Author’s response to reviews

Title: Engaging Policy-Makers, Health System Managers and Policy Analysts in the Knowledge Synthesis Process: A Scoping Review

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Response to Editor and Reviewer Comments on IMPS-D-17-00614: Engaging Policy-Makers, Health System Managers and Policy Analysts in the Knowledge Synthesis Process: A Scoping Review

Our responses to the reviewers’ comments are outlined below in italics and have also been indicated in the manuscript using tracked changes. The line numbers correspond to the version with tracked changes.

Editor comments:

This is a very well written and constructed paper as is reflected in the reviewers’ comments below. My only additional reflection is a bit more of an introduction into why this review is important in the context of the available evidence. We see an increasing interest (and therefore publication of papers) in co-production but we need stronger evidence to guide these processes.
This then gives a stronger rationale for the importance of the review and then a stronger case in the discussion and conclusion for why this review might be of value. Reviewer 2 makes some useful suggestions - particularly around definitions of engagement and a clearer description of “what next”.

Author response: Thank you for the opportunity to revise our manuscript and for your excellent feedback. We have added the following to our introduction on lines 91 to 96:

“Co-production of evidence increases the policy-relevance of research questions and fosters integration of findings into policy and practice.[12-14] However, the opportunities and approaches to engaging a wide range of knowledge users remain largely unexplored. Evidence is required to guide the process of engaging knowledge users in knowledge synthesis to identify engagement approaches that are effective, efficient and meaningful. In addition, co-production of research by researchers and knowledge users requires additional time and funding and it is imperative that the limited resources available for health research are used appropriately”

As well, we have incorporated all the suggestions made by Reviewer 2 and have responded to them below.

Reviewer 1: When reviewing a paper I typically have major comments (I think it needs restructuring or substantial rewriting) and/or minor ones (there are errors or typos). In this case I have read the ms through a couple of times and have no comments at all: I think the ms is acceptable for publication as it is. Well done!

Author response: Thank you for taking the time to review our manuscript and for your encouraging comments. We hope that the broad themes of knowledge user engagement presented in this manuscript will provide some clarity on strategies, as well as barriers and facilitators to engaging knowledge users in the production of knowledge synthesis and encourage researchers to meaningfully integrate knowledge users when planning a review.

Reviewer 2: This paper is a scoping review of the engagement of knowledge users and stakeholders in the knowledge synthesis process. Generally, it is a well-designed and well written paper that contributes to the literature on how knowledge stakeholders become engaged with knowledge creation but some revisions would improve further:

Author response: Thank you for your thorough review of our manuscript. We appreciate your time and helpful feedback on our paper and believe you have made it much stronger.

Comment 1: "Engagement" is a broad term (as this article in fact describes) so I would appreciate provision of a working definition for purposes of this paper. This is particularly important for the eligibility criteria described on p. 9, line 142 of "papers that described any engagement strategy." I recognize the reference to Keown et al's framework on p. 12 (as well as the full protocol paper), but inclusion of a short description of how this was operationalized earlier in the paper would be appreciated.
Author response: Agree that our definition of engagement will be useful for the readers and have added the following on lines 146-152:

“Engagement can be defined as “an iterative process of actively soliciting the knowledge, experience, judgment and values of individuals selected to represent a broad range of direct interests in a particular issue, for the dual purposes of: creating a shared understanding [and] making relevant, transparent and effective decisions”.[8] This scoping review limits knowledge user engagement to those opportunities that allow a meaningful interaction of knowledge users in the research process from its conception through its design and completion and/or interpretation and uptake of results.”

Comment 2: I was struck by use of the phrase "optimal methods" (p. 6, line 89). For one, any kind of optimization requires a description of the dimensions to be optimized, but more importantly this paper cannot speak to anything optimal—rather it can only describe how, when and through what means knowledge users are involved. I would recommend rewording.

Author response: We have rephrased the sentence to the following on lines 89-91:

“…the opportunities and approaches to engaging a wide range of knowledge users remain largely unexplored.”

Comment 3: The study design excludes scoping reviews that do not "mention" at least one type of knowledge user, but nowhere in the paper did I find discussion of how many papers actively engaged knowledge users and how many "mention" knowledge users but were not able to engage them in the process. I.e., did any of the scoping reviews describe failed attempts to engage knowledge users or were all the reports successful in some level of engagement?

a. Relatedly, if in fact all scoping reviews included in the study did engage knowledge users, findings for RQ4 should include a caveat that the barriers reported are within the context of studies that were successful in engaging knowledge users.

Author response: We did not exclude studies for failed attempts in engaging relevant knowledge users. That being said, since reporting of knowledge user engagement was not the primary focus of most of the 73 application papers and their engagement methods were reported in an inconsistent manner, it is difficult to definitively quantify the proportion of studies that encountered a failed attempt at engagement. It is quite possible that authors simply did not report any activities that did not take place. We have now highlighted this limitation in our discussion on lines 443-448:

“Furthermore, the reporting of knowledge user engagement methods varied considerably in their completeness across the included studies and as such, our data are limited by the details described in the literature. For example, most papers described steps to engage knowledge users but did not provide details on non-response or unsuccessful engagement.”

Comment 4: At times, the number of studies included is confusing. The total number of studies is 84 + 7 = 91, but most tables refer only to 84 (or to the 74 application articles). Please include a
statement as to how the companion reports relate to the 84 unique documents (e.g., they are excluded from analysis due to inherent duplication of information).

Author response: We have now clarified this in our manuscript on lines 213-214:

“…84 unique documents and 7 companion reports (i.e., follow-up reports to the main literature included in our analysis) fulfilled our eligibility criteria”

Comment 5: I found it interesting that although the search spanned 20 years, all included documents spanned only the last 10. Does this say something meaningful about the extent to which this engagement process has changed in recent history, or rather is it possible that different terminology was used prior to 2005/6?

a. Relatedly, although I realize all included documents were quite recent, I was curious as to whether there were any over-time trends (especially with respect to the number of stages at which knowledge users were engaged or the stage at which knowledge users were engaged)?

Author response: Although most of the literature in our scoping review span the last 10 years, there is no linear relationship between the number and year of publications and a time trend for intensity of engagement was not observed. Furthermore, our literature search employed a broad range of keyword and medical subject headings to account for this evolving area. It is also likely that the growing efforts of research funding bodies mandating active knowledge user engagement provided impetus for researchers to discuss and consider engagement with knowledge users in their research activities (e.g. the Canadian Institutes of Health Research require knowledge user engagement for most of their grants). We have revised the following lines 358-361:

“We did not identify differences in results over time or across settings, phases of engagement, or how engagement was conducted. This might be because the practice of engaging knowledge users in knowledge synthesis is still relatively new.”

Comment 6: I was also struck by the very limited number of articles that discussed outcomes of engagement. This seems an obvious next step moving forward, so would appreciate a bit more discussion as to what this might look like moving forward, or what steps further scoping reviews related to knowledge synthesis might take to examine outcomes relate to engagement of knowledge users.

Author response: We have now added the suggested next steps in the discussion on lines 395-398:

“To better define knowledge user engagement in knowledge synthesis, researchers should discretely identify desired benefits and impacts of engagement and develop systematic and reproducible methods and indicators for formal evaluation.”

Comment 7: With respect to limitations, connecting these limitations back more clearly to the findings of your work would be appreciated. For example, limiting to the past 20 years doesn't
seem to be problematic given that all reviews included came from the past 10 years—unless, of course, the methodology used was time-sensitive, as noted above. However, inclusion of only English language reviews likely limits this review's ability to speak to RQ1 contexts related to HICs vs. LMICs. Similarly, the conflation of knowledge users and stakeholders seems to be key to understanding what questions or issues this paper can speak to, so reminding the reader again what the difference is and why a more precise distinction might be important would be appreciated.

Author response: We have revised the limitations section, as follows (lines 428-442):

“To increase feasibility for a timely review completion, we limited inclusion of literature published in the last 20 years. However, this is likely not a significant limitation, as all of the included studies were published in the past 10 years. We also limited to studies written in English, which may have resulted in the exclusion of eligible studies from LMIC settings for RQ1. Given the large number of documents included, the data were abstracted by one reviewer and verified by a second reviewer. However, the data are likely valid, as a pilot-test was conducted prior to embarking on data abstraction with the entire team and a second reviewer who is an experienced research coordinator on the team verified all data. Often the included documents did not distinguish between stakeholders (i.e., those who are affected by or have an interest or stake in research [4]) and knowledge users (i.e., a subgroup of stakeholders who are likely to use research findings to make informed decisions about health systems and practices [5]), which is likely due to inconsistent use of the terms in the literature. As such, our results are likely applicable to both stakeholder and knowledge user participants.”