fuse The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health

Considering Translational Research? A Question & Answer resource

Introduction
As a UK Centre of Excellence for Translational Research in Public Health, Fuse has gained substantial experience of undertaking research with public health colleagues. This "Question and Answer" document is aimed at researchers with an interest in translational research.

Defining translational research
There isn't a single definition of Translational Research (TR), and it can involve a spectrum of activities. For some, TR is simply about sharing research findings effectively (dissemination). For others it is about working closely with practitioners (or policy-makers) to ensure the delivery of evidence-informed policy or practice at the 'frontline' (implementation science). A third main approach involves working alongside stakeholders throughout the whole research process. Below, we hope to identify the merits of involving academic, policy and practice partners early on in the research process, and we outline some of the issues involved in this.

Q – Why is translational research important? Why bother? What is to be gained?
A – Public health research is challenging. Often the evidence base for interventions or programmes is patchy or contested. The evidence base may not address the precise questions that stakeholders want answered. Research may not appear to be relevant to the local context, and may be subject to social and political influences. Working with those people who will use the findings of the research (research users) can increase the feasibility, acceptability and relevance of research. Participatory approaches may also be considered a more respectful approach (working *with* research users and stakeholders rather than doing research *on them*). It acknowledges the value of professional and lay expertise and tacit knowledge. Done well, it may help facilitate the use of evidence, accelerating evidence-informed policy, practice and decision-making, and improvements in outcomes.
Most funding streams require a 'Pathway to Impact' statement. Adopting a translational research approach can help the development of this statement go beyond the tokenistic.

Q – Who are my stakeholders? Who might be interested in the research topic I'm exploring?
A – It is important to identify the stakeholders who may have an interest in your research topic early on. These may include service users, service providers, commissioners, policy makers and other academics working in your field. It can extend to the general public and specialist journalists and thinking through the relationship of the research to these groups is also worth taking into consideration.

Q – When should I involve these people?
A – It is helpful to involve stakeholders from the earliest stages of developing a proposal, so that you can include their ideas and feedback in the research design. It can help 'ground' your ideas and research design to fit in with live and 'messy' practice contexts. The

advantages of working with stakeholders early on are that their input may help to increase the acceptability, feasibility and potential use of the research.

Q – How could I involve stakeholders?
A – Here are some ideas to consider:

- Jointly identifying and framing the research question(s)
- Collaborating with stakeholders as co-applicants
- Appointing stakeholders as advisors to the project so that they can comment at specific stages
- Stakeholders will be in the best position to facilitate access to research sites, personnel and documentation
- Stakeholders can act as 'pilots' or friendly critics for initial ideas for the research design
- Participating directly in the gathering of data and/or analysis and interpretation of the findings, and writing up
- Influencing the findings and any products of the research
- Potentially committing to being co-funders financially or in kind
- Spreading any findings through their professional networks and by word-of-mouth
- Helping to ensure findings inform service planning, commissioning or delivery

Q – What are the things to consider? What do researchers need to have in place to engage potential stakeholders?
A – It's important to get the tone of your interactions and behaviours right and to be prepared to put in some extra time and effort. This includes, for example, being approachable, saying 'yes' to extra-curricula opportunities (such as participating in the partners meetings and events), maintaining regular communications and updates, and using the most appropriate medium for the message that suits the partner's needs (email, phone, etc). Feedback often, emphasise both the successes as well as the learning points (concerns that need attention and perhaps a change of course) and tailor your message to your audience. You will need to be flexible to the changing demands and contextual 'churn' – this may involve changing the research parameters mid-project.

Ensure:

- Clear, explicit expectations of one another (ie: researcher and stakeholder) are negotiated and agreed from the outset (and preferably documented).
- Any Advisory Group membership and terms of reference are agreed
- You, as researcher understand that people are busy, with competing priorities
- Be patient - it takes time to build relationships
- You will need a flexible approach, given that the context may change
- It is important to be prepared to re-negotiate partner involvement to take account of organisational re-structuring and following changes of government or government policy.

You may find this **summary checklist** of questions useful to consider including:

- What is the expected impact on public health policy or practice of this research? Is it possible to map out the causal chain/logic model from the research to impact via the anticipated changes?
- Who needs to be involved from policy and practice? What are their expectations and needs? What do they need to gain from the research project? What would academics and project partners need to put into the project for it to be feasible?
- What are the costs, and on whom are they likely to fall? Have budgetary implications been thought through? What decisions and arrangements have been made about any payments to policy and practice partners or members of the public (see link to INVOLVE publication in reference list). Will there be any incentives for their involvement in the research process or will you engage stakeholders because the findings will be of interest to them?
- What plans need to be put in place to enable all the benefits envisaged to happen?

Q – What methodological approaches or research designs could I use?
A – Some specific methods are traditionally associated with TR, for example, Participatory Action Research (PAR), grounded theory, ethnography, co-creation or co-production models. However, any attempt to engage research users (or those impacted on by the findings), regardless of the research design, are attempts at TR activity.

Q – Does this rule out other research designs?
A – No, all approaches to research design can benefit from being discussed and shaped by wider stakeholders to ensure their feasibility, applicability, relevance and usefulness.

Q – Can you suggest how I can share the results of my research?
A – Iterative designs allow interim or early research findings to be shared with stakeholders and wider audiences as the research progresses. Other ways to disseminate results are set out below.
Fuse has developed a wealth of experience in communications work. It is worth considering the methods listed below, which can help bring your research findings to the attention of a wide audience. In addition the Fuse Communications Officer can provide direct support, guidance and assistance with all aspects of dissemination.
Methods include:

- Fuse briefs
- Quarterly Research Meetings
- Knowledge Exchange Seminars
- News and media items (including press releases)
- Fuse blog posts
- Social media, for example: Twitter
- Items for the website (and therefore 'infuse')
- YouTube videos – talking heads/animation

Examples of specific support from the Fuse Communications Officer include:

- Templates – PowerPoint presentations and posters
- Corporate Visual Identity (CVI) guidelines

- Bank of images
- Mailing lists
- Review of lay summaries
- Design and organising of printing of Fuse related marketing material

The Fuse Communications Group meets approximately every two months and can be considered as a sounding board for specific topics. For further information, contact Mark Welford, Fuse Communications Officer, M.Welford@tees.ac.uk

Q – How could the research findings be used more widely?
A – Examples could include:

- Production of results or recommendations in a user friendly form and style familiar to policy and practice partners (typically 1-page briefings).
- Participation in stakeholder meetings, workshops or conferences, either on a one-off or more sustained basis, such as an invitation to join a working group
- Through policy and practice networks and newsletters
- Co-production of a training package, a list of key principles, a web-page, an app, a model commissioning document, or a contribution to strategic documents, like a needs assessment, annual plan or strategy
- Open forums, like community meetings
- Secondments, internships or shorter term shadowing arrangements - to a partner organisation or from the partner organisation into academia
- Advising on changes to service planning or commissioning resulting from the implementation of research findings.
- Discussing the research outputs with stakeholders at an early stage will help budget for possible additional commitments in time, staff and money.

Q – How else can Fuse colleagues help?
A – Various options are available and may include, for example:

- Scoping potential stakeholders. The Knowledge Exchange Broker (KEB), Avril Rhodes, or the Translational Research programme research associate, Mandy Cheetham are resources to draw on at the scoping stage and beyond. Contact Avril.Rhodes@tees.ac.uk or M.cheetham@tees.ac.uk.
- The Knowledge Exchange Group (KEG) meets approximately every two months and has an agenda slot, known as the "open conversation" where any issue can be discussed informally.
- Issues concerned with translation can be included in the Members' Days agenda.
- Making use of the networking opportunities at QRMs, Fuse conferences and Knowledge Exchange seminars.
- Facilitating links with established research networks outside academia, for example, those set up to manage research taking place in the NHS such as Comprehensive Local Research Networks (http://www.crn.nihr.ac.uk/).

Q – Can the experience of developing AskFuse help?
A – An anticipated benefit of AskFuse is that, by definition, the projects emerging from enquiries have co-creation built in, and there will be experience arising from Askfuse

projects that can be shared internally – pulling out generic lessons based on real and recent experience. For further information, please contact Peter van der Graaf, AskFuse Research Manager, P.Van.Der.Graaf@tees.ac.uk

References

Mental Health Research Network and INVOLVE (2013) Budgeting for involvement: Practical advice on budgeting for actively involving the public in research studies, Mental Health Research Network, London and INVOLVE, Eastleigh, available from http://www.invo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/INVOLVEMHRNBudgeting09Jul2013.pdf (accessed 15.08.14)

ESRC toolkit offering advice on carrying out knowledge exchange with sources of information, training and support and funding available from http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/impact-toolkit/what-how-and-why/knowledge-exchange/index.aspx (accessed 10.9.14)

Ten "top tips"

1. Consider the involvement of external stakeholders from the outset of any research. Think about the possible gains and what steps you will have to take to avoid any pitfalls.
2. Approach stakeholders with an offer for them to provide a meaningful input to the research (enhancing both the project and enriching for the stakeholder) and on which you are prepared to negotiate.
3. If you have involved stakeholders substantively, the writing of grant applications and impact statements are likely to be more rewarding and you will learn about the worlds of practice and policy making.
4. Bear in mind that involving stakeholders should strengthen the project and increase the likelihood of adoption of the findings in practice – a key aim of TR.
5. Remember that stakeholders, however committed they are to the subject, will not always have research at the top of their work agenda.
6. Consider the people within Fuse that can help, including the advice of KEG, the communications function and members of the translational research strand.
7. Do not rule out the possibility of a translational approach just because the work appears at first glance to have no connection with stakeholders.
8. In involving stakeholders you are contributing to goodwill in relation to the undertaking of future projects and the growth of potential future researchers with a service background.
9. Think imaginatively about how research findings may be disseminated and in what format they should be produced, in addition to academic contributions to peer reviewed journals.
10. A positive experience of TR will mean researchers of the future will have a firm basis on which to make follow up approaches to the same stakeholders – but beware of "research fatigue".

Remember: feel free at any time to contact and seek support from the Translational Research programme members. We would like to hear about the Translational Research activities you are involved in too. For further information, please see http://www.fuse.ac.uk/translational-research/Who

We would welcome any comments and feedback about this Q&A document. Please do let us know if you found it useful, and any suggestions for improvements.
Please send these to Mandy Cheetham M.cheetham@tees.ac.uk

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