Author’s response to reviews

Title: How do researchers conceptualize and plan for the sustainability of their NIH R01 implementation projects?

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** Note: all page and line references correspond to the ‘final markup’ of the manuscript – i.e. without track changes

EDITOR COMMENT: We read this manuscript with some interest, but find a number of substantial issues that diminish enthusiasm for it. First, it is very US-centric. Even though the NIH does fund R01s from non-US institutions, in general, non-US based researchers will have little understanding of terms such as "R01" or other language specific to the NIH.

IN TEXT EDITS: “Second, our study focused exclusively on implementation researchers funded by the NIH. There may be additional insights that can be gleaned from doing a similar study of implementation work funded by other agencies in different countries; however, the NIH is one of the world’s largest funders of health evidence implementation research.” (p.12, l. 237-241)

“These findings on the NIH R01 grant scheme can be useful for funders and researchers worldwide who are involved in similar operating grant schemes. Some examples of schemes that fund implementation work outside the United States are the project grants from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and the Invention for Innovation grants from the National Institute for Health Research.” (p.11-12, l. 227-231)

RESPONSE TO EDITOR: We appreciate your review of our manuscript. We have made edits to the discussion and limitations sections to acknowledge that the study is limited to NIH funded research. We selected the NIH for this study because it is the one of the world’s largest funders of health research. We believe that our suggestions for funders and researchers are sufficiently
broad that they can be applied by funders from other large funding agencies like the CIHR and the NIHR.

EDITOR COMMENT: Second, the document analysis appears thin, based as it is on the limited information in NIHRePorter; it is unclear that these abstracts will have the kind of information being sought.

IN-TEXT EDITS: “First, our study only examined the information available on the NIH RePORTER profiles. This information does not provide complete descriptions of DHR funded implementation projects, nor does it include implementation studies that were reviewed elsewhere at the NIH. It is possible that information on sustainability may be documented elsewhere such as in final study publications. This is why we decided to conduct interviews with funded researchers” (p.12, l. 233-237)

RESPONSE TO EDITOR: We agree that the data source is limited. We have acknowledged that the abstracts may be missing information on sustainability that has been documented elsewhere. This is the reason we decided to do follow-up interviews to allow researchers to expand on how they conceptualized sustainability for their projects.

EDITOR COMMENT: Second, the response rate to the interview request seems very low, and it seems likely that the responses may not be generalizable to the full population of researchers obtaining these grants.

IN-TEXT EDITS: “Third, due to our small sample size, the interview findings may not be generalizable to all implementation researchers. Interviewee demographics reflected that they were from different institutions; however, it is possible that key insights were missing and that there was a bias in those participating in interviews, especially since most interviewees had mentioned sustainability in their project profiles. Qualitative research studies often include this limitation. The goal of qualitative research is to provide rich description of a phenomenon, not to generate perceptions that are representative of the general population from which the study sample was drawn [20].” (p.12, l. 241-248)

RESPONSE TO EDITOR: Yes, we agree that the low response rate means that the interview findings may not be generalizable to the full population of researchers obtaining NIH R01 grants. We have acknowledged this in our limitations section. In qualitative research, small sample sizes are not unusual and the lack of generalizability is a common concern. We offered further detail on this in the limitations section.

EDITOR COMMENT: Finally, a somewhat more conceptual point is that it may not be appropriate for all grants to assume the need for sustainability, nor that all projects have findings that merit sustainability. We recognize that these are policy issues at the NIH, but feel it necessary to point out, since the readership of Implementation Science is not entirely composed of NIH-funded or seeking individuals.
IN-TEXT EDITS: “Fourth, there may be different arguments on whether it is always appropriate for NIH-funded implementation researchers to consider sustainability. Some sustainability experts perceive sustainability as a process that should be considered at the onset of all implementation work, and others perceive sustainability as an outcome that should be considered once the intervention has been evaluated [9]. There may be some implementation projects with findings that should not be sustained. Our study does not expound on this debate.” (p.12-13, l. 248-254)

RESPONSE TO EDITOR: You have raised a good point about the necessity of sustainability. We did not explore this concept in our paper and have added a fourth limitation to acknowledge this. Two recent systematic reviews by Shelton Cooper and Lennox have pointed out that sustainability frameworks, theories, and models suggest different approaches to sustainability. Specifically – some conceptualize sustainability as a process that should be measured and planned for at the onset of all implementation and others conceptualize it as an outcome that should be measured and considered after implementation evaluation.

EDITOR COMMENT: Some discussion of this is warranted. However, given the relatively thin data sources, we encourage you to resubmit as a Short Report, including as necessary additional files that can add some detail for interested readers. We wish you well in finding another outlet for this manuscript if you prefer not to revise.

RESPONSE TO EDITOR: We have taken your advice and are re-submitting this manuscript as a short report. We have cut the content of the paper approximately in half.