase.

3. On page 9 lines 31-32 you write "Of these, only one funder proposed and then subsequently reported back on their experiences of adopting a methodical approach to RIA (21) (22)." Although you write "only one funder" you still refer to two references, numbers 21 and 22. Which one of these are you talking about?

4. In the results section you note that only five papers met your inclusion criteria (on page 9 lines 43-44) but at the same time you claim on page 10 lines 47-48: "the only paper strictly meeting our inclusion criteria". What do you mean? It is unclear how many papers met your inclusion criteria. Please clarify. Also, I find the results a bit confusing since you have also described some of the other papers (n=124) in your search. I am not completely sure why you do this. Please consider whether these parts contribute to your aim and in that case how. I think that they could be left out.

5. What was the purpose and aim with the narrative review? Please clarify this briefly in the opening paragraph in the results section.

6. The paragraph on page 10 lines 22-55 is too long and difficult to follow. Also, you blend two references 21 and 22 in this paragraph, and at the same time claim that number 22 was the only one meeting your inclusion criteria. This paragraph needs clarification.

7. On page 12 lines 7-8 you write " , as well as the theory, design, results and application of discrete RIA studies." What do you mean with application of discrete RIA studies? Please clarify.

8. To increase rigour and transparency please label the interview quotes somehow, e.g., funder 1 respondent A, B etc. Also, I think you should indicate the funder and respondent when you write for instance "one interviewee noted" so that the reader can understand which interviewees said what and from which funders.

9. Check the spelling on Donabedian.
Discussion

1. In the discussion section page 21 lines 13-14 you write "We noted in our findings that funder maturity and readiness for RIA varies considerably even across the four funders we examined". Since you have not indicated funders and respondents in the results section the reader cannot verify this claim. Please indicate the funders and respondents in the results section.

2. The following paragraph is missing a reference: "This sentiment is echoed and expanded upon by Trochim and colleagues. They recognise that setting out the implications of RIA can support policy and action as well as 'clarify conceptual concerns and engage thinking' amongst researchers. They encourage funders to work collaboratively with local groups in their approaches to evaluation. In their view, the role of funders in this area is to provide general guidance, not explicit requirements - to allow scope for local ownership and contextually-relevant planning of evaluation activities to take place. Nonetheless, they encourage funders developing written evaluation policies or guidance to ensure that these address important topics over and above management and methods: such as goals, roles, participation - as well as the use, dissemination and meta-evaluation of such policies." Page 24 lines 14-26

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Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English**
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