



A critical second look at integrated knowledge translation

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ABSTRACT

Integrated knowledge translation (IKT) requires active collaboration between researchers and the ultimate users of knowledge throughout a research process, and is being aggressively positioned as an essential strategy to address the problem of underutilization of research-derived knowledge. The purpose of this commentary is to assist potential “knowledge users”, particularly those working in policy or service settings, by highlighting some of the more nuanced benefits of the IKT model, as well as some of its potential costs. Actionable outcomes may not be immediately (or ever) forthcoming, but the process of collaboration can result in group-level identity transformation that permits access to different professional perspectives as well as, we suggest, added organizational and social value. As well, the IKT approach provides space for the re-balancing of what is considered “expertise”. We offer this paper to help practitioners, administrators and policymakers more realistically assess the potential benefits and costs of engaging in IKT-oriented research.

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1. Introduction

Should practitioners, administrators and policymakers become involved in research? Integrated knowledge translation (IKT), which requires active collaboration between researchers and knowledge users throughout a research process, is being positioned as an, and perhaps the, ideal way to address the problem of the underutilization of research findings [1]. Faced with a future population with chronic, complex health conditions, a large proportion of which will be seniors, combined with the opportunities offered by new technologies, practitioners, administrators and policymakers are looking to (or are expected to look to) research-derived knowledge as one critical source of evidence in their decision-making processes. Although there are many approaches to how IKT might be operationalized

[2], the general assumption is that collaborative research will engage, from its early stages, the so-called “knowledge user” and address questions that are of concern to them. As described by Graham and Tetroe, IKT “. . . involves collaboration between researchers and research users in the research process including the shaping of the research questions, deciding the methodology, involvement in the data collection and tools development, interpreting the findings and helping disseminating the research results. Research users could be other investigators from different disciplines, teams or countries but more often are policy makers, decision makers, research funders, industry, clinicians or the public” [1, p. 48]. This problem-focused, co-production approach in generating knowledge is being taken up and promoted by a number of research funding agencies [3–5] requiring that knowledge users be named as collaborators on funding applications and/or act as “relevance” reviewers of scientific grants. This approach differs from traditional-end-of-grant knowledge translation approaches where study findings are distributed by researchers to colleagues through conferences and scholarly journals. Practitioners, administrators and policymakers

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may be feeling the pressure of being “knowledge users” and entering into IKT agreements with researchers. Similarly, researchers in many countries are now mandated to identify, develop and sustain relationships with their potential “end users”, however defined. The purpose of this commentary is to assist potential knowledge users, particularly those working in policy or service settings, by highlighting some of the more nuanced benefits of the IKT model, as well as some of its potential costs. We recognize that there are additional issues, from the perspective of those conducting research, that require critical examination, but those are saved for another discussion.

The push for IKT continues to be prominent across multiple disciplines and sectors, such as education and social services [6]. IKT approaches can take the form of mandated or voluntary partnerships, or they can be formalized in institutional contracts (e.g., embedded research units in policy/practice departments). IKT partnerships involve information sharing, frequent meetings and working together to: generate and refine research questions; develop feasible research designs and data collection procedures; collect and analyse data; interpret data for practice and/or policy recommendations; and identify an action plan to support the integration of recommendations. Across these models is a common underlying need for sustained partnerships based on the “two-communities” theory [7], which suggests that researchers and users of research (policymakers, managers, practitioners) come from distinct worlds with different cultures, values, timelines, goals and rewards [8]. IKT, or close interactions involving the researcher and research user during knowledge generation and application, is positioned as the bridge across these two worlds [1], leading to: research questions that are more practice or policy relevant; findings that are easier to adapt because they meet a knowledge–practice gap; the creation of a ready audience for implementation strategies; and an increased understanding of each other’s roles (and worlds) [2,9–12]. Benefits resulting from IKT have also been found to extend beyond the lifetime of the research project [11]. Effective IKT can be achieved by early engagement of the users in the research process (not just at the dissemination stage [13]); such processes can be supported by financial incentives [12]. As well, successful IKT initiatives can encourage research users to pilot and implement research findings, and provide the means by which to collaboratively reflect on the implementation process as a way to support organizational-level learning and systemic organizational change [6]. Denis and Lomas [14, p. S2:4] noted that “collaborative research clearly has multiple objectives and meaning in the eyes of those engaged in such partnership” but the overriding aim of IKT is the use of research findings in practice or policy decisions. With this in mind, we use IKT to mean the development of a relationship between academic researchers and practitioners and/or policymakers for the purposes of collaboratively engaging in a mutually beneficial research project or programme of research. Our reflections below are based on experiences with IKT projects in diverse research areas, such as chronic disease prevention, seniors’ health, and family violence.

Fundamental assumptions underpin the push for IKT. One assumption is that resources, by way of time, staff and dollars, are available to support the processes required to develop and nurture the partnership [15,16]. For example, new relationships may require project guidelines (for authorship, ethical conduct of research, conflict resolution, student involvement, intellectual property and dissemination, etc.) that are not readily available but instead must be developed through negotiation. Another assumption is that partners – on both sides – accept the fact that the effort put into IKT partnerships is largely ignored by the usual professional performance evaluation metrics for academic researchers, practitioners and bureaucrats [14]. Universities still reward push strategies (publication in peer reviewed journals) while practice and policy-oriented organizations look to service provision targets and policy development goals, often emphasizing efficiency in both process and outcomes. In short, it may be increasingly difficult to provide incentives for this kind of work, when it essentially does not “count” for either knowledge producers or knowledge users.

Finally, a general assumption exists that researchers ought to be the ones approaching knowledge users and managing ensuing partnerships [17], perhaps owing to the heavy emphasis on knowledge generation and lesser emphasis on dissemination and uptake activities (the user-partners are seen as the targets and conduits for dissemination).

One more nuanced assumption rarely stated explicitly, but that can have a significant impact on the evolution and sustainability of partnerships between knowledge producers and knowledge users, and indeed the whole notion of IKT, is what we can term the “positivity bias”. That is, it seems to be generally assumed at the outset of projects that there is, or will be, definitive (ideally “positive”) evidence generated on a specific problem. Researchers enter into new work expecting to contribute to the knowledge-base, ideally with something new and better that “works” more effectively or efficiently than what it is intended to replace (or that fills the gap it needs to fill). Knowledge users, in our experience, enter into IKT arrangements with this same hope. In an ideal world, the research fills a gap, provides a better, perhaps cheaper alternative, or otherwise can be integrated into decisions in a way that leaves everyone happy. However, in the real world of research, including original studies and secondary synthesis work (systematic reviews, meta-analyses, etc.), it is very often the case that the results suggest either “insufficient evidence” (in the language of systematic reviews and guidelines) to support change, or perhaps only incremental gains in knowledge that are not sufficient, in themselves, to warrant major changes to policy and practice. This can be especially true if the process of adaptation to new contexts, or from well-resourced research sites to poorly resourced service sites, is not clear [18,19]. The positivity bias leads to the assumption that actionable outcomes will result from the collaborative research, but of course this is not true across all research projects. In the case of unactionable findings, and given the investment of resources required for the collaboration, the appetite for future partnerships might well be diminished.

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