

Reviewer's report

Title: Overview of a Formal Scoping Review on Health System Report Cards

Version: 1 **Date:** 27 September 2008

Reviewer: Martin Eccles

Reviewer's report:

Editors Comments

You need to answer mine and the points raised by both the reviewers.

According to your study aim and the purpose of the method you describe I do not think that you can report what the literature says in the way that you currently do. Firstly, as one of the reviewers points out, you don't have any method of reviewing the quality of the literature and so should not really be attempting to report what you think it says unassessed. I think that you should concentrate on doing what you describe the method as being for – producing an overview of what the literature is about.

In sections such as the one on quality indicators you constrain yourselves to saying what the literature is and what it addresses – this is a model for other sections. The sections on Evidence of Effectiveness and Stakeholder views both stray into describing results in a way that is not appropriate and should be removed.

When you are cataloguing studies you need to be clearer about what is contained. Presumably you have articles keyworded and so can present totals for each section and sub-section. At the moment (as the reviewers point out) your use of words such as “several” is unhelpful and serves mainly to obfuscate – especially when you claim in an area such as Evidence of Effectiveness that you have identified 192 articles yet only reference 18. This is a common issue and should be addressed throughout. I would have thought that you could have tabulated the sub-section of all of your four areas in the way that you have for Methods (though each of the methods sub-sections could be further divided). This would then provide the reader with an overall map of the literature with some understanding of what appears where.

The referencing is problematic. You cannot have a reference list with 282 references. I suggest that those references that are cited in the general writing of the paper should appear at the end of the article. Those that are cited from the database you have compiled should be held in a separate list that is in an Attached file (see instructions to authors). Also, as one of the reviewers points out, you need to check all of these are cited.

You talk about the involvement of stakeholders (including policy makers) in the process and you seem to have involved them at least once in your process. If this is the only time you involved them you should make it clear; if it isn't then you need to say more about how often this happened and why.

You say at the end that you are unsure if policy makers will use the database as a resource. If this is the case then you need to represent much more clearly what the point of this exercise is and who it benefits.

You do not say anything about the place of updating in an exercise like this. Given that the scope of this exercise is so broad then relevant literature will accumulate relatively quickly. How do you propose to deal with this, if at all?

As currently written the last sentence of the background is unclear and should be re-worded. I would prefer you to have Aims rather than Purpose. Linked to this you say that your purpose (and subsequent steps) relate to “best practices” – but I cannot see any description of a process that results in best as opposed to less than best being identified. Finally, you never say why this exercise was done. This is very important because you at least hint that you have done an overly broad exercise – who was it that wanted this done? Was it the research team or was it an external body with an information need and if so, what was this? And was it met by what you did? It is only if you can describe things like this that you may end up with some basis for your claim that reviews such as this are “useful”.

The first section of the Methods describing the methods of scoping reviews should appear in the Background.

In your methods you say that you excluded non-systematic reviews. Given what you have done I don't understand why you have applied a (presumably quality) criteria to reviews that you have not applied to other article types.

The discussion needs to be amended in the light of all of the comments and needs to be more “realistically critical” of what was done. At the end of the discussion I am currently still left feeling “so what?”. You have shown that you can do this but I am none the wiser about why and to what purpose, other than to show it is possible. You should amend the discussion.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no competing interests.