Strengthening learning from research and evaluation: going with the grain

Final Report[1]

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Executive Summary: Strengthening learning from research and evaluation

The aim of this study is to put forward actionable recommendations on learning lessons in DFID, particularly from evaluation studies and research findings.

Methodology

The study included 38 semi-structured interviews in Palace Street, Abercrombie House, and via video conference or telephone with staff in country offices; an online survey carried out by EVD and answered by 254 respondents; a review of documents obtained on a rolling basis in order to provide further insights, comparisons and triangulation; and analysis and iterations in particular with EVD staff, IACDI members and other DFID experts.

Findings and conclusions

Three perspectives of learning were identified in the study:

First, from the starting point of DFID's research and evaluation outputs, the question of whether lessons are learned focuses on how influential that work is, whether findings and recommendations are taken up in policy and programming and acted upon.

Second, from the point of view of decision-making and action, the question of lesson learning becomes a matter of looking at the extent to which evidence (and in particular, that emerging from DFID's research and evaluation) feeds into and informs the process of policy making and programming.

Third, looking at learning from the perspective of DFID as an organisation, the question of lesson learning focuses on how knowledge within DFID is captured, shared and used, as and where it is needed.

The study suggests that DFID is much better (or at least more comfortable) at using the findings of research and evaluation than organisational learning. Similarly, it is much better at using research and evaluation findings during, or as part of a project cycle, than in more complex and emergent decision making processes.

From the analysis of decision-making models and the role that evaluation/research based evidence plays, three main conclusions emerge:

1. Initiatives that promote a sense of ownership of research and evaluations and those that support the development and strengthening of interpersonal learning networks work well in DFID. In other words, learning in DFID (of the kind that promotes the incorporation of analysis into decision making and the development of a learning organisation) is more akin to a system with fewer intermediaries and more direct relations between users and producers of knowledge.

2. Formal mechanisms directed at lesson-learning seem to be more useful where it is possible to 'go with the grain' of what is required for learning in the circumstances faced; and

3. In line with this DFID's systems are not properly set up to deal with the complexity of problems the organisation faces.

Recommendations

One very clear need identified by this study is the need for a strong and coherent approach to improving lesson-learning – in particular at the organisation level. This study has shown the need for serious efforts to systematise, join up and coordinate lesson-learning. At the moment, a number of departments have ongoing initiatives which relate to lesson-learning, but they currently do not appear to add up to more than the sum of their parts and individual elements cannot be presumed to provide the impetus on their own. In addition, the timing seems ripe for such a move, as initiatives are undertaken by the new ministerial team to improve evidence-informed decision making and the use of evaluations.

On a more practical level, DFID should aim to develop more formal and long term relationships with key UK-based think tanks and research centres and globally to provide high quality short and long term research and evaluation-based lessons to DFID and DFID staff. Formal relations and planned spaces for communicating preliminary and final findings of the work would reduce the cost of advocating and communicating (from outside) and would facilitate feedback to ensure that research agendas remain aligned to DFID's current and future interests and needs.

There are also a number of recommendations relating to various parts of DFID[4]; these would be more effective as part of a joined-up, coherent effort, but also would have an impact on their own.

Strengthen the research and research uptake teams to act more as experts or matchmakers between researchers and policymakers rather than focus their attention on synthesis and dissemination and the support of intermediary portals and project.

Target research funding more effectively and provide clearer signals to researchers (outside DFID) about the specific current and future information needs of the organisation at the global, regional and national levels.

Focus efforts and resources on improving the communication of research outputs and findings through mechanisms that promote and strengthen professional relationships between researchers and policymakers, such as holding regular seminars and events and developing bespoke templates for the publication and dissemination of findings.

Finally, continue to promote the use of funds available for quick policy research within policy teams and maybe encourage DFID staff to take part in the studies.

For evaluations, similar approaches should be pursued but particular attention should be given to clarifying the evaluation function within DFID.

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[4] These have been grouped according to the authors' best understanding of who might be responsible for these kinds of actions – while this assignation may not have been correct in some instances, hopefully nonetheless the content of the recommendations will be relevant

Additionally, direct support to DFID teams and staff undertaking evaluations should be provided including a review of TORs to ensure that recommendations are taken forward by both the evaluators and those responsible within the organisation.

To improve knowledge and information management as a whole, DFID could create an online platform that effectively makes the links between projects, questions and people. For example, it could allow one to search for DFID staff who have worked in a particular country for a specified period, or list all of the advisers who have worked or currently work on governance projects in a given region. Clear, searchable statements of current responsibilities (as well as the immediate projects a staff member is working on) would allow researchers to target information more effectively at those who may need it –when they need it.

Measures to deal with the issue of poor institutional memory in the context of staff turnover need to be addressed. Ongoing plans for improving handover procedures and institutionalising exit interviews are likely to be hugely important. A possible alternative to high staff turnover would be to establish closer relations with the research teams of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Directorate for Strategy Policy Planning and Analysis who specialise on specific geographical areas and themes and therefore maintain the organisation's institutional memory (and intelligence).

Finally, human resources policies are necessary in order to strengthen the advisory cadre. Given their importance for learning, policies on the placement of advisers should be given attention, and efforts be made to remedy what is seen as an excessively high turnover in relation to the requirements of doing a good job.

Additionally, efforts should be made to 'raise the bar' of expertise among advisors (who are the main interlocutors between policy and research): on research skills, academic qualifications or experience and evidence use. This is related to efforts to reduce the range of issues or interventions managed by single advisors so that they can focus on learning rather than using evidence.

Contents

Introduction: knowledge and learning

The objective of this study is to put forward actionable recommendations on how to improve the learning of lessons from evidence emerging from research findings and evaluation studies. The study was commissioned by the Independent Advisory Committee on Development Impact (IACDI) in order to inform future plans for DFID (the full TOR can be found in appendix 1). The study had two phases, first focusing on semi-structured interviews with DFID staff, and second incorporating an online survey on lesson-learning, with documents, reports and other literature on lesson-learning in DFID reviewed throughout in order to provide context and triangulation for the themes emerging from the primary data collection.

The focus on learning provides a rich entry point to a more pressing debate: how to do development policy in a downturn? The results and value for money debates have risen to the top of the DFID agenda over the last year. These demand a great deal of certainty in a context where, in part due to the risks associated to the downturn (both as cause and effect), as well as other risks that DFID's efforts are targeting (climate change, food price rises, state fragility, etc.), uncertainty is on the rise.

In this context, wiser or smarter decisions about the long term and short term allocation of limited resources to alternative ends ought to be the focus of an organisation like DFID. This demands the capacity to learn and adopt and adapt to new information, insights, experience and practices. At first sight some of the building blocks are present: an increasing budget on research and the focus on long term programmes, the earmarking of funds to communicate research findings and promote learning and the uptake of research based evidence and recommendations, the incorporation of new staff charged with brokering knowledge and encouraging the dissemination of research and evaluation findings as well as providing feedback to knowledge producers and signalling specific knowledge demands.

However, this in itself does not guarantee learning; or the formation of a learning organisation.

The report is structured as follows: the next section outlines the methodology; then we provide an analysis of the supply and demand of research and evaluations lessons, in order to set out DFID's strengths and weaknesses for learning, and locate the key problems to be addressed; the next section focuses on the realities of decision making and learning in DFID, drawing comparisons to the wider literature in order to build a picture of what is feasible and what might be desirable in terms of 'lesson learning' in DFID's context. Based on this analysis, we go on to offer some recommendations.

Methodology

The study ran from April through to September 2010, and had a number of different elements:

- *Semi-structured interviews:* In total, 38 semi-structured interviews were carried out in Palace Street, Abercrombie House, and via video conference or telephone with staff in country offices. Drawing on good practice for reviews which look into complex

topics such as understanding the influence of research on policy, a number of questions were selected based on the underlying 'theory of change', areas of investigation which correspond with different areas that are thought (based on DFID understandings of learning and also empirical evidence) to contribute to lesson-learning. There was also space in each interview for more wide-ranging discussions about the realities of the interviewee's work, and also after the initial 5 interviews the proceedings of the interviews were discussed in order to refine questions and approach, and the final 4 were carried out some time after the rest in order to attempt to capture some issues which had been felt to have been left out. In order to ensure that interviewees were as open and honest as possible, the interviewees will remain anonymous and the list of staff participating will not be provided (however, a discussion of the profile of the interviewees and representativeness can be found later in this section).

- *Online survey:* An online survey was carried out by EVD in close collaboration with the RAPID research team, in order to provide a broader look at perspectives on lesson-learning in DFID. The survey was posted and advertised on Insight, the DFID internal network, and hence was *available* to all DFID staff; in total, 254 staff answered the survey. The survey questions were strongly informed by themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews so it gave an opportunity to 'test' insights and hypotheses which had emerged from the smaller sample (but deeper analysis) provided by the interviews. Again, survey respondents remain anonymous.

- *Document review*: A variety of internal DFID documents (such as the 2009 IACDI reviews on evaluation quality, etc) were obtained on a rolling basis in order to provide further insights, comparisons and triangulation. As the research team was not permitted access to internal DFID KM systems, documents were obtained as and when the team became aware of items of relevance, drawing on direct recommendations from interviewees and other *DFID* contacts. Complementary literature relevant to the topic of lesson-learning in bilateral development agencies has been drawn upon where possible. This was not carried out as part of a formal literature review, rather in order to inform interview questions (as mentioned above) and also reacting to themes emerging from the interviews. This literature has added depth to the analysis by highlighting areas to be investigated through the interviews and survey, as well as by providing some basis for comparisons about how lesson-learning should (and does) work[5].

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[5] It should be noted, however, that there is not one single body of theory or established area of 'good practice' which encompasses all of the issues involved in understanding and improving lesson-learning in DFID. Work on the use of evaluations is valuable and well-established, but does not cover the full story due to insufficient guidance for specific organisations, and due to limitations of the 'types of use' construct. Literature on knowledge management and learning organisations provides another useful perspective, however it is generally based on models drawn from private sector organisations operating in developed countries, and it is generally accepted that there is not a firm academic and theoretical base to the field as a whole (Ferguson et al 2007). Moreover, literature on knowledge and learning more generally is not well equipped to deal with organisations which are partly politically-driven, and which are operating in frequently highly political environments. Finally, work on the policy process is invaluable for this study, throwing light on a number of issues about the influence of research and evaluation in policy-making, however it does not provide comprehensive guidance about how such processes work and can be facilitated within a specific organisation (focusing, rather, on overall processes of policy making at international, national or sub-national level involving a variety of actors). As such, it is not

- *Analysis and iterations:* The interviews were, where possible, digitally recorded in order to capture the full richness of discussions for review as and when as needed, and, although some notes were taken during interviews, transcripts were then typed up from the recordings at a later date. A qualitative data analysis software package[6] was used in order to ensure that the analysis of interview transcripts was as systematic, comprehensive and transparent as possible, and in order to better triangulate interview data with other sources. A number of supplementary discussions and meetings were held with other DFID staff (including from EVD, KIM and research uptake) at various points throughout the study in order to further contextualise the findings, to provide various hypotheses about lesson-learning in DFID, and inform the study team of ongoing initiatives. A number of interim products were produced throughout the research process, with a set of 'initial reflections' provided after the first portion of the study and two drafts written in the run-up to the IACDI meeting in July 2010, before this final version. These products served as way to elicit feedback from DFID staff, from IACDI and from members of the research team, in order to provide multiple perspectives and interpretations of the issues emerging from the interviews.

Clearly we could not hope to have an entirely 'representative sample' with interviews which were voluntarily undertaken. When the aim of the study is to generate a qualitative understanding of how lesson-learning works (rather than, for example, gauging how much something is carried out, what is the level of approval, etc) representativeness is not the primary criterion for a high quality study. However an effort was made in order to interpret transcripts in the light of interviewees positions in the organisation, their career and educational backgrounds, their history in DFID, and where they sit in relation to (and their contact with) EVD and research teams, and consideration has been given in the analysis to which groups have not had such a prominent voice in the interview process. With this in mind, the interviewees were:

- 24 women and 13 men; 5 Senior Civil Servants, 16 staff at level Civil Service Grade G6 (DFID grade A1) , 13 at Grade 7, (A2) 1 Senior Executive Officer (A2L), 1 Higher Executive Officer (B1) and 1 Fast Stream; 11 currently based in Abercrombie House, 15 in Palace Street, and 8 in Country offices.

- Although precisely categorising each interviewee's role was not possible, 14 seem best described as advisers, 16 as generalists/managers and 4 in corporate services; Many of the advisers and also some of the generalists had spent considerable amounts of time in DFID as advisers, and many of those based in the UK had also spent considerable amounts of time in country offices.

- 2 interviewees had worked at DFID (and its predecessors) for 30 years or more and around a half for 10 years or more, while 3 had worked for DFID for a year or less. Before DFID, a significant number of interviewees had worked for other UK civil

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possible to point to a single ideal 'model approach', and the issue is one which many organisations are struggling with and is in need of the development of evidenced 'good practice'.

[6] MaxQDA 2010

service departments, a significant proportion had professional backgrounds, and others had worked for NGOs or multilateral agencies.

Other biases in the interviews: While many insights which emerged from the interviews marked out areas of strong consensus between interviewees and have also been given added weight by other documents reaching similar conclusions, or by resonating strongly with themes in the wider literature, this was not the case universally. Those issues which marked points of disagreement and divergence, and which have not been highlighted by other work, should be interpreted in light of the limits of semi-structured interviews as a research tool: they should be taken seriously and thought should be given to their interpretation, but they may be best treated as issues which would bear further investigation, rather than firm statements about how things definitely do work.

For this draft, the analysis proceeded by incorporating the feedback, revisiting the transcripts to get 'under the surface' of the data, and triangulating themes emerging from the interviews with each other, and with evidence gathered from the document review. As such, it has been possible to make some fairly robust statements about lesson-learning in DFID, and recommendations which are supported by a number of different sources of evidence. However, these caveats are important.

Learning from DFID research and evaluation

This study draws on three interlinked areas of theory and practice relating in order to look into the issue of lesson-learning in DFID. This kind of approach is very suitable for understanding complex, multifactoral issues such as this, where even the question of whether individuals, teams or the organisation has 'learnt' from just a single piece of research can also be quite opaque.

This is based around an approach known as theory-based evaluation (The World Bank 2004), and places at its centre a 'theory of change', a model of how it is that lesson-learning is envisaged to work. The theory (or here, theories) sets the overall framework for looking into lesson-learning by basing it on certain (evidence-based) expectations about the processes and mechanisms through which lesson-learning will happen (and how research and evaluation will feed into that). Interview and survey questions were designed to look into these areas. By analysing whether these processes are functioning, or whether different intermediate outcomes are occurring, the study is able to locate the strengths and weaknesses with relation to lesson-learning in DFID, give an idea of what is working well and what isn't, and what factors seem to be the main obstacles and hindrances to lesson-learning.

The three areas investigated by this study approach the issue of lesson-learning from different levels of starting points:

- First, from the starting point of DFID's research and evaluation, the question of whether *lessons* are learned focuses on how influential that work is, whether findings and recommendations are taken up in policy and programming and acted upon.

- Second, from the starting point of decision-making and action, the question of lesson learning becomes a matter of looking at the extent to which evidence (and in particular, that emerging from DFID's research and evaluation) feeds into and informs the process of policy making and programming.

- Third, looking at learning from the perspective of DFID as an organisation, the question of lesson learning focuses on how knowledge within the DFID is captured, shared and used, as and where it is needed.

We will look at each in turn, for each we will first outline the ideal of how learning should work and describe the background theory which informed the areas which were investigated, then we will compare the various areas/ideals of 'good practice' with the evidence gathered in this study on these processes.

Learning from research and evaluation outputs

Using DFID's research and evaluation as the starting point, the question of whether lessons are learned focuses on how influential that work is, whether findings and recommendations are taken up in policy and programming and acted upon. It is relevant here to draw upon the substantial literature about the non-academic impact of science and research and the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of research communication. There are many things highlighted by the literature on 'bridging research and policy' which represent areas of 'good practice', which are generally associated with increasing the uptake, use and influence of research and evaluation –a selection of interview questions was used to investigate this relationship, looking at various factors which would ideally make up 'links in the chain', forming a bridge between knowledge production and use. For each, we will present and discuss the evidence emerging from the interviews, survey and document review, about the extent to which these processes are functioning.[7]

Questions set by users, relevant to their needs, when needed, credibly answered

Firstly, the nature of the questions addressed by research or evaluation has a bearing on whether or not it will be used: it needs to address questions relevant to the needs of potential users, when they need it, and this can generally be enhanced by having research questions shaped by the intended users of the research. In addition, it is important that evaluation or

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[7] Possibly the most well-known approach to theories of change (ToC) involves describing a succession or 'chain' of elements and the logical or causal connections between them. This usually involves a set of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact (some selection of them), with each element causing or leading to the next one, depending on certain assumptions. For example, a log frame sets out this sort of chain, and can be the basis for a ToC. This has the benefit of identifying a series of intermediate outcomes which can be measured as determinants of progress or success (as 'early indicators' of potential impact, and/or confirmation of a useful influencing approach).

Working around a 'causal chain' ToC, there are a variety of methods for evaluating outputs, uptake and use. Evaluating outputs involves looking at the tangible products that are produced by a project/programme or institution, in order to judge their quality, credibility, relevance, accessibility, and other factors which are associated with evidence being influential.

research studies answer their central questions in a way that is of sufficient quality and credibility to their users.

Looking at **EVD evaluations** first, there are some good signs. Interviewees generally felt that studies addressed relevant questions. This was particularly the case for thematic evaluations, and country programme evaluations where the process of evaluation and the input of the evaluators was felt to be most useful due to giving credibility and profile to good work done, and impetus for action on issues that had otherwise been 'bubbling under the surface'. Rigour and robustness was seen to be generally sufficient for learning purposes. This is backed up by the ratings given to DFID evaluation reports in the online survey: interviewees from PS, AH and COs all rated evaluations highly for relevance and quality[8], as well as a high number of respondents reporting to have read an evaluation report compared to the other types of studies[9], and the judgement on rigour squares with Burt Perrin's assessments (2009).

The most common criticism of evaluations among the interviewees was timing: although they mark important rhythms for Country Offices (COs), they were seem to generally take too long to be relevant to policy teams, and insufficient attention is paid to tying them into policy cycles and expected windows of opportunity. Evaluation reports scored much lower on timeliness than other factors overall, and scores were worse from staff working in Abercrombie House (AH) and Palace Street (PS) than in COs[10]. The majority of comments posted in the survey question about how to improve evaluation reports refer to timing and timeliness as well. Other criticisms raised about evaluations have to do with the variability of the quality of consultants, difficulties which arise where a project has been poorly set up to be evaluated in the first place (for example with no baselines or where unrealistic objectives set both the project and the evaluation up for failure), and there were criticisms about the quality of recommendations, which were seen as insufficiently bold at times. Again, this chimes with findings of last year's IACDI reviews (Manning 2009, Perrin 2009, Riddell 2009).

Decentralised evaluation: In slight contrast with this, the most frequently cited way of learning from evaluations referred to decentralised evaluations. This was the case in policy division as well as at country office level. They were felt to be the most suitable to the decentralised way DFID works, and for working in a 'reactive' manner, and were generally the most frequently cited example of useful and influential research and evaluations. It should be mentioned that not one interviewee explicitly described this as 'decentralised evaluation' (although a great deal of it probably would fall under this category as EVD and IACDI understand it); this could explain the opaqueness of this area of work thus far for EVD, and the seeming lack of interest from previous efforts to get a handle on it.

In terms of **DFID research**, there were some positive messages coming from the interviews about the quality of studies, with some interviewees feeling that there were "some real gems" in there; and the survey revealed relatively high scores for quality of content and relevance. The interviews revealed that the 'quick research budget' is very widely seen to have significant value for lesson-learning providing relevant, rigorous and salient work that meets the needs of policy teams, as well as allowing resources to be mobilised on a timescale

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[8] Content quality: 21 answered 'very good', 116 answered 'good', 13 'poor' and 1 'very poor'. Relevance: 18 answered 'very good', 102 'good', 28 'poor' and 1 'very poor'.
[9] 82.4%
[10] Timeliness: 3 'very good', 56 'good', 81 'poor', 9 'very poor'; AH+PS: 2, 35, 59, 9 vs. COs 1, 21, 22, 0.

more relevant to the pressures of their work (although there were some concerns about the transaction costs of accessing it).

However, the most common perception among interviewees was that DFID research was not intended to be primarily relevant to DFID staff (this came out strongly among COs, although a number of policy staff also echoed this). The 5-years timeframe on which large research programmes (like Research Programme Consortia, RPC) are carried out is not generally opportune for meeting the majority of immediate policy and programming needs, and adds to the very common perception that it is research done for the 'public good' rather than for DFID's consumption. This feeling of disconnection between DFID's research and the rest of the organisation could be the result or the cause of perceptions about the usefulness of ongoing research. Many felt that there were no valuable lessons in the research they were aware of, but the same interviewees tended to admit to not reading many studies; corresponding to this, nearly 30% of the survey respondents answered that they had never read all or part of a DFID-commissioned research report.

Resource centres[11] were praised by some interviewees for providing timely responses to questions which are highly relevant (since set by the 'users' themselves). Many felt that they had the potential to meet policy needs by allowing quick, demand-led research, but overall, there were mixed messages. Some felt that they were not made full use of by all staff, and others also questioned whether there is sufficient capacity for them to be fully used. There were concerns that the quality was variable between different centres, and also some questions about the extent to which they are really able to fulfil learning needs – providing information that could be used instrumentally, to help achieve some given ends rather than really representing a valued input to decision-making processes[12]. The online survey shows that resource centres were not ranked highly in terms of first resources for 'practical lessons on what works', 'the most relevant academic and/or professional literature', or 'people who can help me find answers quickly' in the respondent's field of interest[13]. However, it is difficult to judge based on the interviews and online survey alone, and there was not a wealth of information about resource centres available for this study.

This prompts us to consider whether resources centres may provide a way to bridge the research undertaken by the RPC and the more immediate 'consultancy' style studies that focus on key policy questions.

Credible outputs packaged, formatted, disseminated

Secondly, it is important to pay careful attention to the communication of research and evaluation. It is important to ensure that reports are written clearly, in language suited to the intended audience, presented in a visually engaging and accessible fashion (Young and Court 2004). Different channels and formats can be used such as hard copies of reports, online features, email lists, etc, in order to reach the intended audience(s).

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[11] For more information on them see here: http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Global-Issues/Resource-Centres/
[12] This theme resonates with some well-known criticisms of managing knowledge-based inputs to policy in this 'instrumental' mode, for decoupling advice from the theoretical and explanatory frameworks it stems from, which can hide assumptions and value-judgements, and in turn makes context-sensitive policy judgements in fact harder to make (Cleaver and Franks 2008, Jones et al 2008).
[13] 9.7%, 10.8%, and 5.9% respectively

The format and presentation of **evaluations** was criticised, and some interviewees felt that the full reports were too long and technical. This was echoed in the comments from the online survey about what is needed in order to improve evaluation reports, which showed perceptions of reports being "dry in style", "too long to read in full", and often without a good executive summary; although, survey results also showed that evaluation scored highly for clarity, and not too badly on quality of design and layout[14]. This divergence could be a result of differing expectations for evaluation reports: many interviewees felt that problems of highly technical language and tone are a common issue with the evaluation profession, rather than unique to EVD or DFID.

Whether this is an issue particular to DFID or not, this places special importance on other products and communication activities around the evaluations. Here, interviewees echoed other assessments (e.g. Perrin 2009, Martin 2006) that evaluation products summaries could be more 'punchy', better targeted, and delivered in a way that was more clearly designed to shape staff's thinking. This was echoed by interview questions aimed at gauging awareness of evaluations, which suggested that many interviewees felt that they only knew about the evaluations that were on their specialist topic but not of others that might be "sideways relevant". Comments in the survey asked for shorter, snappier products on Insight, and suggested accompanying this with a PowerPoint presentation to promote the document more widely, and others suggested it would be fruitful to return to distributing short evaluation summary sheets. It could be that initiatives currently underway to improve the communication of evaluations could go some way to solving these problems, but it will be important to review this in the future as the problems are currently yet to be resolved.[15]

A possible explanation of the lack of awareness of evaluations may be the fact that there was a general lack of awareness about EVD itself. Although the vast majority of interviewees felt that EVD's profile has definitely been rising over the past few years, there was still a limited understanding of its exact role, its aims, and how they work. Many interviewees did not know how DFID decides what to evaluate, how it responds to 'pull factors' for evaluation, and how EVD is intended to (or actually does) link up with the research department. This is consistent with other sources, such as Martin's (2006) assessment that there was a pressing need to improve staff understanding of EVD's work, and the desire for clarity about DFID definitions and standards for evaluation (NAO 2008). When interviewees had been involved actively with EVD in one way or another, their understanding of the department was higher, and this brought down any misconceptions about being 'audited'.

Similarly, whilst interviewees were often quite critical about the communication of **DFID research**, there was a universal recognition that research communication and uptake was moving up the agenda in DFID, and that the effects of many of these new initiatives were still in the process of coming into fruition. Short products posted on Insight and sent around via email received praise as did seminars and workshops, but there was also a feeling expressed by some that currently research teams were not sufficiently pressed to deliver messages to the wider DFID community.

Face-to-face meetings with producers and users of knowledge, engagement throughout and after the research process

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[14] 77.7% rated them as 'good' or 'very good' for clarity, and 74.7% did so for quality of design and layout.
[15] And it is the research team's view that these solutions may create disincentives for a more in-depth and critical engagement with the evaluation (and research) process.

A third key area of practice is direct engagement between the producers and intended users of research and evaluation. Face-to-face meetings between researchers and policy makers were reported as being one of the most influential factors in promoting research uptake, and there are strong arguments suggesting that 'process use' (Patton 1998), where individuals and organisations are influenced as a result of being involved in an evaluation, is one of the most common ways in which evaluations have an impact. Good practice in this area suggests that it is beneficial to promote engagement between researchers/evaluators and intended users at the outset of the research process, throughout, and then upon conclusion, using events such as workshops to bring them into contact.

There are a number of signs that DFID staff tend to draw upon and use **evaluations** where they have been involved in the process. A common argument was that EVD evaluations are relevant and useful for providing focus and credibility to issues which are already anecdotally well-known to staff, acting as a tool to promote action on an issue, rather than for providing new and revelatory insights. Many interviewees felt that they only knew about the evaluations that were on their specialist topic but not of others that might be "sideways relevant". This is related to engagement with specific pieces of work, and perhaps is another sign of the dominance of 'process use'. Better awareness was also seen where interviewees had been engaged with evaluation teams, for example in country and thematic evaluations, and where there was someone in EVD specifically responsible for their thematic or geographic area; and where there was an adviser who worked in the area of the thematic evaluation who was engaged with the study[16].

Similarly with **DFID research**, a good deal of appreciation was shown by interviewees for factors that facilitated engagement between researchers and staff working in policy or programming, such as seminars and presentations. The majority of examples given by interviewees about the direct use and influence of research involved situations where staff had been engaged with research teams for significant periods of time. Particular praise was given to the co-location of research and policy teams in Palace Street, which was felt to be beginning to have benefits, and many interviewees felt likely to lead to significantly better linkages in the future – this is reflected in survey results about perceptions of DFID research, which are generally more positive from staff based in Palace Street.

The survey highlights the crucial nature of engagement between producers and intended users of research and evaluation, indicating that face-to-face briefings, conferences, meetings (and so on) was the preferred way of getting information about lessons learned by nearly 50% of all respondents.

There are two main worries expressed by interviewees about engagement between the producers and intended users of research and evaluation in DFID. The first concerns how systematically it is done – in many cases, interviewees felt that the effectiveness of these modes of communication were not fully capitalised on (with a continued reliance on dissemination of research products instead), or seen as something 'messy' or too informal which should not be the focus of serious planning efforts. A second concern expressed was about facilitating longer-term processes of engagement between policy teams and

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[16] Also, concerns about the quality of evaluation recommendations (some interviewees put this down to consultants being more sympathetic to country programmes after staying 4 weeks with them) could be tempered by the fact that process use is a significant factor (Perrin 2009), and that this explanation was generally offered by staff external to the processes they were describing.

researchers (in academia or those funded through DFID research grants). They felt that real policy learning came from longer term individual and institutional relationships and partnerships, but that the importance of these were no longer recognised (despite DFID having been a beacon of good practice in this regard with the well-documented development of the sustainable livelihoods approach – see Solesbury (2003)).

Intermediaries, brokers, and networks to support dissemination

Finally, the literature on linking knowledge and policy highlights the importance of having intermediaries who broker knowledge between the producers and intended users of research and evaluation. As well as marking out specific actors who play an important role in bridging research and policy, it is crucial to look at networks of actors which can facilitate the use of knowledge.

The most relevant (though not necessarily effective) types in relation to learning in DFID are those individuals and units in the organisation whose task is to help the flow of knowledge into the policy process: research evidence brokers, the research uptake team and the global outreach team are all tasked with performing this kind of intermediary function for DFID research. However, although it is possible that these positions in DFID will bear fruit in the future, as of yet the benefits seem yet to be felt by interviewees (as with co-location). For evaluation, there are not as many such intermediaries – the members of the EVD team tasked with having responsibility for different regions could be seen as potentially having this brokering role, but many interviewees suggested that this could be done more coherently; and ditto with results advisers could be seen as potential brokers of evaluation within the organisation. However, again, it may be that the effects of these roles are yet to be felt and it will be important to look into how they are working in the future.

The most frequently mentioned role which can be seen as an 'intermediary' for research and evaluation is the advisor –and for the advisors it is experts in their own networks of expertise of communities of practice. Throughout the interviews, advisors were universally felt to be crucial to learning, as the individuals whose job it is to keep up with new knowledge in their field and to feed insights from research and evaluation into the decisions and processes of policy making. In relation to research and technical evidence many managers saw learning as primarily their advisors' jobs: "I just need a clear idea of the policy outcomes, not the detail". In this conception, advisers are seen as the key "brokers" between generalists and the (research-based) professional knowledge on topics. The flip-side to this is that where there is no adviser available to a country or team for a particular sector or theme, or where the advisor is not capable enough or unable to keep up with new knowledge, evidence and lessons emerging from research and evaluations on that theme (as it was reported in one of the interviews) may not find their way into policy and practice, or only in a superficial manner.

Advisory cadres and professional networks were felt to be crucial to supporting advisors and as well-functioning channels for disseminating research and evaluation, and the survey reveals that 'professional networks' were felt to be the most persuasive way for DFID to receive evidence in their field[17]. The literature on knowledge translation also indicates that advisers themselves would be more appropriate targets for more straightforward synthesis,

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[17] 29.3% ranked this first, higher than for any other source by a factor of over 50%.

translation, and dissemination activities, since they are well-versed in the underlying knowledge base (Michaels 2009). It does highlight the importance of the level of voice and the 'critical mass' of advisers in policy teams, as well as achieving the correct disciplinary balance.

Overall assessment

For the type of 'lesson-learning' used to denote staff directly using or acting upon specific recommendations of evaluations and research, there is a mixed picture.

At a country level, there was a general feeling that recommendations of evaluations are generally acted upon where possible. One interviewee put it like this: "most immediate lesson-learning is within programmes, where there is a rigid system and annual reviews create a platform for incorporating them". While there seems to often be the issue of being committed to projects which are already in train, and of having to make decisions based on other factors such as government priorities and COs' capacities and coverage, it is not clear what the alternative to this would be. The systems ensuring that evaluations fit in with COs' timings, combined with evidence from various sources about successful 'process use', add weight to this conclusion.

In other respects there is a less positive picture. The more 'general' recommendations of Country Programme Evaluations (CPEs) seem to frequently be lost, and policy or thematic evaluations tend to be acted upon only where they fit into the pressing contingencies of decision-making, and it seems there are is a lack of conscious coordination with relation to this. Other concerns raised may be worth further investigation, for example the feeling that not enough use is made of the research teams themselves (as opposed to their findings and research outputs) for informing policy and country teams (although generally this kind of use will be in a more indirect manner, informing them with concepts and increasing the stock of knowledge rather than providing concrete recommendations).

The interviews revealed a number of insights about what kinds of studies are most useful for lesson-learning, and in what way. Many interviewees gave glowing references to research and evaluation that offered synthesis and comparison of work from around DFID on particular themes or sectoral areas, which resonates with findings of the evaluation perceptions survey about the demand for synthesis of lessons for use by DFID staff, and the value of thematic and sector evaluations. Analytical work which provides strong evidence of the value for money of a particular area of work, or its causal links with headline goals such as the MDGs, was also reported as highly useful. In addition, outputs which gave insights past purely technical issues, for example providing lessons about the political and relational factors of policy and programming, such as the political economy of securing a certain policy change, or lessons about how to set up programmes with multilateral partners, was highly valued.

In a sense, though, it emerges from this analysis that at this level of learning the main driver is not the research or evaluation question or method but rather the policy or programmatic demand. Evidence (from research and evaluation) then, is at risk of being very narrowly defined as anything that supports a decision (regardless of whether it is to go ahead or stop a process). The danger is that in this situation evidence may be confused with a fact or a statistic –and that no attempt to understand it in its context may be made.

In this sense then improvement in the way that DFID takes advantage of the potential value of evidence brokers and intermediaries could be lost of failings in the strengthening of the understanding of evidence itself –and the capacity to use it.

Learning in the policy process

From the starting point of decision-making and action, the question of lesson-learning becomes a matter of looking at the extent to which evidence (and in particular, DFID research and evaluation) feeds into and informs the process of policy making and programming. Interview questions attempted to look into the realities of decision-making in DFID in a way that wouldn't bias the investigation towards one model or another[18]. Emerging insights into the dynamics of the policy process have then been related back to the literature on the policy process, and combined with data from the survey. This reveals a number of different factors influencing learning in the policy process, and a number of insights about the extent to which the policy and programming process in DFID is suitable for fostering learning.

The policy cycle

Throughout the questions about lesson-learning, interviewees frequently drew on ideals of the policy cycle, about a process that can (or should) approximate to stages of rational problem-solving: this sees policy as a sequential, cyclical process moving from agenda setting, to policy formulation, to policy implementation, to evaluation, feeding back into further policy formulation (Court and Mendizabal, 2006). 'Learning' in this context occurs through analysis being carried out at each stage, and feeding from one stage into the next.

There are a number of processes and mechanisms for policy and programming in DFID which help to embed parts of this policy cycle (and that enable it to function). The most prominent are the formal procedures and requirements for analysis and sign-off. Ensuring a decent evidence base when seeking approval for spend from higher decision-makers (e.g. heads of teams, heads of country offices, ministerial sign-off) was the most frequently cited incentive for lesson learning and seems to be successful in incentivising staff to learn from the available evidence at the **formulation** stage. Blue Book[19] guidance around economic appraisals, the drawing up of log frames, and the different mechanisms for seeking approval for different levels of spend were all frequently mentioned. Some interviewees felt that new directives like the requirement for all policy papers to be accompanied by an action plan to be produced by Country Offices, helps to link the formulation stage to implementation as it forces a conversation between HQ and the countries.

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[18] Interviewees were asked about different types of decisions they were involved in, discussing and elaborating specific examples, and reflecting about how 'typical' the situations they described were. Interview questions aimed to generate a picture of how these processes tend to proceed, what informs them at various stages, how difference forces and restrictions shape the outcome, and crucially, what the role of evidence (and in particular research and evaluation) were at each stage. The issue was investigated from the starting point of typical decision-making processes, and the ways in which staff would naturally search for 'lessons'.

[19] The Essential Guide to Rules and Tools is known as the Blue Book: http://www.dfid.gov.uk/About-DFID/Finance-and-performance/blue-book/

Mechanisms which attempt to improve the project/policy cycle at the implementation stage are the monitoring activities such as the annual reviews, output-to-purpose reviews, mid-term reviews, and other elements of the results and organisational performance frameworks. At the end of a project or programme, evaluations provide another opportunity to feed in assessment and analysis to policy and programming.

Unfortunately, many of these latter elements were not favourably perceived by the interviewees. The project review and scoring process in particular, but also implementation plans and even ex ante analysis and assessments were often felt to be carried out as simply box-ticking exercises which didn't bear a great deal of relation to the realities of the work. Although the current evaluation policy locates incentives for lesson-learning in the results action plan, many interviewees were ambivalent about the role of the results agenda as a tool for learning. The interviewees reported that in many instances performance frameworks and **monitoring** are carried out as a paper exercise rather than an active learning and management tool that would give an impetus to build up the evidence base of policy; this is partly confirmed by the NAO's assessment that monitoring produced very low data quality and with scarce evidence of the use of the information generated (NAO 2009).

There were also felt to be a lack of sufficient incentives to act on evaluation recommendations: some interviewees raised concerns about a lack of formal incentives to act on evaluation recommendations (a break in the link from evaluation to formulation), arguing that there was insufficient monitoring of country or regional follow-up, or quality control of responses (as also argued by Perrin, 2009). Turnover and lack of ownership are also issues here: often the staff involved in a project or programme's planning or implementation have moved on by the time the final evaluation is commissioned or the results presented. If a new adviser comes into post, we were told, they are likely to want to "put their stamp on something" rather than pick up existing ideas or projects; many felt that career incentives were geared towards original thought, coming up with new ideas, or doing what is in vogue, as opposed to using proven ideas or lessons learned elsewhere[20]. There were also concerns that lessons from evaluations which were relevant to DFID more generally, at a strategic level, had no 'owner' (this was also raised in Perrin and Manning's reports, 2009).

To a certain extent, the fact that a number of these processes do not seem to be fully influential all the time should not be surprising, or even not hugely troubling. Policy and programming decisions must be based on a number of factors, for example: local and national government, and partners priorities; DFID HQ and internal political priorities; donor coverage and DFID comparative advantage; CO capacity, and existing relationships and work streams; and, technical knowledge in the form of assessments, surveys, and other research and evaluations. In various cases described, considerations about ongoing work and existing relationships, and the costs of a radical change of direction were too great for it to be worth drastically altering a programme. Problems to be addressed may also just as frequently be identified by partners or other actors, or from other data sources than evaluations of previous DFID work.

Once we take into account this dose of realism, there was a stark distinction between how the project cycle works at country level and elsewhere in DFID. The rhythms and milestones

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[20] One interviewee argued that "the vision of the development hero drives rewards" and career advancement.

of the 'project cycle' were felt to be relevant and worthwhile at country level, (even if as only one of many inputs to decision-making), but were simply not recognised this way elsewhere. Many country offices have an 'in day' to go over results frameworks and evaluations, while not one interviewee based in Palace Street or Abercrombie house reported such ownership[21].

This is likely to be a sign of where project cycle management fits with the way in which parts of DFID work. Many interviewees argued that COs had a significant amount of autonomy, allowing them to be responsive to country contexts and issues but with some kind of continuity of presence and focus. In countries which were higher political priorities for HQ and for UK politics, it was felt that this enhanced the profile of evaluation and review work carried out on COs, making recommendations very likely to be taken on. And in general, with large programmes (which therefore required ministerial sign-off) the interviewees argued that a great deal of time and money went into carrying out reviews, assessments, and other analytical work to feed into the design process. Comments contributed to the online survey on how well DFID uses evidence concurred, with perceptions that COs have "a better culture of results based management".

Elsewhere, however, the policy cycle has less relevance. This was reflected in various factors, but particularly in more negative feelings about how DFID learns in PRD, and perceptions about what is to blame. The ideal of the project cycle has a strong 'grip' on perceptions of lesson-learning, and so where it seems to not be functioning properly, staff tended to be negative about DFID's ability to learn;[22] moreover, staff in policy division who felt driven to work in an evidence-based way therefore tended to feel that the fault for poor learning lay at the door of those producing the knowledge. It is a typical phenomenon of the 'rational' view of policy making to suggest that the key problems for learning lie in the disconnect between the 'two communities' (knowledge producers and users)[23] –when often produces and users belong to the same communities and are linked to each other and others through a complex set of relationships.

However, these perceptions may not be an indication that DFID is poor at learning in the process of policy and programming, but rather that the policy cycle does not have a great deal of reference to how staff learn in various parts of the organisation. When probed on the rhythms and dynamics of everyday work in DFID, a number of alternative models or conceptions of the decision-making process emerged and the ideal of the policy cycle seemed a lot less relevant. This resonates with strong themes in the literature, and this suggests that although the policy cycle has some relevance to how, when and why DFID learns in COs, a more sophisticated selection of models should be employed in order to understand processes there and elsewhere.

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[21] Some teams felt it is not relevant to their work due to variety in their portfolio and the arbitrariness of comparing apples and oranges; for others, risk management is ignored compared to performance management, which means that it is hard to assess the real value for money of a project; to others, the timeframes on performance frameworks and scoring systems is inappropriate with relation to the combination of short and long term processes that produce results; and a better recognition of the role of context, and the fact that 'no progress' on some impact indicators may represent a considerable success.
[22] Even when they would then be highly complementary of DFID's ability to learn in comparison to other bilateral aid agencies
[23] Jones (2009)

Reactive and interactive processes

Another perspective on learning in the policy process comes from the 'interactive model' of the policy process (Grindle and Thomas 1990), which sees policy making as a process in which stakeholders can exert pressure for change at many points. Especially at policy level, many interviewees explained how some decision-making processes are "reactive", driven by priorities or announcements by Government ministers. Given this initial impetus (e.g. a target for spending in a particular area announced), policy teams then work to try to make sense of how to operationalise it, attempting to design programmes based as much as possible on sound analysis and evidence in order to have a workable initiative that also fits the key criteria passed down. There is then some kind of iteration, dialogue and interaction between ministers and civil servants until something like an acceptable compromise is reached.

Here, clearly 'learning' cannot so easily approximate a continual rational cycle, with new actions shaped by previous action and analysis alone. Rather, here the key issues revolve around the location, strength and stakes involved in attempts to drive or alter policy initiatives, and how formal and informal incentives shape the use of evidence through the interactions and negotiations of the policy process.

The various spaces for evidence and analysis which are provided by processes such as those around project approval clearly offer the potential to feed lessons from research and evaluations, and from different disciplines and professional backgrounds, into the policy process. However, the formal requirement for analysis is not on its own sufficient to guarantee genuine attention is given to doing real analysis and learning. Hence it was not surprising that, as well as advocating for the importance of the formal requirements for analysis, interviewees involved in designing and approving proposal placed significant value in the interactive process and the back-and-forth that goes on around formal sign-off.

Therefore, the incentives of the individuals involved in these processes are crucial. Advisers are crucial to embedding real evidence based lesson-learning into this process, as the individuals whose job description and career incentives are geared towards using technical knowledge and professional expertise. As well as their formal career incentives, the interviewees highlighted a common perception that DFID advisers with strong professional backgrounds combined with a tendency to be strongly committed to DFID's mission were unusually independently-minded[24]. However, organisational power structures also play a role, and many interviewees praised the significant amount of flexibility of country offices, and one interviewee noted that a policy could only be 'rolled out' as fast as COs could be consulted and given guidance on how to implement them (which often in turn required waiting for countries to pilot approaches) –or they wanted to. There were also a few examples given where policy initiatives were driven from the 'bottom up', with a critical mass of requests for guidance from COs leading to PRD formulating new advice (which is then run for sign-off past the SoS). This suggests that the power and positioning of COs in the process of dialogue is at a positive level at the moment.

However, when policy is dictated and evidence is gathered to fit or make sense of policy demands, formal requirements and back-and-forth iterations can become empty processes.

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[24] While this study cannot carry out the kind of comparative analysis that would be required to substantiate this, the anecdotal evidence about advisers backgrounds, career paths, and perceptions from interviewees who have worked in other government departments seem to corroborate this

Furthermore, there are additional concerns about the incentives around learning. There were a few concerns that advisers moving on quickly made them more likely to be doctrinal, applying ideas not necessarily suitable for the local context, not properly understood, or not having enough time or interest to engage with the complexities of development processes. Also a number of interviewees argued that DFID had difficulties learning from 'failure', often relating it to the fact that staff are driven to 'leave a mark' and incentivised towards original thought and doing what is in 'vogue'. Not one of the interviewees gave examples of DFID learning involving lessons from closed or failed/failing projects or programmes, and the perception was that people generally don't want to be associated with them (this would tie in with the model of using research and evaluation in order to promote ones influence). Survey results came out supporting this as well, as the majority of respondents felt that DFID is good at learning from success, but not good at learning from failure[25]. Interviewees often put this down to the incentives created by results frameworks which made it difficult to allow any project be seen to 'fail'. Genuinely experimental programmes are often forced out, and one interviewee remarked that "all our pilots seem to be successful!" suggesting that they were not really 'pilots' in the first place (in terms of attempts to test ideas or interventions). Finally, incentives which push staff towards 'getting money out of the door' could help explain why a good deal of effort went into meeting requirements for project approval, but less so at the end of projects.

It is also important to look at the values and incentives around learning in the organisation in general, as well as on the part of just advisors. A number of interviewees argued that commitment to a sound evidence base can be quite variable depending on the personality of generalists and managers; however no interviewees admitted working closely with such individuals so it is hard to assess the extent to which this applies.

Related to this, time pressure was the most frequently mentioned difficulty restraining proper use of research and evaluation, forcing staff to rely on experience rather than research and evaluation based evidence to support their arguments. Over 50% of survey respondents indicated that they did not feel they could find the time to properly draw lessons from the available evidence.[26] This pressure was seen to be increasing as a consequence of an expectation that 'more has to be done with less', and it seems to restrict learning due to organisational imperatives that drive staff towards getting funds spent in time.

However 'time pressure' is not of itself a reason to drop any one activity over another, so it is clear that the underlying judgement being made (also explicitly argued by a number of interviewees) is that personal and organisational learning (as opposed to just using evidence) is not seen as important enough in comparison with other factors (which would resonate with 'lesson learning' ranking bottom in staff perceptions of the functions of evaluations, NAO 2008). Insufficient time should also not be seen as an isolated cause. It may be partly explained by some of the factors described above: a pressure to move on to a new job, to look for new ideas rather than work with what already works, competition with DFID to promote sometimes conflicting policies (rather than following a single coherent policy), a focus on deliverables and results that may be at odds with the realities of international and national policy processes, limited capacities of some advisors or other key knowledge brokers within DFID, etc.

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[25] 70.9% and 65.2% respectively
[26] 52.4%

There was also a widespread recognition that decisions at higher levels in the organisation become more political, as various pressures came into play alongside the technical evidence about programme design. This is illustrated by the fact that the budget support evaluation was the most frequently cited example of good lesson-learning in interviews (and was also cited as a good example of lesson-learning in the EVD annual report). Many staff pointed to the fact that 'doing more with less' (a ministerial policy) seems to make budget support (a technical mechanism to implement the policy) the only feasible option for getting money out the door, which could explain its influence just as well as any considerations about the evidence for using that modality. Survey results on attitudes and preferences on using evidence revealed a strong trend towards being more cynical about the use of evidence for respondents working in higher levels of the organisation.[27]

There were indeed some suggestions by interviewees that processes at the top level of DFID could be better geared towards incorporating knowledge and professional expertise in the policy process. One argument was that career paths for professionals in DFID can constrain the deployment of expertise at high levels, for example by requiring advisors to become generalists in order to proceed above A1 level, and by reforms affecting the standing of heads of professions[28]. One senior interviewee commented that there was not the 'spirit of intellectual inquiry' behind policies that is seen at organisations such as the World Bank, and high-level processes and fora should devote more time to policy and intellectual questions alongside issues of ensuring organisational functioning. One suggestion was that a lack of formal mechanisms for professional peer review of policies and programmes was the missing ingredient in this.

However, it was argued by many interviewees that the commitment of DFID ministerial teams to evidence and learning over the past thirteen years has been very high, in comparison to ministers at other government departments. While the reflections on processes at the top level of the organisation are important there should also be a realism about the extent to which evidence can really be usable at this level: unlike things like clinical medicine, development and poverty reduction is not an area amenable to objective, unquestionable judgements being made about (for example) funding one broad sort of intervention over another (e.g. education versus governance), and any one evaluation or piece of research is very rarely definitive enough to persuade individuals to abandon belief in a certain kind of intervention, or to commit to it if they were not previously persuaded.

Moreover, although some interviewees initially brought these factors up as issues which got in the way of learning, when pressed on the issue it was nonetheless felt that interaction between ministers and civil servants was 'as it should be'. Interviewees recognised the possibility that there were risks in iterative processes of producing "policy-based evidence", but while many argued that processes could be improved, most felt that this threat did not actually materialise in any case they were aware of; the general perception was that they had sufficient space and power to have a real input into the process.[29] The online survey

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[27] 69.4% agreed with the statement that DFID is good at justifying policy decisions with evidence

[28] Although it should be noted that some interviewees felt strongly that this was not a problem, and there was sometimes a perception that professional groups were well-enough placed in order to help contribute to organisational goals.

[29] There were examples given where the nature of the political statements meant that policy was far from ideal and certain inflexibilities did not reflect what professional staff saw as the ideal way forwards, but policy teams often found ways of designing what they saw as viable programmes nonetheless. For example, where insufficient

seems to back up this conclusion as a number of questions aimed at understanding the extent to which lessons are truly drawn from the evidence seemed to show an overall positive picture[30].

Incrementalism and policy regimes

A third perspective on learning in the policy process highlights how debates and policy making can go through a number of different 'regimes', with the options open for new policies varying depending on perceived urgency for action, agreement on policy principles and the state of the underlying knowledge base. These therefore have different learning dynamics, and it is important for organisational systems, procedures, capacities, etc, can fit the needs of each.

Incrementalism

Interviewees described how most policy issues they worked on in PRD that were not driven by ministers tended to proceed in the mode of "marginal incrementalism" – looking for ways to improve the value for money of work in existing areas, trying to ensure it is based on the best possible evidence, that it responded to what other donors were working on, etc. This was also felt to characterise a lot of work done at country level. This strongly resonates with the incrementalist model of the policy process, where selective issues are dealt with as they emerge, focusing on small changes rather than dramatic shifts, and change occurring through a series of small steps and a process of 'muddling through' (Lindblom 1980).

Incremental decision making implies certain types of learning dynamics – it involves incorporating information and knowledge that is not drastically at odds with what has gone before. Often policy making is characterised by a process of deploying arguments, where different teams make the case for funding, focus, etc. by relating pieces of work to existing results frameworks and goals, accepted knowledge, and presenting cases about the marginal value for money of their sector; as such, evidence and research is deployed in order to increase one's influence, and in order to try to trigger action and resource allocation without 'rocking the boat'[31]. This resonates with what interviewees universally felt was a strong incentive for using evidence and analysis, as a tool for influencing others. In the context of a perceived push towards evidence-based policy, supporting work with evidence and lessons from research and evaluations undoubtedly builds credibility and influence within DFID. These more informal incentives also apply for influencing audiences outside of DFID – it was generally accepted that using evaluations, research and other evidence made one more persuasive. Country office staff interviewed felt that it can be an important tool for

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time was allowed to set up an organisation promised by politicians, instead the early phase of the programme was designed to be like an extended design process, generating knowledge and best practice before the nuts and bolts of the organisation were actually put in place. Some concerns were also expressed that this kind of process sometimes lead to an over-riding criterion of "does this tick all the boxes for the political initiative" and "get the most attractive label" as opposed to "is this a robust, value-for-money way of delivering that", but again no specific examples were given.

[30] The majority of survey respondents agreed with the pronouncement that DFID is good at: 'ensuring policy is responsive to the evidence', 'acting on recommendations based on evidence', 'analysing evidence to generate recommendations', 'ensuring policy is informed by evidence', and 'acting on what new evidence tells us'.

[31] Again this is quite a natural form for policy decision-making to take, although there were a few sceptical voices about how relevant the whole process is, for example one interviewee had sceptical feelings about this process, saying that people in HQ are "very clever with words", effective at self-promotion but had no concern with or impact on what happened at country level.

influencing partner organisations and governments, and those working with multilateral partners argued that evidence-based arguments were the primary mode of communication and negotiation.

In this kind of internal DFID discourse, shared expectations about suitable sorts of evidence and argument, and the balance of different 'triggers' for resource allocation are important. An issue frequently raised was that quantitative measures, especially when used to justify impact or value for money, were the most influential. Providing a figure to illustrate an assertion, with a recent publication date, was often felt to be a used as a substitute for decent analysis. These concerns seem, to a certain extent, to be borne out by examples of influential work and of the kinds of evidence which were seen to be most useful. This could mean that a good deal of relevant research would be passed over, and in particular the real lessons about *how* to design programmes may be lost. Another commented that there was now very little mention of sustainability, and of participatory techniques and the usefulness of local knowledge. This was borne out by no mention of these issues by other interviewees, and represents at least an imbalance in how DFID uses evidence: focusing mostly on what is useful and immediately relevant.

Some of these issues were related by interviewees to performance frameworks, which demand quantitative information and indicators, and can work around timeframes which are at odds with securing sustainable change in some areas (e.g. governance). This resonates with some well-known issues in the literature on performance management (e.g. Thomas 2008), particularly in terms of how such frameworks, if not used with caution, can incentivise short-termism and stifle long term innovation and learning (Ordonez et al 2009).

There are some deeper concerns with incremental dynamics of policy making, since they make it very difficult to for staff to grapple with some of the biggest most important questions in an area, or to challenge the core principles underlying policy in an area, even if they may be misplaced. When policy making is entirely focused on delivering the agreed goals in the most efficient and effective way, this means that evidence or voices that question whether the goals are appropriate at all may fall on deaf ears. Furthermore, challenges in implementation will be more likely to demand adjustments than thorough assessments of the overall approach. There is therefore an important question of when and how more critical voices are heard, and interviewees shared a concern that they were frequently ignored. The majority of the online survey respondents felt that DFID was not good at taking on board criticism[32].

This seems to be a reality of how DFID works, as a large number of interviewees felt that evidence of 'failure' and what doesn't work does not get taken up in the organisation, that there was a great deal of defensiveness to critical perspectives (backed up by some other assessments e.g. Perrin 2009), and that there is sometimes a preference to only draw on work which fits into prevailing orthodoxies.

This insight, coupled with the clear rise in the importance and prominence that the development sector enjoyed since the creation of DFID, could suggest forces similar to those that contributed to the decisions that led to the global financial crisis of 2008 may have been at play: namely, confirmation bias,[33] where any new information tends to confirm a pre-

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[32] 54.3%
[33] A broad discussion on this can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias

conceived position or view; and positive-outcome bias or the valence effect, where people overestimate the likelihood of success over failure.[34]

Fundamental and emergent policy-making

According to the theory on decision regimes, policy making will proceed in an incremental mould until some kind of large outside stimulus such as a crisis, or a new government (Lindquist 1988). Here, fundamental decision regimes will see the core principles of policy open to scrutiny and whole domains being re-thought, and emergent regimes mark out situations where a new issue arises on which there is no consensus for action and the field is open for the development of a broad vision of action. These dynamics are very much echoed by DFID staff who often felt that DFID didn't learn until there was some kind of crisis -survey respondents agreed with this statement more consistently and more strongly than most other offered statements on how DFID reacts to evidence[35].

There were a number of examples where policy broke this 'incremental' mould, where large issues spring up largely unanticipated, and action may need to be taken regardless of the current state of knowledge. The food crisis, climate change policy and interventions in fragile states were all mentioned in this light. Decision-making here is markedly different, and there are special learning dynamics: on the one hand there are challenges for evidence-based policy making, one interviewee said that "policy had to be to be made 'on the hoof'", another argued that "policy is at the forefront of evidence on this issue". On the other hand it marks out situations where policy is highly responsive to emerging evidence, as policy modalities and priorities were yet to be set in stone. This demand for evidence was very high in unforeseen issues or crises, where various imperatives mean that action is needed in very short timeframes, and any emerging knowledge about what to do is highly valued. It is difficult to assess which areas these are based on in this study alone, however a larger proportion of the online survey respondents from Palace Street answered that there was not a strong evidence base in their area of interest compared to elsewhere, so policy division could be a place to start.

In order to respond to such moments in the policy process, the challenge is to distil the available lessons in the short timeframe required for action. While the quick research budget and decentralised evaluations were felt to be of assistance in these situations, some other mechanisms were felt to be too rigid for such fluid situations – rigidities around policy and project sign-off are less appropriate here. In addition, since they mark out occasions where policy can be extremely responsive to evidence, and the whole policy agenda of a number of organisations could be equally open to influence, those in DFID who are eager to see real policy learning on a broad scale should have more tools to influence these regimes when they arise.

It was suggested that it would also be beneficial if such broad questioning of policy goals did not have to wait until a crisis each time, for DFID to be more open to considering the fundamental principles of policy at some level in a periodic manner, so that large issues are less able to creep up on the organisation. It was felt by some interviewees that DFID used to place more emphasis on long term partnerships with academic and research organisations, which were instrumental in developing new and innovative approaches in longstanding

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[34] For a more general list: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases
[35] 68.1% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

policy areas such as what happened with the sustainable livelihoods framework. One interviewee noted that DFID has a pretty good record of internally-focused policy entrepreneurship, where key individuals championed and drove a reorientation and combination of parts of DFID (the development of social development work in DFID was felt to be a good example of this), however it could be that there is room for a more systematic process allowing for such exercises – the literature emphasises the role of individuals and units who act as 'sense makers', engaging with staff in conceptualising their work and leading thought on an issue, with a responsibility for defining strategy (Denis et al 2009).

Overall assessment

Although these forces generally promoted the use of research and evaluation in decision-making processes, there seem to be some issues about which sources were used and why, which begs the question of the extent to which learning does really occur.

For 'learning' in terms of ensuring that decision-making is informed by evidence and analysis, there seems to be a number of important strengths as well as issues for concern and attention.

Interviewees suggested a commitment of DFID staff to its mission and values that means that in processes of policy making, programme implementation and evaluation, and internal debate and contestation there may be a high motivation to understand the relevant evidence and draw on research and analysis in order to inform decisions. Given the strong consensus on this point among interviewees with varying backgrounds, positions in the organisation, and responsibilities, as well as other anecdotal evidence, this is not something that can be lightly dismissed (although obviously a full comparative study was not possible here).The devolved structure of the organisation was also felt to facilitate this type of lesson learning, as COs have the autonomy and capacities to adapt to emerging evidence in-country; as one interviewee put it, "learning is driven by ingenuity at the design stage in-country...what we have is innovative offices, which is then picked up and codified at the centre". Again, a good level of agreement between varied interviewees adds weight to this conclusion, as do other studies, such as Gulranji's (forthcoming) comparative assessment of DFID, NORAD and CIDA, which highlights the value of the devolved model.

On the other hand, there are some issues of concern. Although decisions often involve using evidence, it is not clear that this is always based on a balanced analysis, or whether the research and evaluations used are truly influential in the process. As research and evaluations were felt to rarely provide timely or sufficient guidance for decision-making, the variability of the quality of commissioned and decentralised work, which is most often the vehicle for importing analysis and lessons into decision-making processes, is a cause for concern. The high demands in tight deadlines, and the need to use evidence to bolster one's position within DFID also give reasons for concern about whether the evidence drawn upon is substantially transformative: the need seems to be to quickly find work which backs up one's case (as there is often insufficient room to question or assess alternative sources or conflicting evidence) with preferably quantitative information.

Even if concerns about the actual influence of this knowledge are set aside (e.g. literature on the use of evaluation casts this 'legitimating' use as a positive factor, adding to incremental influence, Sandison 2006), it can nonetheless be said that there is a certain bias in what

kinds of evidence and analysis DFID draws upon (away from participatory knowledge, and from information about 'what doesn't work' and difficulties in carrying out certain types of work)[36].

Learning organisation

Looking at learning from the perspective of DFID as an organisation, the question of lesson-learning focuses on how knowledge within DFID is captured, shared, and used as and where it is needed. Interviewees were asked to describe how it was that they 'learn' – in terms of immediate short-term needs that required them to understand a new issue that they must react to or how they would go about finding information on an unfamiliar topic, as well as longer term considerations about how they build up knowledge of their area and develop professionally. As well as seeking to understand the habits and methods used for drawing in 'lessons', the aim was to also get a picture of naturally when, what and why DFID staff do this[37]. The insights from the interviews have been related to theory on knowledge management and organisational learning in order to help deepen the analysis. We look at two key areas: much work on knowledge management and learning within organisations focuses on systems for collecting and storing information, on ICTs, databases and portals; while a 'second generation' of theory on knowledge and learning focuses on finding ways of building on and complementing interpersonal learning mechanisms (Ferguson, Mchombu and Cummings 2008).

Systems for collecting and storing knowledge

One important area for facilitating learning across an organisation is having well-functioning processes for 'externalising' the tacit knowledge generated in the process of working, collecting emerging insights and turning them into something explicit and easy to share; and, having systems (usually ICTs) designed to store this and other (explicit) knowledge so that staff around the organisation can access and use it as and when needed.

Unfortunately, the interviews and comments from the online survey indicated that this is not seen to be done well in DFID. The system for storing documents, QUEST, was criticised, and interviewees did not feel that it was an effective tool for learning. Criticisms included that there are too many types of documents, that the search function is not good enough, and there needed to be an agreement and common practice on tagging, labelling, etc. The system for collecting and storing project information, ARIES, was also criticised: poorly filled out data and insufficient quality control were seen to be issues. DFID project records and documentation were not highly rated in the survey as persuasive sources of evidence.

A large number of interviewees indicated that they were unable to find relevant documents through these systems or other DFID portals such as Research for Development (R4D). The general consensus (among interviewees who did not work in support services) was that one could look for the items and reports one already knew about, but otherwise most did not

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[36] For example, for an assessment of the dangers of the bias towards experimental impact evaluations (RCTs), see Jones (2009a)

[37] Again, these questions served to break them out of uncritically accepted models of how this 'should' work, and to focus on what activities work well in their context.

bother to search through and see what DFID had done on the subject ahead of other sources of information. Intranet, team sites and other web-based services such as R4D were mentioned by a few interviewees working in Palace Street –but they received little praise. The perception was that there are some good areas of the intranet and some good examples, but their quality was highly variable and with all of these, the general feeling was that you generally only get information from them if you already know what you are looking for.

Some interviewees also felt that these systems were not an appropriate vehicle for lesson-learning, for example ARIES was mainly set up for administrative data management (reflected in the fact that it is not formatted for readability but for IT purposes), and doesn't include the kinds of information which are most relevant for learning lessons from past projects. A number of interviewees argued that there was very little learning about relationships with partners, and 'good practice' for relationships management in general, or for policy influencing. This is reflected in the online survey, where there was a very broad mix of responses to the question which asked respondents to rank different kinds of considerations for their decision-making, with 'political and contextual knowledge of countries' and 'maintaining and managing relationships with partners' both scoring relatively well, but there is no formal mechanism for sharing DFID knowledge and experience on these issues.

On the other hand, interviewees who worked with corporate support and knowledge management services felt that the problem was the slow adoption of nonetheless useful tools. It is not possible to arbitrate between these perspectives on the basis of these interviews alone but the frequent recurrence of this perception is worth attention if nothing else.

Although the interviewees did not consider them, evidence brokers and other intermediaries recently employed by DFID can be seen as substitutes (in some cases) of these technological solutions and services.

Processes for connecting people and promoting their learning

Another area for sharing knowledge and learning is through promoting and facilitating interpersonal learning. Developments in the KM literature over the past 15 years show a movement away from technology-based solutions towards focusing mechanisms around people and practice (Ferguson, Mchombu and Cummings 2008). There is also a significant literature suggesting that more complex, multidimensional problems require facilitating high-quality deliberative fora, where participants, each bringing different knowledge and skills to the table (e.g. organisational knowledge, technical expertise) collaboratively address problems through joint discussion, debate and analysis (Brown 2007, Lomas et al 2005, Jones 2009b).

The interviews strongly suggest that learning takes place primarily through interpersonal networks and contacts, usually within DFID as the first port of call, or within the country or epistemic community for CO staff. Trust is a key feature of their responses. As well as DFID staff, interviewees often contacted colleagues in other donor offices, and experts and academics known to them. There were some very pronounced similarities between answers to this question, and a good deal of consensus; this also reflects the findings of a number of

previous studies (e.g. Perrin, 2009, argues that the influence of evaluations primarily relied upon informal dissemination and engaging the right people during the process). The survey also strongly backs this up, with 'DFID colleagues' rated as far and away the *first* port of call for respondents when they were looking for practical lessons on what works, and people who can help them find answers quickly[38]; and the response to the question on respondents single favourite way of getting lessons learned was similarly overwhelming[39].

There were two different aspects to this, however. On the one hand, discussions and networking were seen as a means to an end: these activities point you to sources, as one interviewee put it "you call people up (e.g. use organograms), ask your boss who has worked on things in the past, call and follow-up through others. Often there's quite a lot of evidence already gathered, people are very good at getting back immediately". On the other hand, the discussions and interaction with colleagues and experts was itself the primary way of learning: one interviewee argued that with such complex issues the best way to learn is "through discussing issues with colleagues, having face to face discussion and argument", and another put it thus: "most learning comes from being on the job, working with colleagues and line managers, through implicit and explicit coaching and mentoring". More specifically, advisors tended to report that their cadre and professional networks were very valuable for both these purposes. Mostly research was picked up due to discussions with researchers and engagement with ongoing studies, although seminars were also highly rated.

However, despite the positive perceptions of efforts such as seminars, advisory retreats and workshops as learning tools, interpersonal learning is not generally done systematically. The value of embedding different types of organisational knowledge in the staff of DFID was clearly under-recognised as well, as a large number of interviewees noted that DFID has a 'poor training culture'. This was backed up by the survey which indicated that training courses were very rarely rated well as a source of evidence in DFID. It seems that insufficient value is placed on knowledge and skills by a large portion of staff, and it was felt that not only was there not enough done to promote advisors development as expert knowledge brokers, but insufficient formal training in general for all staff.

Overview

The interviews and the survey confirmed that DFID is not strong in this type of learning. Survey respondents felt that DFID is not good at sharing evidence across different teams[40] and learning from previous DFID experiences.[41]

Staff turnover and its implications for institutional memory emerged as one of the most troubling issue for learning from past work and from elsewhere. "Reinventing the wheel" was a common phrase used by the interviewees, nearly all of whom brought this up as a major issue, and this seems to reflect a common diagnosis of learning problems within DFID (e.g. KIM is working to try to address the problem).

The change in the recommended length of advisers' postings in COs seems to be another major contributing issue, but it was also argued that insufficient time was given for staff

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[38] Of 7 options, they received 56.5% and 62.6% of votes respectively
[39] Of 4 options, face-to-face was preferred by 48.6%
[40] 62.4% disagreed
[41] 59.7% disagreed

working in policy to effectively build up the knowledge and relationships required to do the job. Those who speculated what had driven this change felt that it was a result of DFID becoming "more of a civil service organisation", with new career incentives to move on very quickly.

The implications for learning are that the way in which experience and evidence about these alternative considerations is shared is just as important as technical evidence and analysis.

Theory on knowledge brokering shows that while disseminating reports and hiring consultants is a key way of learning in routine and incremental decision-making[42], more complex or emergent decision-making requires facilitating the direct engagement or collaboration of knowledge producers and users (Michaels 2009).

Again, although traditional models of knowledge management and learning within organisations focus on collecting and storing information, on ICTs, databases and portals, these seemed less relevant to the majority of staff's work (Ferguson, Mchombu and Cummings 2008) – the literature suggests that this may not be as much to do with a fault in the systems, but more about the nature of the problems and challenges faced by DFID staff and the appropriate measures for dealing with them. These systems are not able to facilitate the kind of high quality communication channels required to transfer deeper, tacit knowledge of complex issues, or to facilitating the adaptation of knowledge or guidance to the 'users' specific circumstances where they are not already well-known (Greenhalgh et al 2004).

What stands out as a clear implication of the relevant literature is that this is not a 'second best' way for organisations to learn, or some kind of phenomena which should be left entirely 'informal'.

Drawing from the previous sections, for 'learning lessons' in terms of drawing on experience about what has gone on in past DFID work, or capitalising on knowledge, information and experience which has been generated elsewhere in the organisation, there seem to be other major difficulties.

"Reinventing the wheel" was one of the most common phrases used in reaction to the question of how well DFID learns, and the perception is that much of the work carried out by policy teams and in country is repeated, overlapping, and not capitalising on existing work. This was a very strong theme emerging from the interviews, and is reinforced by other related issues raised about staff turnover and poor institutional memory (with staff moving on frequently, and having insufficient time to fully get to grips with a topic or develop their networks in-country or with relevant researchers and colleagues), and linked to difficulties with the information management systems ARIES and QUEST, which were not felt to be much use for finding any work which you weren't already personally aware of. Other claims that would bear further attention were about a lack of linking between COs, as they seemed to be treated "too much as silos", missing out on opportunities to link up similar work or share similar lessons.

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[42] This relates to comments about resource centres: although they were often used, some advisers questioned whether the kinds of input they provided was really lesson-learning: useful for things that could be used instrumentally for certain ends, not really the kind of 'learning' wanted from research.

There is slightly more cause for optimism about the ability of DFID to learn broadly across themes, backed up by related arguments about the relevance and influence of portfolio reviews, and the presence of advisers in-country who are likely 'uptake channels' for such research. However it is not clear that these opportunities are being fully capitalised on for promoting learning, for example they could be triggers for dialogue between HQ and COs, and/or improved mechanisms for follow-up on recommendations might be worth considering.

Conclusions

The study suggests that DFID is much better at using the findings of research and evaluations than organisational learning. Similarly, it is much better at using research and evaluation findings during or as part a project cycle than in more complex and emergent decision making processes.

This, in turn, points towards a possible mismatch between the ideals and realities of lesson-learning in DFID. For example, research is largely done outside the organisation by increasingly larger consortia with clear incentives to communicate to audiences other than DFID. The incorporation of their findings into DFID policymaking processes then depends on these programme's communications capacities, intermediaries (both technology based and knowledge brokers), and DFID staff themselves –who, according to the study are under increasing time pressures that reduce incentives towards engaging with research and evaluation processes and the analysis of their evidence and findings.

The system emerging from this is one where intermediaries between research and evaluation and policy and practice play a significant role.

However, the study suggests that ownership emerges as a key issue among the incentives to use evidence and lessons from evaluations and research. Decentralised evaluations and 'quick research' projects were seen as more useful and accessible. Equally, the lack of ownership of large evaluations or research programmes delivered externally can help explain their lack of influence. Related to this, direct interpersonal relations between staff and, both, researchers and evaluators as well as to the research and evaluation processes matter a great deal. Difficulties related to accessing information (evidence or lessons) from research or evaluations tended to focus on the intermediaries: QUEST, the R4D platform, the external nature of large research programmes, etc. In these cases, ease of access and presentational characteristics matters. On the other hand, where the studies were owned by DFID staff and the relation with the researchers and evaluators was direct, these issues did not seem to play a role any more.

In other words, learning in DFID (of the kind that promotes the incorporation of analysis into decision making and the development of a learning organisation) is more akin to a system with fewer intermediaries and more direct relations between users and producers of knowledge.

In line with this the formal mechanisms directed at lesson-learning seem to be more useful where it is possible to 'go with the grain' of what is required for learning in the circumstances faced. For example, at the country level the rhythms of the project cycle make more sense since they are relatively independent, and they must work with similar government

bureaucratic cycles, and research and evaluation findings are valued when they help staff gain insight into and tie together a variety of technical, organisational and political concerns that are of relevance to them. In these cases, systems for storing and disseminating research and evaluations more likely to be of use.

In other cases, the signs are that DFID's systems need to be better set up to deal with the complexity of problems the organisation faces

Decision-making has become more complex, as typified by the following quote: "now we're doing much more regional projects because we're looking to work across boundaries – it becomes a lot more political, for example when you are working with other partners or as part of multi-donor approaches". Those with long experience in the organisation argued that while DFID used to largely be a 'projects driven' organisation in the days of technical assistance, the work is increasingly different: as COs and the policy level must do more work 'further upstream', as offices begin to 'do more with less', and as working with and influencing partners and governments increasingly becomes the mode of engagement, the work has become much more complex. This resonates with Kurtz and Snowden's 'complex' domain of problems (2003), where there is not a strong consensus on policy goals, evidence may be contrasting or conflicting, and cause and effect may only be seen in retrospect.

There are a number of issues for learning here. In one way the ability to learn lessons from research and evaluation in complex systems is limited, in that technical knowledge will only be one input, as action is negotiated between a variety of actors. This also means that requirements for highly detailed analysis before the initiation of a project may be unhelpful, as it may be just as relevant to do a rapid appraisal and initiate action, but then use rapid feedback indicators and insights from ongoing negotiations in order to adapt and revise ongoing work. On the other hand, there may be untapped opportunities for learning lessons. As one interviewee put it: "we often encounter this situation: we had evidence about what needed to be done, we knew (from experience) what would happen without an intervention, but we didn't know how to get there...this is political economy, and country experience". Sharing lessons about building relationships, about influencing partners, and when, where and how to deploy the technical evidence in order to catalyse change, could be very well-received. The literature about how to deal with these complex problems also places an emphasis on symbolic and enabling actions which will then serve to build up consensus around action, and rapid feedback (Shaxson 2009).

 'Lesson-learning' then works well in DFID where there is space for activities and processes that match the (often complex) realities of development faced by its staff. The value placed on direct interpersonal learning can be seen as a (often tacit) recognition that this is a relatively effective mechanism for learning in the contexts faced by DFID staff (and this is borne out by literature on the topic). And the value placed on advisers' inputs for learning is well explained by the literature on knowledge translation and decision-making which emphasises a variety of inputs to collective decision-making in complex circumstances, and by the 'interactive' model which emphasises the need for well-placed and relatively well-supported/powerful individuals with technical backgrounds in order to improve evidence-based decision-making.

Recommendations

Based on the above, there are a number of recommendations which can be made[43]:

Over-arching recommendations

One very clear need identified by this study is the need for a strong and coherent approach to improving lesson-learning –in particular at the organisation level. This study has shown the need for serious efforts to systematise, join up and coordinate lesson-learning. At the moment, a number of departments have ongoing initiatives which relate to lesson-learning, but they currently do not appear to add up to more than the sum of their parts and individual elements cannot be presumed to provide the impetus on their own. In addition, the timing seems ripe for such a move, as initiatives are undertaken by the new ministerial team to improve evidence-informed decision making and the use of evaluations.[44]

Attempts to study this across the organisation must not underestimate the importance of people and their roles and responsibilities as the key agents for the delivery of DFID's mission. This type of study should lead to some conclusions about what models should be expected in terms of lesson-learning in an organisation like DFID; this study has made some suggestions, but further work would be needed in partnership with the intended 'users' of lessons. Such models could form the basis of better coordination between research/evaluation and policy/programme teams, by providing a formal mechanism that could be naturally integrated into cycles and rhythms of staffs work and be the basis for linkages[45]. By drawing on decision making models such as those discussed in this study section above, work can be better designed to address learning problems – for example, based on understanding the various types of factors relevant to decision-making, different learning strategies and products could be formed for spreading knowledge on fitting programmes into organisational imperatives, and on meeting the political challenges of policy reform, as well as more technical concerns about what works; alternatively, an appreciation of the nature (and pitfalls) of 'incremental' policy making could lead to forming specific strategies for bringing in more critical voices at appropriate moments.

Related to this, there must be better coordination between those who are aiming to promote lesson-learning, and the 'supply' side. Attention must also be given to the link between corporate evaluations, self commissioned evaluations, and research related to DFID core business; how are expected to feed into each other, how do they feed into other frameworks such as managing for results, and how they feed into different decisions and ongoing processes. For example, it could be that evaluations routinely suggest questions to be addressed by research, while research provides causal knowledge about how and why different contexts affect the impact of certain activities. Another example would be for

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[43] Within the timeframe of this preliminary drafting it was not feasible to get a comprehensive picture of all ongoing initiatives relating to lesson-learning, and a number of the recommendations directly suggested by interviewees (as well as those inferred from the trends and conclusions) are in part or in full being addressed at the present. Where this report's conclusions overlap this should be seen as adding further evidential support for those actions.

[44] In addition, if EVD is to become an independent evaluation watchdog, extra efforts will be required in order to improve lesson-learning, as there is generally a tension between the independence of evaluation departments and their success in engaging users of evaluation (Foresti et al 2007).

[45] Yaron and Shaxson's (2008) recommendation to to keep a timeline of research (projects) and policy (events) work in an area, and using those as a mechanism to improve coordination, clearly fits into this general prescription, and serves as an example to illustrate how this could be realised.

research or evaluation to be used to inform judgements about what are realistic targets to put in log frames for particular sorts of programmes;

In order to work towards these changes it will be important to have leadership and high-level backing.

Another challenge that must be met is the lack of comprehensive models and 'good practice' for embedding such learning in the realities of the operation of aid agencies and ministries. A comparative study of bilateral (and possibly multilateral) donors (as well as other Whitehall ministries like the FCO) could underpin benchmarking activities and highlight some effective approaches, but it should also be recognised that there is insufficient theory for how learning does or should work in complex, politically-driven organisations such as DFID[46]; as such, carrying out this kind of work will see DFID working at one of the frontiers of public administration (Bourgon 2010), and effective approaches may be best designed in collaboration with academics and specialists, as well as agency staff.

There are also a number of recommendations relating to various parts of DFID[47]; these would be more effective as part of a joined-up, coherent effort, but also would have an impact on their own.

For Research and the Research Uptake teams

The study points at the importance of ownership and personal relations between producers and users of knowledge. This points to the promotion of research that is more clearly targeted at DFID's needs and its staff as well as to the development new or support of existing professional relationships between research organisations, programmes, and researchers and DFID, DFID departments or teams, and its staff.

This may be translated into some of the following practical decisions:

1. Strengthen research teams to act more as experts or 'matchmakers' between researchers and DFID staff rather than focusing on translating, synthesising and disseminating distilled findings through intermediary portals or projects –often located outside of DFID. This may include encouraging them to undertake research of their own.

2. Target research funding more effectively and provide clearer signals to researchers (outside DFID) about the specific current and future information needs of the organisation at the global, regional and national levels. This can be done by way of:

    a. Providing long term institutional and research grants to UK and internationally based think tanks and research centres to produce high quality short term (and demand driven research) as well as long term and prospective research (this would support the use of evidence in emergent policy scenarios).

        Formal relations and planned spaces for communicating preliminary and final findings of the work would reduce the cost of advocating and communicating

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[46]: KM literature and theory tends to focus on the private sector, while policy process literature is geared towards national policy processes.

[47] These have been grouped according to the authors' best understanding of who might be responsible for these kinds of actions – while this assignation may not have been got right in some instances hopefully nonetheless the content of the recommendations will be relevant

(from outside) as well as facilitate feedback to ensure that research agendas remain aligned to DFID's current and future interests and needs.

Long term, relationships will also facilitate the implementation of many of the recommendations described below –e.g. secondments, seminars, partnerships, etc.

b. Setting up a database of staff and projects so that it is clear who is working on what –thus allowing DFID staff to find expert as well as allow researchers to target their outputs more effectively (see details below);

3. Again, rather than relying on intermediaries or research communication tools, the communication of existing and new research can be improved by:

a. Matching up Research Programme Consortia (RPC) (or any large research programmes) to a policy team within DFID (or a Country Office where the programme operates) so that the research is owned not by the research department or the research uptake teams but rather by the users themselves;

b. Offer placements within the RPC for DFID staff to do research, take sabbaticals, plan new programmes, etc. –this would be compatible with matching up RPC to teams;

c. Create opportunities for think tanks and research centres and DFID staff to engage during their strategic planning processes or retreats.

d. Holding frequent DFID based seminars and events with senior researchers from RPC and other research programme researchers;

e. Developing standard formats for the communication outputs of RPC with DFID - this would 1) make it easier for DFID staff to find relevant evidence and lessons from various RPC and sources (and is also applicable to the communication of evaluation findings) and 2) provide a sense of ownership by DFID of the research being commissioned and funded by the organisation:

   i. Communication outputs should include: working papers and briefing papers and other outputs form the RPC (supply led) as well as,

   ii. Lessons documents that bring together research from across an individual RPC (on any theme) or for specific regions or countries (across RPC) or for particular policies.

4. Finally, additional support and maybe an increase in the amount available for quick policy research could promote lesson-learning within teams. This is a welcome addition and should be looked to be increased, and its management streamlined, in order to be more responsive to the short-term demands of decision-making, and take advantage of 'emergent' policy scenarios such as was experienced with the food crisis, and the global financial crisis. To encourage in-house learning, these funds should be allowed to cover for the time of DFID staff who wish to be involved in the studies themselves.

For EVD:[48]

Taking into consideration the changes going on in DFID in relation to the future role of EVD, some possible courses of action include the following:

1) Provide support to colleagues to:

   a. Encourage and improve the consistency of the quality of decentralised evaluations, through providing services such as reviewing TORs and training outputs for designing studies. They could also help 'link up' ongoing evaluative efforts with other related and relevant work (either ongoing, or past work).

   b. Communicate this support function more effectively. Heads of profession, policy and regions could be given a formal role in quality assurance to encourage ownership at the highest levels of DFID policymaking.

   c. Facilitate access to a cadre of 'DFID-approved' evaluators who would be knowledgeable of DFID's procedures and culture hence making their recommendations not only evidence based but also technically, financially and politically plausible. There are already a number of respected 'evaluation societies' and knowledge management networks that should be employed.

2) Focus on learning from evaluations by increasing and improving the relationships between the evaluators (and the evaluating body) and key potential users. One opportunity to improve learning would be to formalise the link between DFID's evaluators and the heads of profession in order to capitalise on the strength of professional networks for learning, so evaluations relevant to specific cadres could be more effectively disseminated and evaluators more effectively deployed. Another suggestion made by interviewees was to ensure that there are specific staff within DFID's evaluation cadre with responsibilities for different geographical regions, in order to provide a contact point who can feed country offices evaluations, or this could be done by having evaluation 'champions' roving the regions. Finally, the approach followed by SIDA, where learning focused evaluations are conducted in consultation and often in collaboration with the potential users, could be adopted.

3) The communications of specific evaluations could be promoted in the same manner as what is suggested for the Research and Research Uptake teams.

4) Review existing evaluation policies to ensure that the Terms of Reference for evaluations and studies drawing lessons from evaluations include the need to present specific lessons and recommendations and to target those to pre-identified audiences or clients. The evaluation body in our outside DFID would then be responsible to follow up and report on how these audiences or clients have used the lessons and adopted the recommendations. Evaluators could be required to provide follow up to their studies, presenting them and supporting teams to make sense of their lessons and implement their recommendations (this could be considered as part

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[48] Or a team or body playing EVD's role, in light of recent developments relating to the department's future.

of the communications activities –hence no need to spend more funds) to encourage the development of closer relations between DFID staff and the evaluators.

5) Finally, any restructuring under the new SoS could provide the rationale to reach out to wider audiences to inform audiences and improve engagement – A launch strategy for the new Aid Watchdog should be careful developed and timed to provide an overall picture of the future of evaluation in DFID.

For those responsible for DFID's knowledge and information management strategy:

1. As suggested above (in the case of research and evaluation) a possible innovation could be to provide an online platform that effectively makes the links between projects, questions and people[49]. For example, it could allow one to search for DFID staff who have worked in a particular country for a specified period, or list all of the advisers who have worked or work on governance projects in a given region. This service would be highly appropriate for the interpersonal mode of learning which currently exists in DFID as it would facilitate the identification and development of direct links between staff, and was met with popular support when suggested to interviewees. These kinds of records could be kept up to date through the project approval process, with documents submitted for approval containing details about who is working on it, etc. This database could be matched with information on experts from within and outside DFID thus making it easier for DFID to identify experts outside the organisation –these could be linked to RPC or other research programmes.

   There are also reasons to suggest that such a platform could be beneficial to improve DFID staff's learning from external stakeholders. Clear, searchable statements of current responsibilities (as well as the immediate projects a staff member is working on) would allow researchers to target information more effectively at those who may need it –when they need it; concerns about being 'bombarded' could be met by having just registered and approved users given access to this direct interaction, but would be crucial to facilitating learning in the context of 'doing more with less', as research and consultancy work is outsourced. This would also be a way of implementing 'transparency' demands as well as improving value for money of the researcher often commissioned by parts of DFID to influence other parts of the organisation (through better targeting), and potentially decreasing the overload of information of dubious relevance received by many staff.

2. Measures to deal with the issue of poor institutional memory in the context of staff turnover need to be addressed. Ongoing plans for improving handover procedures and institutionalising exit interviews are likely to be hugely important: these will have a significant impact on learning lessons from past work if they are fully implemented and followed through properly and given appropriate weight by senior staff. A possible alternative to high staff turnover would be to establish closer relations with the research teams of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Directorate for Strategy Policy Planning and Analysis who specialise on specific geographical areas and themes and therefore maintain the institutional memory (and intelligence) of the organisation.

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[49] It is understood that this idea was suggested at some stage but not followed through

3. Improve the usability of ARIES and QUEST. Improvements to the format and presentation for readability, consistent and restricted tagging and labelling (through e.g. a limited set of keywords, themes etc), and much improved search functions could make them more useful to staff. Ensuring that more work such as decentralised evaluations and other reviews are uploaded to QUEST would also be useful, and having follow-up and spot-checks of quality control on entries to ARIES would also be relevant.

4. Accordingly, develop or improve the intranet to make it easier to search and browse and make it RSS compatible to allow DFID staff to link up to it without having to access the site every time they want information.

Human resources:

1. Given their importance for learning, policies on the placement of advisers should be given attention, and efforts be made to remedy what is seen as an excessively high turnover in relation to the requirements of doing a good job. One option would be to increase the minimum stay in post again (a common feeling that was 2 years was less than ideal but nonetheless an improvement), but another might be to increase the numbers of advisers who are shared between policy and country teams – thus making it more attractive to stay as part of a country programme for a longer time, while also having the added bonus of facilitating learning between the two teams she/he is shared by.

2. Efforts to 'raise the bar' of expertise among advisors (who are the main interlocutors between policy and research): on research skills, academic qualifications or experience and evidence use. This is related to efforts to reduce the range of issues or interventions managed by single advisors so that they can focus on learning rather than using evidence.

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Annexes

Annex 1: ToR

Terms of reference: Structured interviewing around lesson-learning in DFID.

1. **Objective**
   To develop actionable insights on learning lessons in DFID, particularly from evaluation studies and research findings,

   A report synthesising these insights will inform the creation of an action plan for DFID, to be finalised at the June 2010 meeting of the Independent Advisory Committee on Development Impact (IACDI). The report may serve as a background document for the IACDI Chair's annual letter to the Secretary of State.

   Context: DFID's Evaluation Policy commits DFID to make improvements in how evaluation lessons are gathered, shared and embedded in policy-making decisions. Lesson learning is also important for DFID's research programme: improving research uptake for policy is a major workstream.

   Lesson learning is a long-established (but hard to achieve) policy aim, alongside accountability, partnership and monitoring and evaluation capacity building. DFID expects evaluations to drive decision making and this underpins our work on strengthening our systems for follow up, for better engagement at senior level, for improving management responses, and for communications of evaluation, among other areas.

   To get large returns from our investments in evidence, we need to go further and become a learning organisation where high quality, credible evidence quickly becomes embedded in decisions and drives how the organisation thinks and operates.

   IACDI guides the work of Evaluation Department. As part of its focus on lesson-learning in 2010, it aims to agree an action plan in June 2010, that outlines what Evaluation Department and DFID should do in collaboration improve lesson learning from evaluation, research and other sources of evidence within DFID, in order to maximise the likelihood that evaluation and research evidence feeds into decision making and policy in practice.

2. **Recipient**
   This work is being commissioned by IACDI, and will also inform DFID's own thinking. All outputs will be sent to the Chair of IACDI or such other member of the committee as he may nominate, copying in contacts in DFID's Evaluation, Research and Knowledge and Information Management Departments. The Evaluation Department will identify a counterpart member of its staff to provide briefing and assistance, as required.

3. **Scope**
   We require a Consultant to undertake a series of structured interviews with DFID

staff in the UK (and overseas, by video conference) to gather their views on obstacles to lesson learning, particularly from evaluation studies and research. This will involve spending time at both DFID HQ locations in London and East Kilbride.

4. **Method**

The Consultant will review existing relevant literature on lesson-learning in evaluation and research (including official publications such as DFID's Research Strategy, IACDI Quality Review, Quality of DFID's Evaluations and Evaluation Management Systems, DFID's Evaluation Policy and NAO report on DFID evaluation perceptions) and interview a range of DFID policy and programme staff in order to synthesise answers to a range of questions aimed at discovering staff attitudes and practices to lesson-learning and evidence.

The Consultant will interview up to 30 members of DFID staff. These staff members will comprise those involved in making decisions on DFID policy and programmes (the primary audience of research and evaluation findings), and those who have had interaction with DFID evaluation studies and research programmes.

Roles and responsibilities: In line with best practice on semi-structured interviewing, the Consultant will ask a range of questions to initiate a discussion (including follow-up questions) on lesson-learning in order to develop insight in the areas required. The Consultant will advise us on what assistance, if any, needs to be provided for the taking of notes during the interviews.

We expect the Consultant to take the lead on a) devising the composition of interview questions and b) the way individual interviews are conducted. The order and content of initial questions asked will be agreed by Evaluation Department (on behalf of IACDI), with input from Research Department.

The Consultant will conduct interviews with DFID staff based in the UK (in both headquarters offices), and by video-conference with staff based overseas. He/she should ensure that each interview should take no more than one hour, and that comments from interviews will be anonymised in any subsequent outputs.

Evaluation Department will take a supporting role in arranging the interviews and providing any logistical support. A member of DFID Evaluation Department staff will be available, at the discretion of the Consultant, to welcome the interview respondents, to answer any questions about the process, and/or to take notes during the interviews.

Evaluation Department will also ensure that the Consultant will have the necessary briefing on DFID systems and procedures.

The nature of the issues to be addressed is set out on the following page ('Suggested approach to interview content') to aid the Consultant in devising an approach to the interview questions. These will be given concrete application to specific areas of

DFID policy, or identified evaluation and research studies, to be agreed in consultation with the Evaluation and Research Departments.

5. Suggested approach to interview content

Study Areas	Insights needed
What are staff perceptions of DFID's approach to evaluation and research? How do they characterise their interactions with evaluation and research? What is their assessment of the quality and usefulness of specific DFID reports and products?	How aware are staff of DFID outputs in evaluation, research and other sources of evidence? What factors influence their judgments of specific processes, products and reports?
What information do staff seek before making decisions about policy and programmes?	Compared with other kinds of information, how influential are sources of lesson-learning in making decisions? What are these sources? How are they used? What triggers the search for lessons?
What are staff perceptions around the quality of the relationship between learning lessons and making decisions in DFID?	Which processes, structures and relationships determine how likely it is that lessons feed into how decisions are made in the real world? What are the key obstacles and bottle-necks?
To what extent are DFID staff rewarded for making lesson-learning a core part of their work? What obstacles or constraints to lesson learning (if any) do interviewees identify as existing in DFID? To what do they attribute these?	How do staff perceive lesson-learning in terms of risk? What incentives do staff need to seek out and act on lessons learned? Personal recognition? Career advancement? Something else? How does DFID assign ownership of lesson-learning?
What are staff perceptions about top management and Ministerial commitment to lesson-learning in DFID? Do these differ? If so, how?	Is there a demand for lessons learned? Is it authentic? Is lesson-learning perceived as an activity associated with success or with failure?

Are staff aware of different sources of evidence about what works and what doesn't? If so, which sources are most influential and why?	How do staff distinguish between and rank research, audit, review and evaluation? How can we ensure that lessons are credible, persuasive, and accessible? Are reports in the right format?
How aware are staff of DFID's Evaluation Studies and/or of DFID's research programme? If so, which ones? What are staff's perceptions about the quality of evaluation and research, and how findings are communicated?	Which evaluation studies were most persuasive? Why? What factors influence respondent's opinion of how relevant evaluation and research is for their work? What is their personal experience, if any, of their own work being evaluated, and how has that experience influenced how they feel about evaluation?
How are recommendations from Evaluation Studies implemented? How do research findings influence policy?	What is their level of awareness of specific reports, and their lessons, findings and recommendations? Is the timing of reports an issue? What is their awareness and understanding of follow-up (or lack of it)?

6. Reporting: Outputs and timeframe

The Consultant will prepare:

- A preliminary summary report of no more than five pages.

- A draft final report of no more than 20 pages (including a two-page Executive Summary), synthesising findings from the interviews. The report should include analysis and comments on DFID's decision-making culture, and recommendations on how DFID could incentivise more widespread and strategic use of lesson-learning.

- A 15-minute verbal presentation of the findings at the IACDI meeting on 10th June, and participate in discussion of the findings with IACDI members and members of DFID Evaluation and Research Departments.

- A final report revised in the light of comments made by IACDI members and others.

- This work should take no more than 20 working days in total, according to the following elements and timeline:

Work element	Timeline
1. DFID briefing (possibly by videoconference) and finalisation of interview questions: up to **1 day**	Early April
2. Literature review: **1 day**	Early April
3. Preparation work for interviews: **1 day**	Early April
4. Interview DFID staff (at both HQ locations in London and East Kilbride): up to **10 days**	Mid-end of April
5. Write up of preliminary report and informal briefing of Evaluation and Research Departments: **2 days**	Early May
6. Final report: **2 days**	By 12th May
7. Attendance and presentation of findings (15-minute powerpoint) at IACDI meeting (10th June) in East Kilbride **1 day.**	10th June
8. **Finalisation of report: 2 days**	End ofJune

7. Competence and Expertise Required

The appointed Consultant will have proven professional experience of:
- Best practice in semi-structured interviewing.
- Organisational development, ideally in an international development context.
- Knowledge of the relevant literature on lesson-learning/research into use.

Ideally, the Consultant should also have experience and knowledge of DFID policies and systems.

8. DFID Co-ordination

The Consultant will report to the Chair of IACDI. S/he will co-operate closely with James McNulty, Communications Adviser in Evaluation Department. Oversight of this project is with Elizabeth Robin, Head of Capacity and Quality Group in Evaluation Department.

9. Budget

We expect the cost of this contract to be no more than £22,000, with expenses to be limited to no more than £2,000 (including three trips to East Kilbride), payable only on production of receipts.

Annex 2: ODI Approach to the study

<div align="center">

Structured interviewing around lesson-learning in DFID

Proposed approach for the study

Draft, 13th April 2010, Harry Jones and Enrique Mendizabal

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Interview approach

Each interview will approach the topic of lesson learning from two angles:

1) Using the decision as a starting point, tracking back to the factors which influence that in order to understand where DFID research and evaluation fits into this; and

2) Using research and evaluation as the starting point, 'tracking forwards' in order to understand the ways in which these influence their work.

Within the context of assessing the influence of research on policy, these methods tend to underestimate, and overestimate, the influence of research respectively, and hence by approaching the topic from both perspectives it will be possible to work towards a balanced understanding based on triangulation within the text from one interviewee (as well as between interviewees).

For 1), questions will draw on good practice for understanding real-world decision-making, as seen in work such as Kurtz and Snowden[50] and Klein[51]. Questions will be fairly open to delve into the way the interviewee typically approaches decisions in a real-world context, in order to draw out the ways in which DFID staff learn lessons throughout their every day work. However interviews will be sensitive to a number of theoretical issues in this area which should aid the analysis, for example: different phases of policy decision-making (agenda, formulation, implementation, evaluation), types of decision regime (routine, incremental, fundamental and emergent), and types of learning (theorist, reflector, pragmatist and activist).

For 2), the questions are build around a 'theory of change' for how research and evaluation lead to lesson learning within DfID. This kind of approach is very suitable for understanding complex issues such as the influence of research on policy[52], and involves identifying a expectations about how evaluations and research will lead to lesson learning, through what processes, mechanisms, and with what intermediate outcomes. Analysing whether these processes are functioning, or whether different intermediate outcomes are occurring, will help us analyse the 'how' and 'why' of lesson learning from evaluations and research, as well as provide crucial insights into the extent to which it may be occurring.

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[50] Kurtz, C.F. and Snowden, D. J. (2003) 'The new dynamics of strategy: Sense-making in a complex and complicated world' *IBM SYSTEMS JOURNAL*, VOL 42, NO 3, 2003

[51] Klein, G. (2001) *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*, MIT Press

[52] E.g. See Jones, H. (2010)

Where possible, the interviews will identify a few examples of actual research/evaluation use, or particular policy processes, and look to delve into these in slightly more depth in order to provide text boxes or case studies in the report. In addition, the ODI team will work closely with EvD staff carrying out a survey, in order to ensure that the two studies will complement each other and provide a richer picture of evaluation and research use.

<u>Interview questions</u>

Decision-making and learning

1. What kinds of decision do you take? What is the typical decision-making process, and where do you fit in it?

2. Please give an example of a particular decision that you were involved in, which is in some ways typical of your work. (At each stage below, after their initial answer the interviewee will be asked what role different sources of information played).

    a. How did you identify specific problems?

    b. In what way did you get an understanding of the possible courses of action?

    c. How did you reach a decision about the appropriate course of action?

    d. How did you implement and communicate this decision?

3. In general, when and how do you use research and evaluation in your every day decision-making?

4. What increases the likelihood that you will draw on them, and what hinders it?

5. How does this vary for different circumstances you tend to face? When are you more or less likely to use them?

Learning from evaluations and research in DfID

6. Outputs:

    a. What kinds of lesson do you expect to get out of each? How does it differ between the two?

    b. How do you perceive the quality of DfID evaluations and research studies?

    c. How suitable is the format they are presented in?

    d. To what extent do they tend to be timely?

7. Awareness and engagement:

    a. Could you describe the typical process for an evaluation (or research project), and could you mark out a timeline for key evaluations going on that are relevant to your area? *(i.e. what is the interviewee's awareness of research and evaluation)*

   b. Where are evaluations and research made available? Is it easy to access relevant studies?

   c. To what extent do you engage with research or evaluation teams? What are the perceptions of the quality of, and benefits of, engaging with them?

8. Uptake and lesson-learning:

   a. What incentives are there (formal or informal) for using evaluations or research? What are the disincentives?

   b. What are the risks of not searching for lessons from evaluations and research? Or of employing insufficient analysis and evidence in general?

   c. What are the factors which hinder learning lessons from evaluations and research? What facilitates it?

   d. What other sources do DfID staff use to draw 'lessons' from, aside from DfID evaluations and research?

9. Examples:

   a. Can you give an example of an evaluation or research report which has been particularly influential? Why was this the case?

   b. Can you give an example of some evaluation or research which had relevant lessons for DfID which were *not* used? Why was this?

Activity plan

The research is expected to proceed as follows:

1) **Inception**: The interview approach will be drafted and feedback sought from relevant parties. Also, logistical arrangements will begin.
Detailed break-down:

   a. Finalise a detailed activity plan (Tuesday 13th)

   b. Draft interview questions and detailed guidelines for interviewee selection, passed to EVD for feedback and to initiate contact with interviewees (Tuesday 13th)

   c. Discuss (in person, video conference or on the phone) models, frameworks and hypotheses about learning in DFID, and the strategies employed to facilitate learning from evaluations and research with: the head of EVD, head of research and head of research uptake. Discussion with a member of IACDI about these topics, as well as their hopes for this piece of research and how it might be used (week of April 12th)

   d. Discuss logistics with EVD, and make initial contact with 'support person' within EVD, to discuss the interview approach (and the overall shape of the study) in more detail.

2) **Review**: A review will be carried out of all documents relevant to learning and the use of evaluations and research in DFID, and of wider literature about evaluation/research use and learning. Based on these, and the feedback from EvD and IACDI, interview questions and interviewees will be finalised, along with some preliminary models and hypotheses for testing.

   a. This will be initiated by getting EVD and the research uptake team to send all relevant documents, (possibly through the support person, who would also be called upon to chase up other internal documents which interviewees and other staff recommend. This can begin once initial contact has been made with the 'support person'.

   b. Based on documents received from DFID staff, there will be a selective review of the wider literature, in order to provide background and context to the various issues arising.

3) **Testing**: the first set of interviews will be carried out by the principal researcher with a member of EvD in attendance, and will be used to test the research questions. Initial feedback will be used to revise and adapt questions where necessary

   a. After the 'testing' phase, the interview approach will be finalised based on the feedback received from 1.c, the outcomes of the review, feedback from EVD on interview questions and the insights emerging from the 'test' interviews.

   b. This will include a revised set of interview questions, with linked models and hypotheses to test how lesson-learning works in DFID, and key 'themes' and issues to guide the analysis and coding of interview transcripts.

Visit to Abercrombie House: A visit to Abercrombie house could be carried out (19th, 20th, and/or 21st April) in order to:
i)   Discuss logistics with EVD
ii)   Meet the 'support person'
iii)   Meet Nick York in person for 1.c
iv)   Carry out a few test interviews

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4) **Interviews**: these will be carried out by the principal researcher using semi-structured interview techniques. They will be carried out in person where possible, failing that via video conference or over the telephone. Once written up, transcripts will be sent to interviewees for corroboration and feedback.

5) **Analysis**: Qualitative data analysis software will be used to facilitate the analysis of the raw data, allowing for transcripts to be transparently coded, and making the synthesis of themes more comprehensive and systematic.

6) **Preliminary findings**: will be drafted and reported to the evaluation and research departments in an informal briefing.

7) **Final report**: based on feedback received, the report will be revised and delivered by 24th May

8) Attendance at **IACDI meeting** 10th June and presentation of findings

9) **Finalisation of report**: based on feedback from the IACDI meeting, the report will be revised and finalised.

Additional aspects of the research:

Additional information: It would be useful if the ODI team also had access to DFID's web and intranet statistics to assess, for example, how staff uses in-house knowledge services including the research for development portal.

Support: the ODI team would like to count on support from EvD for a number of tasks:

- To assist with research design, giving feedback on interview questions and the online survey, and helping with the selection of potential interviewees.

- To provide relevant background material such as briefings on DFID systems and procedures, and EvD strategies and goals for evaluation use.

- To provide the initial contact with potential interviewees, to set up interviews and other logistics.

- To provide feedback and reflections throughout, for example for a member of staff to help out as a 'sounding board' on emerging themes and issues.

Guidelines for selecting interviewees

The priority is Grade 5 /SCS staff:

- Head of department in Policy and Research division

- Head of either WB or EU team

- Head of aid effectiveness

- Someone in charge of 1 vertical programme (maybe GFATM)

- Head of CHASE (conflict)

Then selectively drilling down to:

- Heads of teams within PRD

- Country programmes

- Heads of selected country teams, and of regional teams

Annex 3: Summary of Online Survey

1. I work for DFID...

|	Response Percent	Response Count
In Abercrombie House	32.7%	83
In Palace Street	41.3%	105
In a DFID office outside the UK	26.0%	66
Other (please specify)		11
answered question		254
skipped question		0

2. My job grade, and what best describes my CURRENT role:

	Top manager	Senior manager	Project/programme manager	Adviser	Admin/Corporate (for example, HR, Finance, Comms)	Te (e kn man
SCS	7.7% (1)	53.8% (7)	23.1% (3)	7.7% (1)	7.7% (1)	0
A band	0.0% (0)	15.6% (23)	17.7% (26)	53.7% (79)	11.6% (17)	1
B band	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	60.0% (45)	1.3% (1)	30.7% (23)	8
C band	6.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	87.5% (14)	6
Other (please specify below)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	3:
Additional						
answered						
skipped						

3. I work in the following division/department:

		Response Percent	Response Count
Research and Evidence		11.0%	28
Africa		15.0%	38
Asia		10.6%	27
Business Solutions		3.9%	10
Communications		3.9%	10
Evaluation		7.5%	19
Finance and Corporate Performance		4.7%	12
Human Resources		4.7%	12
Internal Audit		2.8%	7
International Finance		5.1%	13
International Relations		3.1%	8
Policy		**16.9%**	**43**
SHMECOT		7.5%	19
Western Asia and Stabilisation		3.1%	8
Other (please specify)			4
answered question			254
skipped question			0

4. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: 'I think that DFID is good at...'

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Response Count
Ensuring policy is responsive to the evidence	10.3% (19)	55.7% (103)	23.8% (44)	2.7% (5)	7.6% (14)	185
Justifying policy decisions with evidence	12.4% (23)	57.0% (106)	21.5% (40)	4.8% (9)	4.3% (8)	186
Acting on recommendations based on evidence	10.3% (19)	54.1% (100)	24.9% (46)	5.4% (10)	5.4% (10)	185
Analysing evidence to generate recommendations	16.4% (30)	53.0% (97)	24.0% (44)	3.3% (6)	3.3% (6)	183
Sharing evidence across different teams	9.7% (18)	25.8% (48)	47.3% (88)	15.1% (28)	2.2% (4)	186
Learning from previous DFID experiences	9.1% (17)	28.5% (53)	42.5% (79)	17.2% (32)	2.7% (5)	186
Learning from the previous experiences of partners	7.0% (13)	20.9% (39)	42.8% (80)	22.5% (42)	7.0% (13)	187
Learning from failure	10.2% (19)	20.3% (38)	39.0% (73)	26.2% (49)	4.3% (8)	187
Learning from success	13.4% (25)	57.5% (107)	18.8% (35)	7.0% (13)	3.2% (6)	186
Taking on board criticism	10.3% (19)	32.1% (59)	39.1% (72)	15.2% (28)	3.3% (6)	184
Assessing the quality of evidence	13.1% (24)	37.7% (69)	33.3% (61)	11.5% (21)	4.4% (8)	183
Ensuring policy is informed by evidence	9.7% (18)	49.7% (92)	28.1% (52)	6.5% (12)	5.9% (11)	185
Acting on what new evidence tells us	8.6% (16)	47.6% (89)	34.2% (64)	5.3% (10)	4.3% (8)	187
					Comments:	38
					answered question	188
					skipped question	66

5. In the context of policy or programme design/implementation, please s will you would visit FIRST to find:

	DFID Resource Centres	DFID colleagues	Colleagues outside DFID	My Head of Profession	InSight/DFID Library Services	The Internet
Practical lessons on what works in my field of interest	9.7% (18)	56.5% (105)	9.1% (17)	0.0% (0)	4.3% (8)	11.3% (21)
The most relevant academic and/or professional literature in my field of interest	10.8% (20)	12.9% (24)	4.8% (9)	1.1% (2)	4.8% (9)	40.9% (76)
People who can help me find answers quickly in my field of interest	5.9% (11)	62.6% (117)	21.4% (40)	1.6% (3)	0.0% (0)	7.0% (13)

Other (

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6. Please rate how you feel about the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Response Count
Evidence is more likely to be influential the more senior the person that is presenting it	36.2% (68)	47.9% (90)	11.7% (22)	4.3% (8)	188
DFID doesn't learn lessons until there is some kind of crisis	12.8% (24)	55.3% (104)	28.2% (53)	3.7% (7)	188
There is a strong evidence base in my area of interest	18.2% (34)	47.6% (89)	27.8% (52)	6.4% (12)	187
It is a core part of my job to bring in findings of research/evaluation	33.5% (63)	39.4% (74)	21.3% (40)	5.9% (11)	188
Me/my team actively engage with the evidence base in my/our area	34.8% (65)	50.3% (94)	12.8% (24)	2.1% (4)	187
I can find the time to properly draw lessons from the available evidence	7.0% (13)	40.6% (76)	44.9% (84)	7.5% (14)	187
I have the skills to properly draw lessons from the available evidence	29.7% (55)	46.5% (86)	21.6% (40)	2.2% (4)	185
Balanced analysis is more important than giving the preferred answer	64.0% (119)	30.1% (56)	3.2% (6)	2.7% (5)	186
				Additional comments	20
				answered question	188
				skipped question	66

7. When you make decisions, how do you rank the following six considera importance? (1= most important, 6 = least important)

Ranking

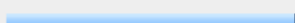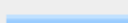|	1	2	3	4	5
Technical evidence	36.4% (68)	26.2% (49)	16.6% (31)	9.6% (18)	7.5% (14)
Scientific knowledge	4.9% (9)	16.3% (30)	19.0% (35)	14.1% (26)	14.7% (27)
Political and contextual knowledge of countries, localities, etc	36.9% (69)	27.8% (52)	19.3% (36)	7.0% (13)	5.3% (10)
Negotiating internal DFID politics	13.3% (25)	16.5% (31)	12.8% (24)	20.7% (39)	18.6% (35)
Maintaining and managing relationships with partners	9.0% (17)	12.8% (24)	20.7% (39)	19.7% (37)	24.5% (46)
Partner/developing country government priorities	17.2% (32)	23.1% (43)	22.0% (41)	18.3% (34)	10.2% (19)

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8. Have you ever read all or part of a DFID evaluation report?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	82.4%	155
No	17.6%	33
answered question		188
skipped question		66

9. How do you rate DFID evaluation reports (according to the following criteria)?

	Very good	Good	Poor	Very poor	Response Count
Content quality	13.4% (20)	77.2% (115)	8.7% (13)	0.7% (1)	149
Relevance	11.6% (17)	69.4% (102)	18.4% (27)	0.7% (1)	147
Timeliness	2.0% (3)	38.1% (56)	53.7% (79)	6.1% (9)	147
Clarity	6.8% (10)	70.9% (105)	21.6% (32)	0.7% (1)	148
Quality of design and layout	8.8% (13)	66.0% (97)	23.1% (34)	2.0% (3)	147
How could this be improved?					51
answered question					149
skipped question					105

10. Have you ever read all or part of a DFID-commissioned research report?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	70.1%	129
No	29.9%	55
answered question		184
skipped question		70

11. How do you rate DFID-commissioned research reports (according to the following criteria)?

	Very good	Good	Poor	Very poor	Response Count
Quality of content	20.2% (24)	73.9% (88)	5.0% (6)	0.8% (1)	119
Relevance	15.1% (18)	72.3% (86)	11.8% (14)	0.8% (1)	119
Timeliness	4.2% (5)	62.2% (74)	31.1% (37)	2.5% (3)	119
How could this be improved?					49
answered question					119
skipped question					135

12. Have you ever read all or part of a DFID internal review?

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	82.5%	151
No	17.5%	32
answered question		183
skipped question		71

13. How do you rate internal DFID reviews according to the (following criteria)?:

	Very good	Good	Poor	Very poor	Response Count
Quality of content	7.5% (11)	70.5% (103)	19.2% (28)	2.7% (4)	146
Relevance	13.3% (19)	76.9% (110)	7.7% (11)	2.1% (3)	143
Timeliness	12.2% (18)	68.2% (101)	18.2% (27)	1.4% (2)	148
Clarity	8.1% (12)	55.4% (82)	33.8% (50)	2.7% (4)	148
Quality of design and layout	3.4% (5)	44.9% (66)	40.1% (59)	11.6% (17)	147
How could this be improved?					62
answered question					148
skipped question					106

14. Please rank the following 10 ways of getting evidence concerning you[r] least persuasive)

My ranking

	1	2	3	4	5	6
DFID Library Services	5.0% (8)	3.1% (5)	5.6% (9)	5.6% (9)	9.4% (15)	8.1% (13)
Professional networks	29.3% (48)	24.4% (40)	11.0% (18)	11.0% (18)	9.1% (15)	4.3% (7)
DFID project records and documentation	9.7% (16)	7.9% (13)	15.8% (26)	11.5% (19)	15.8% (26)	8.5% (14)
DFID web content	4.8% (8)	10.7% (18)	16.1% (27)	8.3% (14)	10.7% (18)	8.9% (15)
Other web content (please specify below)	16.4% (25)	14.5% (22)	15.1% (23)	13.8% (21)	13.2% (20)	6.6% (10)
DFID reports and publications	7.3% (12)	18.2% (30)	15.2% (25)	23.6% (39)	10.3% (17)	11.5% (19)
Partner reports and publications	7.9% (13)	17.6% (29)	18.2% (30)	15.8% (26)	12.7% (21)	13.3% (22)
Professional journals	18.3% (30)	13.4% (22)	11.6% (19)	7.3% (12)	12.8% (21)	6.7% (11)
Conferences and seminars	9.1% (15)	14.0% (23)	14.6% (24)	9.8% (16)	11.0% (18)	9.8% (16)
Training courses	3.7% (6)	11.0% (18)	11.7% (19)	7.4% (12)	6.7% (11)	8.6% (14)

15. My SINGLE favourite way of getting information about lessons learned is:

		Response Percent	Response Count
The Internet		32.0%	56
Email		9.7%	17
Face-to-face (briefings, conferences, meetings, and so on)		48.6%	85
Hard copy publications (please specify below)		9.7%	17
		Comments	35
		answered question	175
		skipped question	79

16. I think it's important that DFID learns more lessons in the following area(s). Please mark all that apply.

	Response Percent	Response Count
Trade	20.5%	35
Communications	26.9%	46
Aid effectiveness	46.8%	80
Civil society	35.1%	60
Aid delivery mechanisms	43.3%	74
Health	29.2%	50
Value for Money	70.2%	120
Governance	43.3%	74
Education	28.7%	49
Climate Change	36.8%	63
Livelihoods	24.6%	42
Agriculture and food	30.4%	52
Conflict and security	39.2%	67
Humanitarian	27.5%	47
Water and sanitation	26.9%	46
Fragile states	50.9%	87
Human Resource Management	28.7%	49
Gender	36.8%	63
Project management and design	48.0%	82
Partnerships	28.7%	49
Environment	25.7%	44
Infrastructure	21.6%	37
Economics	24.6%	42
Statistics	25.7%	44
Other (please specify)		33
answered question		171

17. Please indicate how often you use the following corporate systems:

	Every day	At least once a week	Less than once a week	Less than once a month	Never	Response Count
ARIES	16.6% (29)	24.0% (42)	23.4% (41)	24.0% (42)	12.0% (21)	175
QUEST	42.3% (74)	39.4% (69)	9.1% (16)	7.4% (13)	1.7% (3)	175
BLUE BOOK	1.1% (2)	14.4% (25)	33.3% (58)	42.5% (74)	8.6% (15)	174
Please tell us if you have comments about how useful you find these systems for finding evidence or lessons						59
					answered question	175
					skipped question	79

18. Please let us have any other views you have about how DFID shares and uses evidence to reduce poverty.

	Response Count
	80
answered question	80
skipped question	174