Reviewer’s report

Title: How was research engaged with and used in the development of 131 policy documents? Findings and measurement implications from a mixed methods study

Version: 0 Date: 29 Dec 2018

Reviewer: Dylan Kneale

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to review this paper. The study presents a really interesting account of evidence use patterns from a study which seems to represent a substantial advancement in terms of its comprehensiveness, depth and scale. The paper was well written and clear, although I have comments that will hopefully strengthen the interpretability and interest in the findings.

Comments

- The analysis is mainly focussed on examining differences in research evidence use across six organisations by agency. One of the limitations of the paper however was that it failed to provide much contextual information around the six organisations or the broader health care decision-making context in NSW. This meant that analysis highlighting differences or similarities in the patterns of research evidence use by organisation had limited resonance with the reader. This is likely a reflection of the need to preserve anonymity, but I do think that (i) providing a greater insight into the health care decision-making landscape in NSW (i.e. funding patterns, ways of accessing care etc.); as well as (ii) providing some further characteristics of the agencies and using these throughout to contextualise the results; is essential in conveying the strength of the findings and helping the reader grasp the interest and implications of the findings. For example on page 14, lines 1-9 suggest that there was an agency effect - although it's unclear if this is to be expected or not without understanding more about the characteristics of the agencies. A more case based approach to presenting the analysis could help with interpreting the findings.

- On p8 the inclusion criteria for documents describe a wide range of documents although it wasn't clear in the results the extent to which research engagement had been explored by document type.

- The status of the thematic analysis isn't clear in the description of the methods - on page 11 it reads as though it was used only/mainly to create a checklist to understand the document characteristics and not to fully explore processes or mechanisms underlying research evidence use.
Additional minor comments

- A comment on the background section is that it fails to mention any deficiencies of the evidence base in meeting the needs of health decision-makers.

- On page 8 the phrasing of 'which they considered to best represent their agency's use of evidence' was ambiguous - was this best representation intended to be 'typical' or 'favourable'?

- The sentence on "Another methodological factor limiting our current understanding of research use in policy concerns the relatively high level of detail collected by most measures." ...didn't seem to be explained well - it wasn't clear how a high level of detail was a limitation.

- On page 8 it was described that there was an Appendix 1 although this was not included in the review document

- On p9 the following sentence was unfinished "An empirically derived scoring system has been derived for"

- I think that it would be useful for the discussion to refer back to the evidence base more than it does currently, again to signify what is new from the results of this study. For example it would be useful to consider if this type of finding contradicts or confirms existing evidence, or provides a new angle: "Overall participants reported moderate levels of searching for and accessing research, generating new research, and interacting with researchers."

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