Reviewer's report

Title: Required versus inspired research partnerships: a qualitative inquiry

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Reviewer: Bev J Holmes

Reviewer's report:

Thanks for the opportunity to review this paper, whose topic I believe is very relevant - and important - for funders, researchers and knowledge users. I have a few suggested revisions that are minor but I believe essential, and a few discretionary revisions.

In the minor but essential category, there needs to be some attention paid to the definition of partner/partnership, which is introduced shortly after the term knowledge user, but then conflated with it. Perhaps start with a definition of knowledge user and then relate it to partner, and define the latter.

This type of ‘definitional thinking’ will be important when we get to your literature review on the dominant barriers to successful partnerships, because we need to know what is meant by successful partnerships. The paper nicely refers to the (faulty?) assumption that research will be more easily (or even readily!) implemented if there is a partnership, so this would enable commentary on the wide range of meanings of "success" in partnerships.

The discussion is very short relative to the results. It seems to be organized into the topic areas, but the first sentence of the first area seems to be a lead for the entire discussion section. There are such rich findings in your results section but they don't seem to make it into the discussion, where it feels like you could make more of the them and their implications. An example: in the conclusion, there is mention of funding arrangements and academic performance criteria - so critical to understand and act on - but this was not a strong point in the discussion and could be. Another example: it seems there is a lot of expertise here about impact and expectations of same, which could be explored in a little more depth. Without that, statements such as "the partnership itself was seen by several participants as being more important than the impacts of the research project" are hard to decipher.

The overall study needs a bit more explanation. It's noted that this paper deals with the qualitative component of "this inquiry" but it took me a while to realize that the quantitative piece was the survey.

Finally, there are some grammatical errors to correct...some minor ("the partnerships evaluated in this researcher...") and some less so (on page 14, the word "tantamount" is used when I believe it should be "paramount.")

In the discretionary category:
- overall, I don't think that breaking out the interview results into the three types of partnerships with the same questions under each is the best way to do it. I found it difficult to follow. There is really interesting commentary that might benefit from being collapsed under the thematic areas so you could explore the partnerships within the themes. If the paper was structured differently, I think my comment in the above section about the imbalance between the results and discussion section might be more easily addressed, because you would have more to work with. Some text could come out of the results and into the discussion.

- page 3, re the expectation of iKT is that research findings derived from partnerships will be readily applied...is there anything in your study that suggests we should rethink this expectation?

- page 3, the various terms that related to research with knowledge users...many of these distinctions are not subtle (your assertion). It might be helpful to talk about the range of different meanings and assumptions in these terms. For example PAR is very politically oriented and there are ramifications. The strength of your work is that it can offer guidance (critical success factors) to funders and others engaging in partnership research ...if, again, the terms of KU and partner are more tightly defined.

- At one point you refer to the three CIHR programs that use iKT, and at another, you talk about three "of its iKT programs." Not sure whether there are three or more, but regardless, a description of each - and what partnership or KU means in each - would be very helpful.

- on page 5, it's not clear to me what "whether required partnerships increase grant impact on the quality of research" means. Maybe a typo?

In summary, a paper with really good potential on a topic that needs much more exploration (that could be catalyzed here) but some streamlining and stronger explanations seem necessary.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.