Research & Development
Taighde & Forbairt

GUIDE 7

COMMUNICATING RESEARCH FINDINGS

Knowledge Translation, Dissemination, and Impact

A Practical Guide for Researchers

Contents

This guide is part of the series of guides about the translation, dissemination, and impact of research. It aims to help researchers communicate their research to those who can benefit from it, and to those who can help in disseminating the research knowledge.

The guide gives suggestions on how to understand who your audience is, how to engage them, and how to use different methods of communication. Users of the guide will be able to:

- Understand the value of engaging stakeholders.
- Use different types of communication suitable for their audience.
- Create messages targeted to the audience.

Part A – Communicating with those who can benefit from your research

1. Introduction

An essential element of knowledge translation, dissemination and impact is sharing and communicating your research knowledge. Here is some guidance to help you make the most of your research.

Why you should communicate and share your research findings

1. **What you have found in your study could make a difference to our population staying well and healthy.**
2. **Sharing research findings makes a difference to our understanding of different conditions and treatments.**
3. **Research should be open to scrutiny to ensure it is high quality and ethical.**
4. **Research findings might change guidance or policy or influence training.**
5. **Sharing findings with patients, service users, carers, families, and the public can bring a new understanding of your research and new ideas.**
6. **A lot of health research uses public funds, so we have a responsibility to show patients, service users, carers, families, and the public how we are using the funding.**
7. **Research funders require it. Sharing research findings helps to increase the transparency of research.**
8. **Sharing research findings and knowledge is the right thing to do and will help to generate an impact.**

Researchers using this guide may also want to read: *Guide number 4: Stakeholder Engagement* and *Guide number 5: Planning for Impact*

2. What to consider

Communication is an ongoing process and not just for the end of a study.

Planning for communicating and sharing your research should start at the very beginning of your project. Communicating throughout your study can increase the uptake of your research. It is a good idea to include a communication plan in your knowledge translation strategy. This plan should outline how you are going to inform stakeholders about any outputs, interim results, and outcomes from your research.

3. Audiences

When planning the communication of your research, think first of all about who your audience is and who you are trying to target with the research knowledge. Your research may focus on a theoretical perspective so you will need to consider what this means in practice for different audiences. Human stories resonate with many of our audiences and can illustrate what we are trying to communicate. Examples of your audience might include:

- Families and parents.
- Patients and service users.
- Patient organisations and advocacy groups.
- The general population.
- Service managers.
- Student researchers.
- Academics.
- Clinicians.
- Policy makers.
- Educators and trainers.

Questions to consider:

- What do the audience want or need to know?
- What are their interests?
- What does your research add to the current evidence base?
- What are the right channels of communication and when is the right time to communicate with them?
- How often you should communicate with different audiences.

Communicating your research is something that should be taking place throughout the study so a researcher should consider who the research will impact at the start of a project.

Creating relationships at the beginning of the research is a good investment of time and is more likely to make the research successful. Researchers should make contact lists at the beginning of their project, reach out, connect, and talk to potential knowledge users and opinion leaders who can increase the reach of your research. Engage with patient organisations and patient groups to ask them about the best ways of sharing research with their community. Where possible, build partnerships with patient organisations and groups and respect their need and right to be kept informed of research that impacts on the population's health.

4. Stakeholder engagement

Some tips for engaging with stakeholders:

- It is a good idea to engage at the beginning of the research project to make sure stakeholders find your research relevant and to ensure you are inclusive and engaging the right people (see *Guide number 4 – Stakeholder engagement*, for further guidance on when and how to engage).

Take time Engage Share Communicate Present

- Spend time sharing and presenting your research at different stages of the project.
- Keep the messages as simple and straightforward as possible.
- Consider the right format for sharing your messages and engaging stakeholders, particularly those who may be marginalised or seldom heard e.g.
    - Face to face.
    - Workshops, conferences.
    - Social media.
- Use infographics to communicate your research to a range of stakeholders. This will provide a visual representation of key messages.
- Use social media to generate impact – Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, blogs, websites.
- Deliver some early impacts or 'quick wins' as this can help build interest and enthusiasm for longer term impacts.
- Keep the momentum going to maintain interest and enthusiasm.

MESSAGES
WORKSHOPS
CONFERENCES
SOCIAL MEDIA

5. Engaging policy makers

Researchers can find it challenging to engage with policy makers so here is some guidance for building those relationships and writing briefs for those engaged in policy making.

- Consider whether you are trying to engage with local or national policy makers.
- Try not to focus only on those at the top level of policy making i.e. politicians, ministers, CEOs. There are also those who contribute to the development of policy – committees, advisers, civil servants, government researchers, other government departments, NGOs, advocacy organisations, consultants, who may be helpful. Reed[1] advocates a bottom up and top down approach. Bottom up – engage with more junior people. Top down – reach out to senior people e.g. a minister, CEO, or policy lead.
- Build relationships with members of the policy community when engaging in a project. Be aware of what their priority areas are. Find out who is working on what area. Follow them on Twitter or link with them on LinkedIn.
- Be realistic about time scales, as it can take a long time to change policy and set realisable objectives with small steps.
- Identify key messages (see *Guide number 3 - Knowledge Translation frameworks, what are they, how and when to use them*) and consider how to communicate those messages, particularly if they are complex.
- Be clear about what you want the policy maker to do; is it doable? Look for opportunities, such as public consultations, that might offer the chance to make a contribution.

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[1] Reed M. The Research Impact Handbook. 2018. Fast Track Impact Ltd.

- Consider whether there is an organisation or individuals who could act as knowledge brokers[2]. Advocacy, policy, and expert groups can provide useful links.
- Collaborating with others, such as patient organisations and clinicians, can strengthen your messages. Find out what matters to your community and what they need to happen to make a difference.
- Work at and sustain relationships with policy makers once they are established. Remember those in policy maker roles may change over time so you may need to re-engage with new people.

Developing a policy brief

Considerations in writing a policy brief:

- **Consider who your audience is.**
- **Policy makers tend to be busy and are unlikely to read long research papers or publications, so be clear and concise in any communications and keep the brief short. Do stick to the topic.**
- **Have all the relevant information, statistics and evidence prepared.**
- **Write your policy brief when your research has just been published, or when it is relevant to a policy issue, in order to build on the momentum of publication or public or political interest.**
- **Use accessible language and short sentences.**
- **Use infographics and images to illustrate points.**
- **Clearly define the sections of your policy brief so it can be scanned easily; evidence your argument or issue and include facts and figures.**

The contents of a policy brief should be as follows:

- **Title – it should be short and informative.**
- **Executive summary or summary statement that includes the key points of the brief.**
- **Context and scope of the problem – why is it important; evidence of research; facts and figures.**
- **Conclusions.**
- **Policy recommendations or options.**
- **Sources of information and references – keep this to a limited number.**
- **Supplementary materials e.g. case studies, graphs, charts.**
- **Contact details.**

You may still find there are some obstacles and challenges to overcome when engaging policy makers. They can include:

- People or groups who might oppose your work or have opposing views.
- A lack of support for your work amongst policy makers or the community. Engaging people at an early stage of your project can help to prevent this happening.
- Not being able to get access to policy makers.

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[2] Knowledge brokers are intermediaries who develop relationships and networks between knowledge producers/researchers and the users of knowledge. Knowledge brokering involves linking colleagues to a variety of research, knowledge, and information resources.

- Policy makers citing a lack of funding for not changing policy. It is important to consider making a case for how the research might lead to more effective care or services and whether it will lead to any cost savings.

6. Communicating with patient organisations, patients, carers, families, and the public

As patients, service users, carers, families, and members of the public, we all want to know about our health care and treatment. To do this we need to know which are the most trusted sources of evidence. We may want specific research evidence about which treatments and interventions are most effective for different condition.

People want to know what can support changes in their behaviour to enable healthy lifestyle or improved quality of life. They may be seeking evidence of the most effective self-management skills. They may also want to know how they can be enabled to engage in decision making about their own healthcare.

Plan any communication that is aimed at patients, service users, carers, and families with patient organisations. Discuss with them when, and how often, they want to engage. Agree expectations and what part they would like to play in communicating the research.

Methods of communication can include:

- Presentations to patient organisations, patient, carer, and family groups.
- Leaflets, flyers, and booklets.
- Social media.
- Press releases.
- Trusted sources of information.

However, it is also important to understand where there are barriers to access for some groups particularly if they have no or limited access to the internet and technology.

Communicating with people with intellectual disabilities and low literacy levels

Think about what will help people to engage more in their own health and care and where they find their information e.g. local healthcare providers, the internet, or social media. Consider what matters to people, what information they need and what you would like them to be able to remember.

Simple language

Explain things clearly and simply

Avoid jargon, medical jargon and technical language

Consider what you are trying to explain and why and use simple language to do so. It is important to explain things clearly and simply but to avoid being patronising. Try to avoid jargon, medical jargon, and technical language. Using a plain English dictionary or plain language medical dictionary can help find alternative terms and words for jargon and technical terms. If it is helpful use diagrams. Keep them clear and not too heavy with information.

Test the information with your intended audience and ask questions to check their knowledge and understanding of what you are presenting.

The HSE guidelines on communicating clearly with patients and service users are a useful source of information:
https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/communications/communicatingclearly/guidelines-for-communicating-clearly-using-plain-english.pdf

Part B – Means of communication

7. Types of communication

There are many different types of communication including written, verbal, digital and interactive platforms. Before deciding which type of communication to use, consider the amount of information you want to share, the type of information, and the level of understanding the audience may have.

In communicating your research who are you targeting? How much effort will it take vs how much benefit they will get.

WRITTEN VERBAL DIGITAL INTERACTIVE

Written:

- Journal publications.
- Reports.
- Conference abstract.
- Poster.
- A research forum or hub that could include a series of research summaries provided by researchers and divided by topics or research groups.
- Toolkits.
- Guides.
- Frameworks.
- Teaching resources.
- Information booklets explaining the research.
- Create bite size summaries of the findings.

Top tips

Some rules to follow:

- **Use simple sentences; you might want to use a readability check.**
- **Avoid jargon where possible; if you have to use jargon then you should explain it.**
- **Avoid gendered and discriminatory language.**
- **Try to convey your research in a concise and useable way. Infographics can help to illustrate the key parts of your message and may be better for your audience than a lot of text, graphs, and charts.**
- **Use three simple rules:**
    - **Say what you are going to tell them**
    - **Tell them**
    - **Tell them what you have told them**
- **Always proofread your communications before sending them out.**
- **Consider audiences with specific communication needs such as the non-hearing, those with sight issues, intellectual and learning difficulties, and dyslexia.**

Verbal:

- Oral presentation at a conference or symposium.
- Workshops and seminars.

Digital and social media:

- Project websites can be helpful for keeping people up to date or social media groups such as WhatsApp, or newsletters.
- A website that provides information booklets explaining the research, podcasts, videos, and keeps stakeholders up to date with the projects progress.
- Use of social media platforms to post regular news and updates.
- Videos explaining the research or the research findings.
- Podcasts.

The HSE guidelines on communicating clearly with patients and service users are a useful source of information:
https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/communications/communicatingclearly/guidelines-for-communicating-clearly-using-plain-english.pdf

i. Written communication

There are some simple rules for any written communication whether that is writing a report, a journal article, guidance, or teaching resources. Planning and preparation are important and help us to decide what it is we want to communicate and to whom. Clarity, using simple language and avoiding jargon, being concise, using an active voice are good practice. Every written communication should have a clear goal and message.

Writing for publication

Many health researchers will choose to publish in a peer reviewed journal which is read by academics, health professionals, researchers, students, and patients. It is important to spend time choosing the right journal for your topic. Get to know the journal and the type of articles it publishes. Follow the guidance carefully and stick to the requirements of the journal particularly in relation to the structure of your article.

Most journals have guidance for authors, and it is important to read that before writing your article.
The article should align to the aims and objectives of the journal.

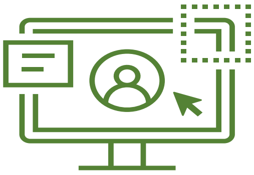
Some journals also give authors the option to upload a short video of their research findings. This can be another way to disseminate your research and reach a bigger audience.

i. Using social media to generate impact

Social media might include platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, blogs, websites amongst others. It is easy to spend a lot of time on social media without gaining much impact if you do not plan your activity and choose the right platform for sharing your research. However, social media can help you to reach people, and get a response from them, where other forms of dissemination (conferences, publications) may not. Consider who your audience are and what is the reach of each of the social media platforms.

Some tips for using social media:

- Think about who are you trying to reach and why.
- Consider which platform is likely to reach your stakeholders.
- Following those people who you want to reach through social media can give you an insight into the topics they are interested in.



- Think about your messages:
    - An image or video can help to engage people.
    - Space and character limits on some platforms can restrict the amount of information you share.
    - Mishandling your message or not being clear can have negative consequences.
- Decide how you are going to find out and measure whether you have an impact with your social media activity. How will you gather data?

ii. Writing a press release.

The first step is to seek advice from your communications department who will have experience in writing press releases. There may be guidance on writing and sending out press releases and you may need to achieve permission from the organisation before contacting the media.

Some tips for writing a press release:

- Consider which type of media you are writing for and the audience; is it a health or care related publication, national or local media.
- Keep it short and do not exceed one page if possible.
- A concise headline that tells the reader what it is about and gets an editor’s attention.
- Make sure you say what your research is about, why it is important, who it is for, when it was carried out and how.
- Include your key messages.
- Identify the key headlines and statistics that are likely to gain media interest.
- Include quotes from participants or knowledge users where relevant.
- Avoid scientific terms or jargon where possible.
- Agree who the spokesperson is going to be following the press release. It should be someone who is familiar with and can talk about the research.
- End with who to contact and where a link to the research can be found.

- **Make sure the press release is dated and the date it should go out to the public is included.**

The contents of a press release should include the following:

- **Name of organisation, contact name and number.**
- **The date of release or a statement saying, ‘for immediate release’.**
- **The main heading.**
- **A paragraph with the authors main messages.**
- **Paragraphs with more details of the research findings, why they are important/new, and how they make a difference.**
- **Quotes and photographs where relevant.**
- **A note to the editor with contact details.**

If any of the information is embargoed, e.g. until it is published, write a clear note to the editor at the end of the piece to say it is embargoed and when the embargo will be lifted.

iii. Blogging

Authors/bloggers should consider the purpose of writing a blog; is it to share their research, make connections, or to offer some practical advice as a result of their research findings. There should be a focus to the content of the blog. They should also consider how to ensure their blog reaches the right people or the right community. If a blogger does not have an existing audience, then their research will not make a connection with those who may benefit from the knowledge. Sharing the blog with those who follow you on social media is a good starting point and can lead to it being shared again by your followers with their own connections.

Some tips for writing a blog:

- **Think about your audience and make sure the tone of the blog is right for that audience.**
- **The headline is important and should engage and make contact with your audience.**
- **Keep it short and clear; use headings, short sentences, and understandable language.**
- **Have a clear message.**
- **Include visuals; starting with a picture and a few key words can engage your audience.**
- **If it is going to be a regular blog posting, then post at regular intervals and make a note of the dates you intend to post your blog.**
- **Link to any other content you want to share e.g. videos or podcasts.**

iv. Creating videos

Videos can be useful ways of sharing research with a wide audience. Key things to consider are what resources, what equipment you have, and whether you need some technical help, to develop your video. Think about the audience and the format of the video for that audience. Should the video be in the form of an animation or feature real people? What do you want your audience to take from the video?

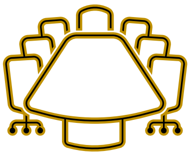
Start planning your video with a script and a storyboard and practice before recording the final version. Keep the video short and have short clips of information within the video. If people, or a voice over, feature in the video make sure they speak clearly and sound animated.

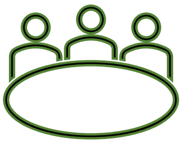
For more information, visit the HSE website and view the digital guidelines: www.hse.ie.

v. Holding events

Interactive events are one of the ways that you can communicate your research. These can be face to face or online, but the common feature is that you can communicate directly with your stakeholders, share your research, and get immediate feedback and interaction. Types of events might include:

- Patient, service user, carer, family, or public engagement events
- Workshops
- Symposia
- Conference.





In planning an event, considerations are:

- The audience. Who should be invited and how do you get the people who really need to hear about your research to attend? It is not necessarily about the number of people as the right people. Rather than targeting a general audience, you may want to focus on fewer people who have good connections in your field.
- Purpose – consider what messages you are trying to communicate as this might inform the type of event you want to hold and who it will focus on.
- Outcome – what do you want people to do as a result of attending your event?
- Resources – holding an event requires resources including funding, administration, and time. Is there a budget identified for this purpose?
- Where to hold the event – will this be on your own organisation's premises, a neutral venue, or, in the case of patient organisations and groups, will you go to the stakeholder's venue. Issues to consider are the cost to participants and their organisations of attending external events, travel, and power imbalances that might arise.

Creating a community of practice is another way of communicating with stakeholders regularly and could be developed at any stage of the study. This is a means of providing regular information and updates to stakeholders who share an interest in the research topic and can use the knowledge generated from the research. The community of practice can extend beyond the life of the project.

8. Creating messages

When thinking about what messages to communicate about your research, you need to understand what your stakeholders' interests and needs are and tailor your output to their needs. You also need to think about the implications of your research for your knowledge users and should talk to them about this.

Consider who might be able to help you and your research team with your messaging e.g. communications departments, research networks, partner organisations.

Tips for creating messages

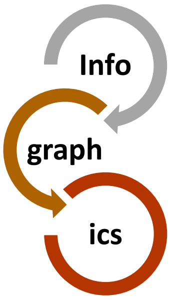
- **Messages should be short and targeted to the audience.**
- **Know your audiences and their interests. What do they want to know?**
- **Adapt your messages for different audiences. The message must be relevant to the recipient or knowledge user.**
- **Include a call to action – say what you want them to do.**
- **Identify any patient organisations or patient, service user, carer and family groups that can help you develop messages for their community.**
- **Telling the story – who, why, what, where, when and how.**
- **The main message needs to be communicated in the first sentence of your communication to engage your audience.**
- **Messages need to be approached in the same way as an abstract or plain language summary.**
- **Consider getting a non-scientist to read the summary of the research to feedback on whether it can be understood or not.**
- **Patient, service user, carer and PPI blogs can improve engagement with the research.**

9. Use of infographics to enhance your communications and messaging

Infographics or visual ways of presenting your research findings can be an eye catching way of capturing the attention of stakeholders. They can be used on posters, in presentations, toolkits, guidance, a research abstract, and as a means of presenting data in charts and graphs. They are useful in multiple ways include online platforms. Infographics should be balanced with text and not be the only means of presentation. Infographics should add value to the presentation or report and support any text that is included. They should be clear and informative and engaging, use clear language and be accessible to the audience.

There are some simple design skills and principles when creating infographics:

Get to know your audience.
Restrict colour.
Align elements.
Prioritise parts.
Highlight the heading.
Invest in imagery.
Choose charts carefully.
(www.visualisinghealth.com)



Creating a poster or presentation with infographics:

- Decide on the audience and key messages for that audience.
- When developing messages, think about what you want people to do as a result.
- Organise your information and create a structure and a layout. Information needs to be easy to digest.
- Find some images or photos that fit those messages.
- Add links to websites, reports, and articles.
- A good title aids recall.
- Consider whether any of your audience has literacy issues as the use of charts and graphs does not always help understanding of the message.
- Test the message before publishing it. Creating infographics means leaving out a lot of information and this could change the message and mean it is misunderstood.

Consider whether you are likely to want to create infographics at the beginning of your project and, if possible, collaborate with designers and include them in your team. Co-design and participatory design can improve the quality of your work.
Remember not all topics will be suitable to turn into infographics as some information will be too complex and difficult.

10. Finally

Nonverbal communication

As with written and verbal communication, we give out messages to others through our body language, eye contact, expressions, posture, and gestures. We need to be aware of our nonverbal communication through our body language, engagement and listening skills. It is important to ensure we engage in active listening and interest and show we value our stakeholders and audiences' opinions.

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