

Scaling-Up Innovations

Introduction

There is a broad desire across sectors to improve services and spread effective interventions across different areas. Yet there is also a widespread view in the literature that regardless of field or sector, the challenges and factors involved make this difficult. Despite efforts to identify and explain what works in the process of creating and propagating change – particularly through the spread of innovations – it remains uncertain as to how different innovations can reach more people to produce better outcomes across various settings.

This briefing provides generalised findings and high-level messages to allow readers to become familiar with many of the issues, strategies, and approaches involved in scaling-up innovations to facilitate thinking and prompt discussion around how to go about public service improvement.

Summary points

- There is a good deal of research and other evidence looking at scaling-up initiatives and innovations. However, there is no agreement on which approaches to use or on what constitutes success.
- It is important to consider both 'hard' components like metrics, and 'soft' components like socio-cultural factors when thinking about scalability.
- How the terms 'scaling-up' and related concepts such as 'spread' and 'diffusion' are understood varies across fields and sectors.
- Adequate time and planning is needed when scaling-up any innovation. The more complex an innovation, the more detailed the strategy required.
- Agreement between stakeholders regarding the intentions and goals of the scale-up process is vital. Buy-in to an innovation and scaling process is best achieved through influence and advocacy, as opposed to position and authority.
- Both collaboration and networks play pivotal roles in spreading innovations by increasing buy-in from stakeholders and increasing the sharing of resources, knowledge, and experience.
- Infrastructure and administrative and technical support are the scaffolding on which the scaling-up process relies.
- Leadership and key roles are most productive and influential when distributed across all tiers and partners involved in scaling-up an innovation.
- Implementing an innovation with sufficient flexibility while retaining fidelity to the core components is one of the most difficult aspects of scaling-up.
- Having multiple and creative ways to assess and evaluate the adoption and implementation of an innovation helps to embed it within the larger system.

About this briefing

This briefing provides a summary of an evidence review produced by What Works Scotland, commissioned by the Scottish Government. The review is the first publication of the What Works Scotland Spread and Sustainability workstream and provides a foundation for its future work during the What Works Scotland programme (2014-2017).

The Scottish Government is focused on sharing evidence of best practice, and reducing the time that it takes to get that evidence into practice. This can be about making existing processes more consistent, or introducing new ideas and innovations. Ultimately the aim is to support organisations and individuals to think differently and enable transformational change to achieve positive outcomes for people. The Scottish Government commissioned an evidence review to distil key lessons for scaling up innovation and how these lessons might be applied in practice to inform several current national initiatives within Scottish Government and other areas which are concerned with quality improvement and wider transformational change as part of public sector reform.

The evidence review and briefing were produced by What Work's Scotland's Evidence Bank for public service reform. The Evidence Bank provides appraised, accessible and action-oriented evidence reviews and other resources for those involved in public service delivery including Community Planning Partnerships, policy-makers, local authorities and third sector organisations.

The full evidence review contains further findings, signposting, talking points, references, and details of how the research was carried out – see www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk.

Scaling up: concepts and meanings

The term 'scaling up' and other associated concepts, such as 'spread' and 'diffusion' were found across the literature reviewed, though terms were not always defined or clear. Evidence in education, health, and social care were most likely to include how the term was being used and defined.

'Innovation' was used to refer to a new or novel way of working, behaving, organising, delivering, or thinking. It also referred to an incremental adjustment, an additional component, or a revised version of something already in existence and use.

In this briefing, 'scaling-up' or 'scale-up' encompasses activities of spreading, diffusing, disseminating, and adopting; likewise 'innovation' encompasses various things that might be considered as innovations (e.g. initiatives, pilots, programmes, systems, frameworks, and policies).

'Scaling-up' and its associated concepts do not mean the same thing to all stakeholders and language can shape perceptions.

Commonly in health and implementation science 'scaling-up' meant delivering or enacting an innovation in a way that increased the number of people benefiting from it while ensuring the original design and measures were maintained.

Education-based evidence understood scaling-up to be more of a 'widening' rather than getting 'bigger', as expectations were more concentrated on an innovation being able to get up and running with relative success in disparate contexts.

Within social care was a similar concern for expansion of innovations alongside a focus on spreading an innovation across departments or units of a service system. There was a particular concern for retaining core components while allowing for adaptations given that innovations aimed at vulnerable populations require sensitivity to varying needs.

Within much of the grey literature (publications from government, academic, business, and industry sectors), there was recognition of a difference between 'scaling-up' and 'scaling-out', and even some discussion as to whether or not 'scaling-up' was a helpful way of expressing what social innovations aim to do. There was also general recognition that the scaling process was best served by combining top-down and bottom-up directions of influence and decision-making.

There is little consensus across different fields on how any associated concepts are understood and used, and it is important that all stakeholders involved in any change process have shared understandings of the terms used, such as 'dissemination', 'spread', 'adaptation', and 'sustainability'.

What is scaled up, and when?

A robust evidence-base showing effectiveness is the most common requirement for an innovation being seen as appropriate for scaling-up. The type of evidence used to demonstrate an innovation's effectiveness needs to be appropriate in its type and scale; the evidence may come from a randomised control trial, a field test, or a community-based trial. Establishing 'good enough' evidence that is sufficient, of good quality, and supports effective delivery, is preferable to searching for 'perfect data'.

Innovations that explicitly address an identified problem, an under-served population, or emerging issues are more likely to be scaled-up. The demands of consumers (of goods or services) can identify where and when scaling-up an innovation would be beneficial, and research can highlight new unmet needs or develop new approaches to meet existing needs.

Wider social and political forces play a role in determining what types of innovations get scaled-up and when.

Opportunities can emerge from shifts in funders' agendas, external events, research, or policy development.

The financial and human resources required for scaling-up an innovation means any innovation needs to be compatible with intended sites and contexts. Innovations that are more cost-effective or simple to implement are scaled-up more frequently, as are innovations whose design included considerations of how scaling-up could be achieved.

Factors that help scaling-up

Scaling up is successful when there has been adequate preparation and there is a high level of compatibility between needs of the setting and what is being scaled. Matching an innovation to any new setting in terms of compatible goals, objectives, values, and population characteristics is critical. Integrating any innovation with current and established services, working styles, or organisational values can facilitate acceptance and buy-in from key stakeholders.

Successfully scaling-up any innovation requires time and commitment, with more geographically isolated sites and more complex innovations requiring longer timescales. Comprehensive assessments regarding site development, skills and knowledge training, and relationship building can produce the most realistic timescales.

To manage stakeholder and staff expectations, communication needs to be as clear and direct as possible, particularly when disseminating key messages about the benefits, operational attributes, and goals of an innovation. A rigorous and detailed dissemination plan can help meet ongoing communication needs. Knowledge exchange and experience-sharing networks can facilitate regular and responsive feedback between stakeholders and partners.

Collaborative working across organisational levels and partners is paramount in scaling-up innovations. Boundary-crossing increases knowledge exchange, variety of input, creativity, and resource utilisation. Involving as many groups of stakeholders as appropriate from a very early stage in the scaling-up process helps with buy-in and influence.

Existing regional networks and clustering can help to foster diffusion and spread of an innovation. Accessing and using any regional alliances can also foreground community needs, capacity, and local knowledge, all of which will encourage adoption.

A strong and continuous infrastructure is needed in scaling innovations. Regular audits of skills, capacities, and support can keep momentum going, and ongoing training and technical assistance mean people are better prepared and more likely to adopt innovative changes.

Leadership and influence for the scaling process needs to be distributed across all tiers and partners, with directions of influence coming from the top-down, bottom-up, and peer-to-peer directions. People designated as key leaders and influencers are most effective when they regularly engage with the scaling process and stakeholders, with frequent feedback helping to build a sense of ownership.

Barriers to scaling-up

Scaling-up an innovation is complex, with many 'moving parts' that need managing and attention. A lack of understanding of what is trying to be achieved due to different perspectives and visions can be problematic. Unresolved tensions around the larger or core components of an innovation can slow or halt the progress of diffusion. Similarly, inconsistent perceptions (for example around levels of risk or loss of autonomy) can foster scepticism and resistance to change.

Resources and stakeholders' energy need to be taken into account, and too much reliance on a small number of champions or on a single organisational partner can lead to organisational fatigue. Resource difficulties, both financial and human, can derail or stall the scaling-up process. Overburdening those in key roles, such as having an active teacher doubling as the site coordinator for an educational innovation, can be particularly detrimental.

Reluctant partnership working and thinking can impede scaling-up an innovation. 'Silo-thinking' and acting discourages cooperation, and professional or practice groups can block effective knowledge and experience exchange across professional boundaries. A sticky knowledge flow may also contribute to a lack of trust between stakeholders, or even emphasise unhealthy competition.

A reluctance for wider organisational change is a commonly reported barrier. Often evidence-based innovations require some degree of internal changes by the adopting organisation, and developing a new set of organisational norms and behaviours may be necessary to reflect the core principals of any innovation.

Mechanisms for sustainability

Practices and strategies that facilitated an innovation to be scaled-up in the first place need to be continued into the long-term. Ongoing human and financial resources, training, infrastructure, and support are critical for sustainability. Moreover, innovations need to be considered within the wider spectrum of goals, services, and practices of an organisation. This 'continuum thinking and acting' applies to both time and scale, and facilitates the innovation's integration. Regarding time, it is important to consider the coherent narrative of an organisation and how an innovation fits within past, present and future workings so that it makes sense to individuals involved in the scaling process. Regarding the scale of changes made, smaller, internal changes necessary to scale-up an innovation need to be consistent with and connected to more comprehensive, external changes required across organisational partnerships and networks.

Taking a broad approach to the scaling process by connecting to and embracing wider social and political agendas facilitates sustainability by increasing stakeholder motivation, securing further resources, creating the sense that the innovation is relevant in the 'bigger picture' and drawing in cross-boundary support and interest.

Balancing fidelity and adaptation is difficult and complex. A careful and informed approach is needed to determine whether or not an innovation can be adapted and, if so, which elements are amenable to adjustment. Many discussions around this mechanism for sustainability acknowledge the *ideal* is to replicate an evidenced innovation in a new setting with no changes to the original, but there are usually mismatches or discrepancies between the characteristics of the new priority population, implementing agency, or local community and those of the original programme.

Across the literature, there is emphasis that in 'real world' settings in which adaptation must be considered, the core components of an innovation – those integral to producing the main effects – need to remain firm. However, adaptations that adjust for contextualisation and locality factors,

local constraints and resources, or different population characteristics can increase adopters' and recipients' acceptance of an innovation.

Monitoring and evaluation need to be planned and established from the beginning of the scaling process and continue indefinitely. The monitoring process is iterative, requiring a long-term view during which findings from earlier stages of evaluation are incorporated back into scaling. Using diverse and creative means of assessment and evaluation can help to buffer against changes in personnel or plans. By taking a rigorous and well-planned approach to monitoring, immediate feedback about implementation can be given to local site implementers and evidence of benefit can be demonstrated to stakeholders.

Policy and practice implications: tips for scaling-up

- Consider size and complexity when thinking about scaling-up innovations
- Expect the unexpected - while planning and strategy are critical, not all dynamics and consequences of an innovation can be planned for in advance
- Ensure collaboration and networking are made possible - change relies more on influence and persuasion than control or power
- Facilitate information-exchange and use of existing knowledge by using a mixture of communication methods
- Spread the responsibility and leadership for scaling-up – any change can take an emotional, mental, and physical toll on people
- Ensure adequate infrastructure, time, and resources are available
- Think about the innovation narrative - a shared vision and clear dissemination encourages buy-in

Conclusion

One straightforward concluding statement regarding scaling-up innovations is that there is no clear, unmistakable way to go about it; the process needs careful thought with due consideration of all elements and configurations particular to each situation.

The overarching finding is well-expressed in the suggestion that when thinking about scaling-up innovations it is essential to balance the insights derived from studying 'hard' components (success metrics, commissioning plans) alongside the historical, economic, socio-cultural, and interpersonal influences that gave rise to them.

This briefing is based on a longer report produced by the What Works Scotland Evidence Bank for the Scottish Government and What Works Scotland.

The Evidence Bank builds on methods developed by CRFR (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships) to address well-documented issues around using evidence including accessibility, relevance, and timeliness.

References

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