

Synthesis for health services and policy: case studies in the scoping of reviews

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Evidence synthesis is what researchers do to bring together the results of different studies to answer a specific research question. It plays a central role in how research is used to inform health policy and service change. Between 2017 and 2020, teams of researchers at three universities – the University of Exeter (Exeter, UK), the University of Sheffield (Sheffield, UK) and the University of York (York, UK) – carried out evidence syntheses to meet the needs of health and social care organisations in the UK. To produce a useful evidence synthesis, it is important to discuss and agree the research question and the types of study to be included with the people who may use the synthesis in their decision-making. This stage is known as ‘scoping’. This report shares the lessons we learned during the scoping stages of eight evidence syntheses that we conducted.

We selected two or three evidence syntheses from each centre to represent the variety of reviews conducted. We produced written descriptions of our experiences of the scoping process by reviewing notes, meeting minutes and e-mails. We used these descriptions or case studies to look for common issues that affected the choice of review question and scope. The 14 issues that we found fitted within three larger groups of issues: (1) consultative issues (i.e. how policy-makers and other review users provided input), (2) interface issues (i.e. how review teams interacted with the intended review users) and (3) technical issues (i.e. how the review team managed the goals and methods of the planned review).

Taken together, our experiences suggest that, as well as information gathering and technical processes, successful scoping relies on building relationships and developing a shared understanding between the people doing the review and those who may use it in their decision-making.

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This report

The research reported here is the product of an HS&DR Evidence Synthesis Centre, contracted to provide rapid evidence syntheses on issues of relevance to the health service, and to inform future HS&DR calls for new research around identified gaps in evidence. Other reviews by the Evidence Synthesis Centres are also available in the HS&DR journal.

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