

Research Communication and Uptake

A snapshot of practice in the Australian-based international development sector

**Report by Anthony Kung and Melissa Kamp,
Coffey International Development**

December 2018



RESEARCH FOR
DEVELOPMENT
IMPACT NETWORK

A collaboration between
the Australian Council for
International Development
and Australian universities

The Research for Development Impact Network

The Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network is a collaboration between the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and Australian universities. It is a network of practitioners, researchers and evaluators working in international development with the objective of linking quality research, policy and practice for impact in international development.

The Network began in 2009 and grew out of a collective desire to widen debate on international development and to strengthen collaboration between academics and members of ACFID. Since this time, the Network has continued to grow and promote positive relationships and connections between ACFID members and universities, with the overall goal of supporting collaboration and understanding across actors within the Australian development sector.

Further information can be found at www.rdinetwork.org.au.

Coffey International Development

Coffey's international development team is a comprehensive implementing partner for governments and the private sector, relied on for more than 40 years by our clients, including the US, UK and Australian governments, to successfully design, deliver and evaluate their programs through our global network of development professionals. Today, we are part of a global network of Tetra Tech companies with 16,000 colleagues across 400 offices, in the Asia Pacific, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States.

This report was prepared by the Research, Monitoring and Evaluation (RME) practice, within Coffey International Development. RME undertakes rigorous evaluations, and equips organisations and projects with robust monitoring and evaluation systems. We provide evidence-based advice to governments, civil society organisations and private enterprises, on their development and social performance.

Acknowledgments

The RDI Network and Coffey extend special thanks to each organisation and individual who participated in the interviews, focus group discussions and surveys which made this report possible.

Particular thanks are given to members of the RDI Network Steering Group for this project:

Peter Baynard-Smith, Independent Consultant

Ashlee Betteridge, Development Policy Centre, ANU

Tanya Fenwick, Fred Hollows Foundation

Peta O'Flynn, Fred Hollows Foundation

Associate Professor Chris Roche, Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University

Jenny Vaccari, Research for Development Impact Network

Professor Juliet Willetts, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney

© Australian Council for International Development 2018

Contents

About this report	1
Key terms	2
Structure of this report	2
Key messages and recommendations	2
Organisations that predominantly fund and/or deliver aid	5
Organisations that predominantly produce and communicate research	7
Research use in the development sector	8
Concepts and terminology	8
A broad definition of 'research'	8
Research production, outputs, communication, and uptake	8
Research producers, brokers, and users	8
Creating useful communication products	9
Stakeholder engagement as a communication process	12
Engaging stakeholders to influence the course of research	12
Engaging stakeholders to build trust and credibility	14
Models of research identified in the Snapshot	15
Model 1: Traditional research, with varying degrees of communication	16
Model 2: Researchers consult users	17
Model 3: Users consult researchers as experts	18
Model 4: Users and researchers as collaborators	19
What factors help or hinder research communication and uptake?	20
Engaging research communication specialists	20
Sufficient skills to undertake research communication?	21
Mixed incentives for undertaking research communication	22
Lack of time to find, read, and synthesise research outputs?	23
Academic paywalls	24
Importance of adaptive programming	27
Research communication within large organisations	28

About this report

This report is a 'snapshot' of a study commissioned by the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network, and undertaken by Coffey International Development. The aim of the Snapshot is to provide a point-in-time understanding as to how research findings are communicated and taken up in policy and practice, within the Australian-based development sector. It offers insights that will benefit organisations and individuals who are present and active at any point in processes of research production and use.

To collect data for this Snapshot, Coffey and RDI Network undertook:

- ▶ Nine 1-hour interviews with researchers and practitioners around Australia;
- ▶ Four 2-hour focus group discussions in Melbourne (2), Sydney (1) and Canberra (1);
- ▶ An online survey targeted at Australian-based researchers working within the international development sector ("research producers' survey"; n=89)¹;
- ▶ An online survey of DFAT personnel ("DFAT survey"; n=52); and
- ▶ An online survey targeted at Australian-based persons working in international development NGOs, consultancies, funding organisations, and peak bodies ("research users' survey"; n=35).

Two supplementary annexes provide further information, respectively relating to the qualitative data gathered, and the methodology of this Snapshot. These annexes can be found on the RDI Network website at <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/research-communication-and-uptake>.

The Snapshot is a high-level, moment-in-time study into research communication and uptake. It is expected that further work will be undertaken to deepen our understanding, and to identify more ways to facilitate the use of research in international development.

We acknowledge the earlier work commissioned by RDI Network in 2017 (*From Evidence to Impact: Development contribution of Australian Aid funded research*), which explored research impact and facilitators of impact for projects funded through the Australian Development for Research Awards Scheme (2007–2016).

¹ This survey was designed and administered by the RDI Network. Coffey undertook data analysis.

Key terms

There is no set of universally accepted definitions for exploring how research is communicated, engaged with, used, and applied in policy and practice. For the purposes of this Snapshot, we have used the following definitions:



Research means rigorous investigative activities which generate reliable evidence.



Research communication means 'the process of interpreting or translating complex research findings into a language, format and context that non-experts can understand', and involves providing stakeholders with 'opportunities to articulate their own needs so that communication is driven by demand rather than from the top down'. It is distinct from marketing or promotional materials in that its core focus is on conveying the results of the research.²



Research uptake is applying research findings to policy and practice. Research uptake may 'involve complex processes over time, whereby research outputs ... are adapted, built upon and operationally applied'.³

Structure of this report

This report presents conclusions upfront, with discussion and evidence presented later. We start with **key messages and recommendations**, before discussing in more detail **research use in the development sector**, which provides evidence for the key messages and recommendations.

The evidence shown in this Snapshot is a combination of survey results, and quotes from interviews and focus group discussions. Quotes have been edited for clarity.

Key messages and recommendations

Key messages and recommendations are given below. They have been divided according to their intended audience: all organisations within the Australian-based development sector, organisations that predominantly fund or deliver aid, and organisations that predominantly produce and communicate research.

All organisations

The following overarching recommendations are relevant to all stakeholders in the sector and are designed to build the culture and relationships that enable effective research use. These recommendations are relevant to organisations that fund and deliver aid; those that produce and communicate research relevant to development; and bodies concerned with influencing policy and practice, including the RDI Network.

2 Carter, Isabel and Kurt Paulus (eds) (2010) Research communication: insights from practice. A working paper of the Research Communication Strategy Group. UK Department for International Development. Online at <https://www.gov.uk/dfid-research-outputs/research-communication-insights-from-practice>. Accessed 23 Oct 2018.

3 Australian Research Council (2018) Research Impact Principles and Framework – Glossary. Online at <https://www.arc.gov.au/policies-strategies/strategy/research-impact-principles-framework>. Accessed 23 Oct 2018.

All Stakeholders	
Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>Research communication, and research uptake, are not just about creating products but about processes</p> <p>Study participants often discussed whether certain research <i>products</i> – such as journal articles, blog posts, and media articles – were conducive to uptake. However, more detailed discussions tended towards seeing communication and uptake as interlinked <i>processes</i>, often framed as a form of stakeholder engagement.</p>	<p>All parties should put strategies in place to encourage stakeholders to engage with research planning and processes, as well as with research products.</p> <p>For organisations predominantly producing research, this means ensuring that stakeholders are consulted from early stages of research design, through research implementation, to output. For organisations funding or delivering aid, this means actively engaging with research institutions, so that your needs and interests are made clear.</p>
<p>Research and user engagement can be structured many different ways</p> <p>We identified four, broad ways of structuring stakeholder engagement with research:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 traditional research with accompanying communication; 2 researcher-driven consultative models (i.e., researchers consulting stakeholders); 3 user-driven consultative models (i.e., practice- or policy-oriented organisations consulting researchers as experts); and 4 collaborative approaches (such as partnerships, co-production, and action research). <p>Although not hard-and-fast categories, these four ‘models’ (and their sub-types) provide a framework to think about how research and related stakeholder engagement can be structured.</p>	<p>All parties are encouraged to reflect on which models they currently use for stakeholder engagement with research, and how their interests may be served by the other models presented here.</p>
<p>Trust between researchers and stakeholders is a critical factor for uptake</p> <p>We found that trust between those producing research and those using research is critical to uptake, regardless of the model used. Trust involves (but is more than) a demonstrable history of robust, credible work. It also involves developing constructive personal relationships, so that advice can be sought and provided freely and readily.</p>	<p>All parties should work to build meaningful relationships of trust over time, creating and deepening channels for research communication and uptake. We recommend seeking out opportunities to form and maintain personal connections consistently throughout a research process, or even a career.</p>

All Stakeholders	
Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>Invest in staff time and tools to engage in research communication and/or uptake</p> <p>The lack of time to undertake research communication (for people predominantly producing research) and to find, read, synthesise and apply research (for people mostly using research) was a consistent theme across all stakeholder groups.</p> <p>The lack of time was sometimes framed as a problem of incentives. Study participants indicated that their organisation often set other priorities that overrode or competed with research communication and/or uptake activities.</p> <p>The role of specialist communications staff was affirmed by study participants.</p>	<p>All parties are encouraged to view communicating and taking up research as a distinct task that needs organisational investment.</p> <p>Organisations should review their resourcing and incentive structures, to identify how time and effort spent on research communication and/or uptake can be rewarded. Communication specialists should be considered as an option.</p>
<p>A demand for skills training exists, but what specific skills require training is not clear</p> <p>Three-quarters of respondents to the research producers' survey said that they had not received any formal training in research communication, and that such training would be beneficial.</p> <p>We suggest that most study participants considered themselves to have an adequate base level of skills to communicate and understand research. More skills training would be welcome, but opportunities to apply such training are limited by time and budget constraints (and other structural factors).</p> <p>On our evidence, we suggest that training on how to create communication products for lay consumption would not be a high priority. We do not have clear evidence as to whether there is a skill shortage in stakeholder engagement (for the purposes of research communication and uptake); however, we encourage organisations to investigate whether training these skills would be apt for their staff. Such training may include training in partnership brokering, facilitation, and professional networking.</p>	<p>Organisations, when reviewing what skills development may be apt for them, should explore a range of possible skills that facilitate research communication and uptake. This may include, for example, the skills to engage and build relationships with stakeholders, or to access, interpret and apply research findings.</p> <p>As noted above, lack of time and incentives to engage in research communication was identified as a barrier. Any training should be supported by appropriate resourcing to allow training to be implemented in practice.</p>

Organisations that predominantly fund and/or deliver aid

This research finds that organisations which fund and deliver aid are in a unique position to ensure that incentives are in place to encourage individuals to communicate and use research findings. Funders are highly influential, as they set the terms about how funding can be used for research communication and uptake, as well as the minimum expectations of how research should be used to inform programming. The following recommendations are designed to increase demand and incentives for effective research use in the development sector.

Organisations that predominantly fund and/or deliver aid	
Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>There are missed opportunities to embed research use in existing processes</p> <p>Staff from development organisations are conscious that research evidence should be sourced and used to inform design and evaluation processes, but that this priority is lost amongst pressures to implement and to demonstrate successes.</p>	<p>All development organisations should require, as a minimum, a rapid scan and synthesis of evidence to inform the design of new policies and interventions. Internal evaluations, literature from academic sources, research from in-country sources, and material from other organisations should all be considered. DFAT establishing this requirement would be strongly influential.</p> <p>As a caveat, however, we do not suggest that a mere rapid scan of research at the design phase will always be sufficient. Development organisations should remain open to adjusting approaches where evidence supports doing so (see adaptive management, below).</p>
<p>Adaptive programming conducive to making research outputs relevant to end users</p> <p>There appears to be an increased acceptance of funders seeking ‘adaptive programming’. Adaptive programming would entail changing research programs and/or interventions when evidence supports doing so.</p> <p>In general, the flexibility afforded by adaptive programming was welcomed, although some criticism was levelled at funders asking for adaptiveness in proposals, but ultimately seeking to control planning from the outset. True adaptive management is seen as an enabler of research uptake.</p>	<p>Funders should consider commissioning work (whether research or interventions, or both) that demonstrates adaptability and responsiveness to new findings and changing circumstances.</p> <p>Equally, funders should be aware that ‘adaptive programming’ involves a degree of uncertainty, potentially incompatible with rigid planning approaches.</p>

Organisations that predominantly fund and/or deliver aid

Key Messages

Do people who predominantly use research have time to find, read & synthesise research outputs?

About half of our survey respondents indicated that they did have time and budget to engage with research. Nonetheless, free-text responses to surveys did strongly indicate a preference for synthesised research. A sampling bias may have influenced findings, but interviews and focus group discussions seem to support a finding that there is a general lack of time to engage in research literature, despite a desire to do so.

In particular, some communications staff who participated in the study said that keeping abreast of research was one of their responsibilities, but tended to be pushed into a low priority in the face of high volumes of other tasks.

This finding relates particularly to whether study participants felt they had time to engage with research products. Whether they had time to engage researchers in a more interactive process of taking up research was not specifically explored.

Recommendations

Organisations should ensure that staff responsible for development policy and programming have access to evidence-based advice that synthesises research from academic literature, grey literature, as well as considering the approach and learning from other development actors.

Providing access to research may also require clear messages from organisation leaders that cement a culture of using research in the organisation's work. It may also require recruitment of additional communications staff or research officers to keep abreast of research.

Organisations that predominantly produce and communicate research

Organisations that produce and communicate research have a critical role to play in meeting demand for useful research, as well as in producing and communicating research that is not ‘demanded’ but is nonetheless necessary and valuable. This research finds that structural barriers and mismatched practices between academia and development make it more difficult to do both. The following recommendations are designed to increase uptake of research findings, both where demand from the sector exists, and where it does not yet.

Organisations that predominantly produce and communicate research	
Key Messages	Recommendations
<p>Many organisations cannot access academic journals, presenting a major barrier to research use</p> <p>A recurring theme was that non-university staff were not funded to access academic journals. Articles are often locked behind paywalls, and databases indexing journal articles (such as Web of Science, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost) were similarly inaccessible.</p>	<p>Academic and research organisations should consider ways in which they can support development organisations (e.g., by offering non-profit memberships to academic libraries), as part of a broader approach to partnering for research uptake and influence.</p> <p>Research organisations can also choose to publish on publicly available platforms (e.g., pay-to-publish and open access journals). Funding applications should budget for doing so, and funding organisations should view such budget items as an important element of ensuring funded research reaches target audiences.</p>
<p>Engaging research communication specialists is generally supported</p> <p>In RDI Network’s research producers’ survey, less than a third of the respondents agreed that ‘researchers are best placed to undertake research communications’. Many supported investments in engaging communications staff whose focus would mainly be to translate and disseminate research.</p>	<p>Academic and research organisations should consider hiring specialist staff and/or allocating more staff time specifically to research communications. In doing so, academic and research organisations should be aware that efforts need to be made to build trust between communications and research professionals. Some research teams have hired personnel whose primary role is to broker partnerships with stakeholders – recruiting for such a role can be considered.</p>
<p>Incentives for undertaking research communication could be strengthened</p> <p>People who predominantly produce research frequently stated that a lack of time and budget were barriers to undertaking research communication. While researchers overwhelmingly valued the influence that research can have, promotion and funding structures within their organisation prevented them from spending more resources on research communication.</p>	<p>Academic and research organisations should review staff and organisational performance incentives and targets to prioritise research communication, and research uptake and impact, more highly. Where there are already such targets, to work with staff to help prioritise targets.</p> <p>We acknowledge that this recommendation is linked to funding requirements, and broader political or economic questions that individual institutes, schools or faculties may not have leverage to adjust.</p>

Research use in the development sector

Concepts and terminology

A broad definition of 'research'

In this Snapshot, we considered **research** to mean investigative activities which generate reliable evidence. This definition was deliberately broad, so as not to inadvertently exclude the range of activities that could fall under the descriptor of 'research'. Research included traditional academic research, program evaluations, commissioned studies undertaken by consultants, and action research.

We were interested not to exclude non-traditional forms of research, acknowledging the legitimacy of lived experiences and traditional knowledge (even though these forms of knowledge were not raised in detail during our study). We also wanted to acknowledge that what constitutes 'reliable evidence' is contextual: depending on the application, sometimes high degrees of rigour and confidence are required, and sometimes merely indicative findings may suffice. Our definition of research is broad and flexible, and should be considered a working definition only.

Research production, outputs, communication, and uptake

For the purposes of our study, **research production** meant the process of conducting and recording research into **research outputs**, which could be read (or otherwise consumed) by others. **Research communication** was defined as the process of translating research findings and outputs into a form comprehensible by non-experts in the field. **Research uptake** meant applying research findings to policy and practice (we refer to people 'taking up' research). We borrowed from the Australian Research Council definition (2018) of research uptake, to mean not just accessing, reading or downloading research findings, but actual application which may 'involve complex processes over time, whereby research outputs ... are adapted, built upon and operationally applied'.

Although these working definitions are simply phrased, we stress that the processes underlying them are often complex and non-linear. For example, research communication was not restricted to occurring only after research outputs are prepared. Communication could also occur at any stage of research production (e.g., where non-experts are invited to have input in the early stages of research design). The terminology introduced here is intended to introduce key ideas discussed in this Snapshot; it is not intended to imply neat processes in research production, communication or uptake.

Research producers, brokers, and users

We also want to discuss three terms that we initially used in developing this Snapshot, but have since avoided using in this report. These are: **research producer** (someone who conducts research and records the findings in research output), **research broker** (someone who translates research into non-expert terms or directs attention to research output), and **research user** (someone who accesses and applies research in policy and practice).

We generally avoid using these terms because we do not want to imply that individuals could only fulfil one of these roles at a time. Producing, brokering and using research are better thought of as activities or functions that an individual might undertake – as part of their current role, or over the course of a career.

In one focus group, participants similarly cautioned against creating a dichotomy between researchers on one hand, and practitioners and policy-makers on the other. These participants emphasised that creating useful research is a shared goal and that creating a dichotomous perception that researchers (particularly academic researchers) are disengaged from practice can be counter-productive (Box 1). This is mirrored by survey results, in which university-based researchers overwhelmingly agreed with the statement, 'I value the influence research can have in real-world policy and practice situations'.

For these reasons, in this Snapshot, we prefer to discuss activities or functions (e.g., 'when people are producing research...') rather than classes of individual (e.g., 'when *research*...'). However, we do use 'research producer', 'broker' and 'user' as shorthand in the annexes, because at a very broad level, these categories did inform where we directed invitations to participate.



Box 1. Challenging dichotomy between 'researcher' and 'user'

In the Sydney focus group, participants challenged the perception that academia operates within an 'ivory tower', and suggested that this perception is harmful to research uptake.



Speaker 1: *I think that there's a meta-discourse of academia and research as being in this ivory tower, being very traditional, and very philosophical. ... [But] a lot of research is very practical and does lead to publishable outcomes. A lot of researchers I think are interested in creating, changing the world through their work. I think part of the problem is ... the perspective is that academia doesn't engage. And I think that's not necessarily true.*

Speaker 2: *I have some frustration with how much the dichotomy [between practitioner and researcher] is overemphasised. ... Most of the research that I've done has been very applied and been used to answer a direct policy question [raised by government to a university research centre], but it's also been highly publishable. ... [I hope] that applied research is still high enough quality to be able to be published. And I think that overemphasising the dichotomy can work against research translation and use.*



Creating useful communication products

In this section, we explore the qualities of communication products that make research more likely to be taken up. When we say 'product', we mean tangible outputs, such as journal articles, blog posts, videos, posters, diagrams, press releases, and so on. Products are distinguished from processes of research communication, which is discussed in the next section.

We found that communication products were more likely to be considered useful if they were:

- ▶ **Relevant** to the person using it;
- ▶ **Concise**, and is (or contains) a **synthesis** of the field;
- ▶ Framed in a way that facilitates **practical application**; and
- ▶ **Accessible** (in the sense of being easily found)

Box 2 presents some responses which illustrate these qualities, taken from the DFAT survey and research users' survey. Figure 1 and Figure 2 present the types of communication products that respondents have found useful (from the research users' survey and DFAT survey respectively). Infographics and other visualisations were generally considered useful by both sets of respondents.

Interestingly, journal articles were rated as 'very useful' more than any other communication product, in the research users' survey, even though many of the same respondents said that they had limited access to academic databases (discussed below). We suggest that journal articles were highly valued but infrequently accessed.

More condensed outputs (such as blogs and social media posts) were considered useful, provided that the content was supported by a more rigorously written, peer-reviewed paper

Journal articles may also play a role in elevating or supporting more condensed and accessible outputs, such as blogs and social media posts. While these outputs were considered useful by many, the research users' survey, some suggested that blogs and social media (by themselves) were 'opinions', potentially 'highly biased', and not 'credible'. Such reservations may be addressed where blogs and social media posts are supported by a more rigorously written, peer-reviewed paper.



Box 2. What research is useful to you?

The following quotes were taken from the research users' survey and the DFAT survey. They illustrate what qualities contributed to useful research output.

- ▶ "Short and aimed at a practitioner – not focused on theory. Often blog posts by practitioners are best. I also use twitter to follow key thinkers and organisations to collate new research publications." (DFAT)
- ▶ "The most helpful sources are those that summarise key research papers/documents and provide a quick and easy link to them." (DFAT)
- ▶ "People are usually compiling searches quickly and will look to evidence that's easy to find and ideally already synthesised and interpreted." (NGO)
- ▶ "Readily available and can be transmitted/communicated to others easily. Can be tailored to specific requirements. Often provide new 'leads' to pursue." (NGO)
- ▶ "Accessible, practical and non-jargon laden." (Private sector)

Figure 1: Usefulness of various communication products (research users' survey)

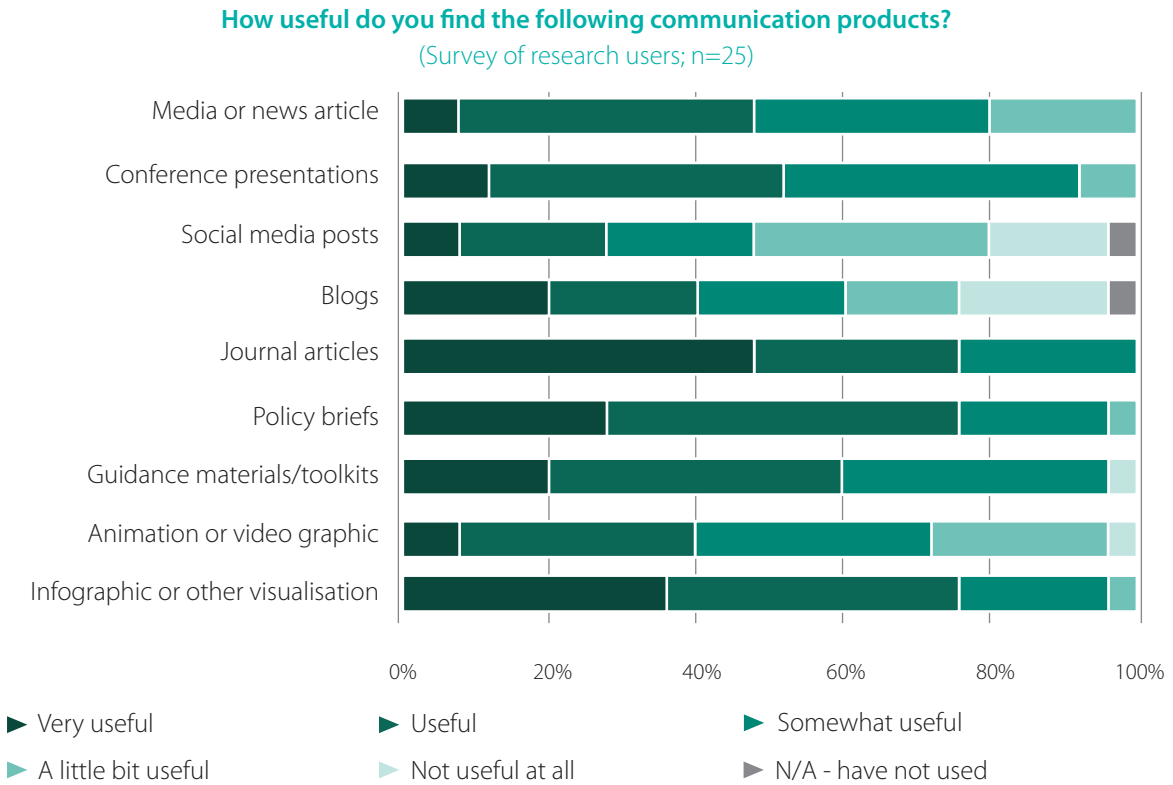
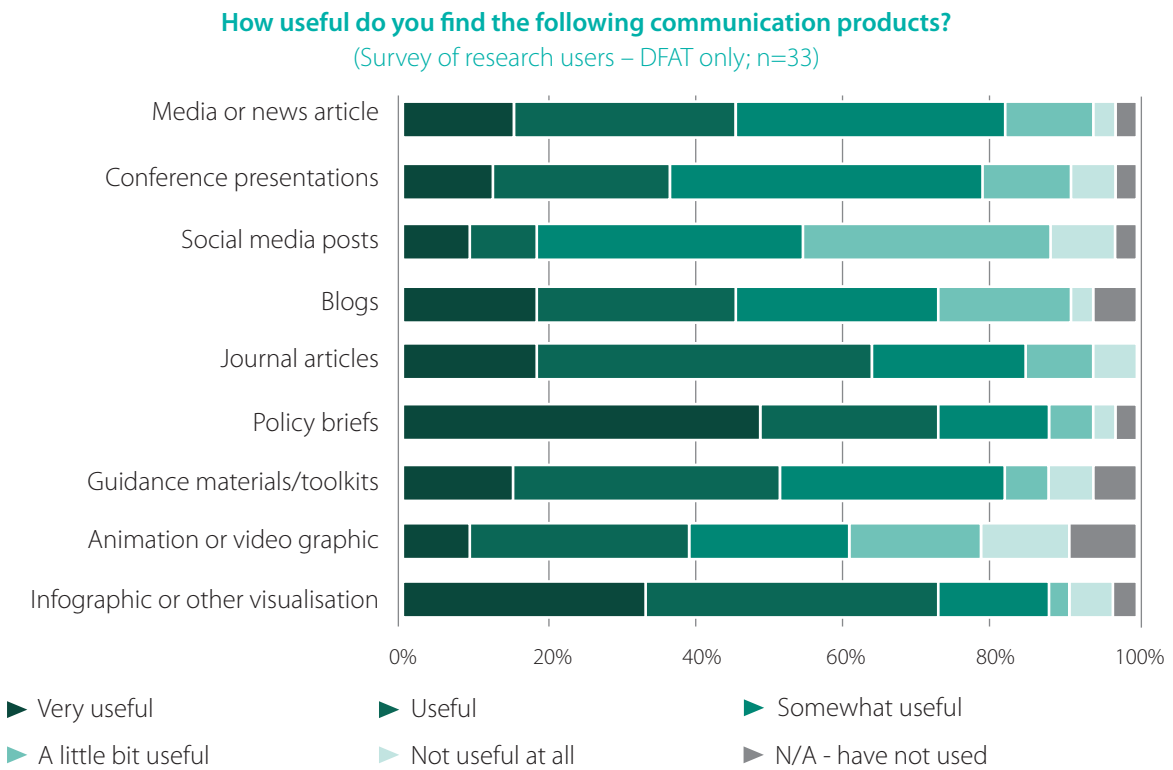


Figure 2: Usefulness of various communication products (DFAT survey)



Stakeholder engagement as a communication process

The previous section considered research communication as the creation of products. However, a strongly recurring theme in our study was that communication (and subsequent uptake) is often the outcome of a process of engagement between those who are producing research, and those who may use it. The distinction between process and product was discussed in the Canberra focus group (Box 3).

Box 3. Research communication as a process



A Canberra focus group participant stressed the *process* of communication over merely creating *products*, and argued that communication should be planned strategically over the course of the research.



Communication is a problematic word, because that assumes that you do a piece of work and then you try and communicate it – as opposed to knowing how it's going to apply, having involved the right people to start, having ongoing relationships ... It's much more integrated than a linear process ...

I agree that there is a whole [lot of] people employed to do research communication in lots of institutions around the world and it's absolutely valuable. But deciding what the communication mechanisms are should also be informed by: who's going to use [the research]; how it's going to be used; how much time they've got to use it; whether or not people really want to use it, or they just had to do the report for an accountability purpose or for a donor ... I think those things are all inter-related. You can't just assume that, just because you've got a nice communication strategy, people are going to use your research.



This section highlights two main ways in which stakeholder engagement was discussed as an important element of research communication.

Engaging stakeholders to influence the course of research

Some study participants described how stakeholders were engaged throughout the research process – from design to reporting – so that stakeholders can actively contribute to research direction. Box 4 presents quotes from two researchers who emphasised the importance of engagement early in the research process, and one researcher who strongly believed that stakeholders need to be empowered for engagement to be truly effective. Early engagement could mean that stakeholders are involved in setting research questions from the outset, as well as having input after the research is in progress.



Box 4. Importance of engaging stakeholders early in the research process

One interviewee (a university researcher) emphasised the need to involve stakeholders in the research design ‘right from the start’.

“If you’re wanting user-centred design, a co-design, then you need the people who are going to be the consumers of the research ... to be involved right from the start. You [need to] have workshops at the start, and you have dialogue: how are we going to frame the research questions, how are we going to do it, what’s going to be most useful? ... If you’re involving them in the conversation, that’s when you’re going to get people’s attention. If you send them the final report, the chances of them reading it are much lower. ... Research uptake is far more effective if people are involved in the process.”

Another interviewee (a program lead for an NGO-university partnership) similarly emphasised the importance of early engagement. This interviewee advocated a ‘stepwise’ structure, whereby a research program is split into phases, and stakeholder input is sought at the end of each phase.

“For research to be translated into practice, it’s not as automatic as, ‘here’s the report and take it to the government so that they can do something about it’. It requires some engagement from the very beginning, engaging the stakeholder and ... involving them in the design. ... But sometimes the timing element can be challenging because [multi-agency collaborations] can take a very long time. ... Either do it in stepwise manner – or do it like a huge piece of work as one goal but do it in steps so that specific decisions are made at each [step].”

A third interviewee (a university researcher) stressed that collaborative research requires the researcher to ‘share power’ with the community who is ultimately to benefit from the research.

“There’s a lot of interest in wanting to do partnership approaches [but] often the reason it’s not going to work is because the systems are set up for other contract arrangements [that do not consider the] notion of shared power. ... I’m sure [our project team] could come up with a really good range of things that they want to have researched... But it’s probably more appropriate for the Solomon Islands government and Solomon Island stakeholders to define what needs to be researched and what is not clearly known. It’s their country [and] their development. Who runs the research, and who has power to do that, is an issue.”

Engaging stakeholders to build trust and credibility

A strong and recurring theme was that research uptake is greatly facilitated when the researcher is seen as a trustworthy, credible source of research. The quotes in Box 5 emphasise that ‘trusted individuals’ form a vital connection between those seeking to use research, and those producing it. These trusted individuals were a go-to source of knowledge for policy-makers and practitioners, and while their published research may not be read, the fact of having been published establishes credibility in the field.

The importance of trust may connect to the time and budget pressures described by study participants (discussed below). Trust implies a situation where the researcher’s quality of work is known to (and favourably viewed by) the person relying on it. Having already established the habitual quality of the researcher’s work, the person using the research can move to implement the findings without additional vetting or review processes.

Box 5. Stakeholder engagement to build trust and credibility



Quote (a) – In the Sydney focus group, the importance to policy-makers of ‘trusted individuals’ was discussed. One speaker described how their organisation actively pursues a strategy of becoming such a trusted individual.

Speaker 1: It would be great [to understand] how policy-makers make their decisions. Where are they getting their data from?

Speaker 2: Usually, well at least in my experience, from trusted individuals. [General agreement]

Speaker 3: It’s all about relationships ... In my experience, they don’t ever go to journals. If they do, they’ll get someone to do a quick review of evidence... Mostly it’s about, “Who’s an individual that I respect and trust, [who will] tell me the evidence?”

Speaker 4: We’re lucky we’re a privileged NGO [that conducts our own research] because we put a lot of our resources go towards becoming that privileged individual ... A lot of our research gets put out and then we have a direct link to government, whether that’s through a roundtable or just directly communicating it to the relevant people. ... Our events, our communications, our blog – it all builds us up as that trusted individual for that one purpose: and that’s getting our research heard. But we’re lucky because we have the resources to do that. And a lot of smaller NGOs just don’t.

Quote (b) – When the person using the research trusts the researcher, they can be assured of the quality of the findings. Personal relationships was emphasised in the Melbourne focus group.

Everybody knows that nobody reads the whole report... There’s a lot of emphasis on the executive summary. And then more important, in some ways I think than the reports, are the presentations and one-on-one meetings that you then have with donor organisations. That tends to work best when there’s been an ongoing relationship or discussion with the donor over time – when they’ve been involved, for instance, in... the formulation of the research question. ...

Personal relationships are really important in this. When I think about my research, and the way some of the things I do feed into DFAT, by far the most successful ways are the people who I have personal relationships with, who I’ve worked with, and who know me. They basically trust that my research is of a reasonable quality [and] somebody who doesn’t know me obviously doesn’t know if that’s the case.

Models of research identified in the Snapshot

The stakeholder engagement described in the previous section can be unpacked further, to consider the degree and nature of the engagement. This section sets out four models of research encountered during our study. These models are not comprehensive, and some models may overlap with others. The purpose of setting out these models is not to provide a rigid catalogue, but to facilitate thinking about different ways of structuring research, and their opportunities and challenges. The table below sets out the models, with evidence illustrating each model presented subsequently.

Model 1: Traditional research, with varying degrees of communication



- 1A** Traditional model of research. Outputs published, and people wanting to use the findings make effort to find the publications.
- 1B** Traditional model of research, but researcher makes additional efforts to translate outputs into more digestible form – e.g. in blogs, Conversation articles, newsletters.

Model 2: Researchers consult users



- 2A** Researchers engage stakeholders in identifying knowledge needs, and in scoping, designing, carrying out and reporting research. This happens over successive projects (and potentially also within projects – see 2B; not mutually exclusive).
- 2B** Researchers engage users as above, but at the scale of a single project. (Might also be in a series of projects; focus here is on scale of analysis.)

Model 3: Users consult researchers as experts

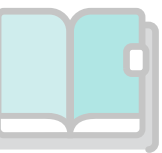


- 3A** Embedded researchers – whereby a researcher is seconded to a predominantly practice- or policy-based organisation, or where such an organisation establishes an in-house team of researchers.
- 3B** A predominantly practice- or policy-based organisation may seek the advice of a trusted and external advisor. The relationship between advisor and organisation is often interpersonal, and the advisor may be a volunteer.
- 3C** traditional consulting model, whereby a practice- or policy-based organisation commissions research.

Model 4: Users and researchers as collaborators



- 4A** Co-produced research, whereby researchers and practice- or policy-based organisations co-bid on funding for a joint project, which they carry out as partners.
- 4B** Action research – an individual simultaneously works as researcher and practitioner, by writing up practical learning as academic findings.



Model 1: Traditional research, with varying degrees of communication

Model 1 refers to a traditional research arrangement, where a researcher conducts a research project, which is then disseminated. Models 1A and 1B represent various degrees of research communication. In Model 1A, the researcher does nothing further than publish the research (e.g., in a journal). The burden is on those seeking to use the research to find and read the output. In Model 1B, the research takes additional steps to translate and communicate the research.

Box 6 presents a quote from an interviewee, who comments that this model requires additional funding to hire staff whose role is to ensure research communication continues to happen (Model 1B). According to the interviewee, such funding is unlikely to come from traditional research grants, but depends on philanthropic donations and the reputation of the person who champions the efforts.

Box 6. Comments illustrating Model 1 – traditional research + research communication



One interviewee (a university researcher) described a blog run by the institute at which he works. He was asked to describe how the blog functions, and stressed that this form of research communication was a separate function from the primary research.

“The blog works in part by the enthusiasm of people who aren't employees in the [institute] to publish one way or another via the [institute]. ... The key secret [is that we have] staff employed who are not in research roles but who are tasked with keeping the ship afloat one way or another. And that's a big advantage when it comes to matters of communication. It will keep working as long as external funding is pulled in. And it works [because of] the reputation of my boss and his ability to pull in external funding ... plus the occasional philanthropist have deep enough pockets to provide external funding.”



Model 2: Researchers consult users

Model 2 refers to arrangements where the people producing the research engage with stakeholders who are envisaged to take up the findings in future. The purpose of the engagement is to ensure that research outputs match practical needs. In Model 2A, such engagement happens iteratively over successive research projects. In Model 2B, the research is structured so that engagement occurs within a single project. These two sub-models are not mutually exclusive, and in many ways Model 2A is an extension of Model 1 (since traditional research, particularly in applied fields such as development, is often directed by practical demands).

The discussion above (about engaging stakeholders to influence the course of research) somewhat overlaps with this model. Box 7 presents additional examples of researchers consulting stakeholders to ensure that their research direction matches stakeholders' needs.



Box 7. Examples of Model 2 – researchers consulting end users

Quote (a) – In the Melbourne focus group, participants said that consulting stakeholders was valuable, often because researchers may not be able to articulate what they really need.

Speaker 1: Often I find the question people think they want an answer to, isn't actually the heart of the question. You have to ... go through a process of figuring out, "Is this really what you want? What are we trying to solve? What is the problem?" [You have to] dig down to make sure you're asking the right question.

Speaker 2: What I get from talking to an academic (as opposed to getting on Google Scholar) is the context that doesn't get written up. ... If the question is ill-defined, I can talk to someone who's in the field and say, "I'm going to ask you a dumb question: who would I want to talk to, is this a thing that people do, is this completely discredited?" That's where the relationship becomes useful.

Quote (b) – In the Canberra focus group, one participant advocated for immersive, in-country scoping to ensure deeper engagement with research users.

[Sometimes, engagement is] still very much a research-driven process. You end up getting in situations where the [researcher] might do a two-week scoping study in a country and, on the basis of that, they'll send in dairy experts (or whatever) to develop a project...

And of course, if you're seeing dairy experts and ask them what the problems are, the problems ... are going to be about dairy. When you see an economist, the problems are going to be the economy, so you have yourself a problem that if you go in there with a short-term scoping study that you're going to end up with very much a researcher-driven proposal and program.

Lately there's this move away from a research for development idea and more of a research in development idea. So, in other words, spend a lot more time working out the needs and priorities within the country. Not a two-week process or three-week process, but maybe you need to spend a year.



Model 3: Users consult researchers as experts

Model 3 encompasses arrangements whereby research users (or, more precisely, organisations who predominantly engage in research use) engage researchers as expert advisors. This is a potentially very broad set of arrangements.

Model 3A describes an 'embedded researcher' scenario, in which a researcher is part of the practitioner or policy-making organisation. Variations within this sub-model include research teams directly employed by a large NGO, academics seconded within an agency, and, as described in Box 8 (below), a contractual retainer to undertake ad hoc research.

Box 8. Comments illustrating Model 3 – Users consulting researchers as experts



Quote (a) – Having embedded researchers (Model 3A) offers opportunity for early inputs: an advantage over formally commissioning research with defined terms of reference (Model 3C).

[Regarding the] relationship with the researcher and the person on the inside of the organisation: places I see that working really well is where there's an ongoing conversation. I might say, "Hey Dave, I want to do a piece of work and I want to know how things are working in this area. Do you reckon that's something you might be able help me with?"

And Dave might say, "Yeah, there's all this fantastic stuff happening... I think you might want to consider asking these three questions." And I go, "Ah well, probably only two of them are going to fit [in my program]." And then we decide on the scope of the piece of research that's to be done.

When it tends not to work is when I, as a relatively low-ranking and inexperienced bureaucrat, ... just tell Dave what to do and tell him that the questions that I need answers to. [from the Canberra focus group]

Quote (b) – In the Canberra focus group, a participant described a responsive, consultative model between two organisations (a modified Model 3A, whereby an organisation is quasi-embedded via contract into another's operation).

[DFAT had] this contract with the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, which I think was set up by DFID. [DFAT] had a kind of overarching contract, which meant that [GSDRC] were resourced to provide very responsive [reviews] of existing literature on key issues. You could literally fire off an email, and you'd get a five to ten-page synthesis back in within a week. ...

You need to set up mechanisms like that to create a culture of using research in day-to-day work. If you can't be responsive in that way, then you won't get people to deliver where they identify the need for more in-depth, rigorous work.

Quote (c) – An interviewee (who works within a large NGO) described how that NGO employs an in-house research team (Model 3B) and commissions external researchers (Model 3C).

We have a global team of experts. [This team has] people from different thematic area expertise, and they are available to provide support. You can call on that internally. ... Externally, we maintain a register of consultants. Sometimes we draw on that list. Often, when we need external support, we distribute terms of reference through our contacts, maybe in ACFID or maybe our personal contacts with a university professor or through LinkedIn.



Model 4: Users and researchers as collaborators

This model relates to collaborative research, where the end user plays a decision-making role in the direction of the research program. This model represents situations where the boundary between research production and research use are perhaps the most fluid. Model 4A captures co-produced research, where multiple organisations embark on joint projects. Model 4B is derived from action research, where a person (or group of persons) employs research skills in practical applications, and then records the learnings of the practice as research outputs. Box 9 presents some illustrative comments of this model.



Box 9. Comments illustrating Model 3 – Users consulting researchers as experts

Quote (a) – An example of collaborative research (Model 4A) was provided in the Canberra focus group. A concerted effort to co-produce research led to richer understanding.

We were doing a project in Pakistan, where a number of scientific projects have been going on for four years before we came on the scene. ... They were working in silos. ... We were asked to come in and figure out how to get them to work together and also to connect more with target beneficiary groups, which were rural households. ...

We held a workshop where we brought all the scientific projects together. A couple of things came out of that. First, the scientific projects learned a lot about Pakistan that they had not realised before, because ... they came from a research basis, rather than a development basis. And [their approach was] based on their discipline, so ... it kind of opened their eyes a bit, I think.

The other thing was thinking out a way forward. How were we going to actually work together? We ended up with a strategy [where] we agreed to work on 'focal villages', in which more than one scientific project... [would] work together. [Bringing the stakeholders together] ... was very useful as a way of getting forward momentum to the project.



Quote (b) – An example of action research (Model 4B) was described by an interviewee who straddles both academic and practitioner roles. She described working with homeless people to mobilise, gather evidence, and influence policy.

I'm the chair of a housing justice organisation. We are a grassroots movement led by people with current or previous experience of homelessness or housing stress. We've been building a movement and using feminist strategic action research as a methodology to understand our local issue. ... It started [because] ... our local level of government launched a housing affordability strategy, but we didn't mention homelessness as a bill in that strategy.

I'm a social worker and a bunch of other people in the community ... got together and started mobilising. We held an initial community conversation, where we got some of the councillors from the Shire to sit down with people who were homeless ... to talk about their experiences ... That led to us forming an incorporated association. We conducted our own research to gather the stories and experiences of local people, which then feed into policy, and led to us developing our own actions for tackling homelessness in that community.

We've now got a partnership with our local government who has identified land to start developing social housing. We've got a housing advocacy officer that's now half funded by the Shire, and who's doing work with people who are currently homeless. ... We've managed to get housing on the agenda in that community. We have mobilized through the most marginalised people in that community demanding their rights and feeling empowered and part of this is a conversation that you can make meaningful housing.

This all occurred because we organised in an activism way, and we used research to argue our case. We collectively understood our local context. ... We always have an evidence-based advocacy in our activism.



What factors help or hinder research communication and uptake?

Engaging research communication specialists

In RDI Network's research producers' survey, less than a third of the respondents agreed that 'researchers are best placed to undertake research communications'. Many supported investment in engaging communications staff whose focus would mainly be to translate and disseminate research (i.e., play a research broker role) – see Box 10.

Box 10. Support for specialist research communications role



Multiple respondents from the research producers' survey wanted communication experts to support research production (selected quotes).

- ▶ "It's useful to have professional communication expertise to help. I like to work with graphic artists and journalists in drafting communication pieces – then I feel more confident that I'm doing it well" (University researcher)
- ▶ "Assign someone to the role [of research communication] and provide an operating budget that supports the engagement and socialisation of the research at all stages." (NGO employee in a research translator/broker role)
- ▶ "[I like to see] my university investing significantly in communications support" (University researcher)

In focus groups, people undertaking original research also emphasised the desire to maintain oversight of the research communication product, to ensure that translated research (e.g. a media article) accurately represents the findings, and to convey the spirit and tone desired – see Box 11.

Box 11. Value of research communication specialists



Quote (a) – The need for researchers and communications specialists to work closely together was emphasised in the Sydney focus group.

“We have a comms team who are fantastic ... [For example, on their advice] I won't use disability adjusted life years [as a unit of measurement in our research] because to a general public DALYs mean nothing. Instead, we'll use years of sight saved, or the number of women's sight restored. ... Let's not use the academic, usual measure because that means nothing to the public.

On the other hand, they'll send me a news article where they've tried to shape something that I've written, and I'll go, "Don't use cost effectiveness in that way, because it's completely misleading." And they'll listen to that and we'll go back and forth and try and meet in the middle. It does take a lot of time though.

Quote (b) – Communications priorities sometimes put disproportionate focus on some research activities, to the exclusion of others, as one Sydney focus group participant explained.

“The comms team [often wanted] wanting to emphasise certain work, and de-emphasise [other work] ... It made it seem disproportionate. ... To the outsider, it seems like we're really doing a lot of work on this project. And you're like, "That's just one of our little tiny things. We don't even think about that.”

We're doing all this other unsexy, but really substantive, good work, but you know the comms people make their judgements about what is going to get communicated. And that can be frustrating sometimes I think for people who are doing the work, when they don't feel like their work is getting as much recognition as something else which is seen as a bit more publicly presentable.

Sufficient skills to undertake research communication?

Study participants were invited to discuss whether they (or their organisations) had sufficient skills to undertake research communication. A mix of responses was received. The opinions expressed in Box 10 and Box 11 suggest that research communication specialists are valued for their specific skillsets. However, when surveyed, three-quarters of research producers and translators expressed confidence in their ability to communicate research (Figure 3). Similarly, respondents to the research users' survey and the DFAT survey also indicated a degree of confidence in understanding research outputs (Figure 3).

At the same time, nearly three-quarters of respondents in the research producers' survey had received no formal training in research communication (Figure 4). Of those that had received training, seven respondents had received media training, two were specialists in implementation science (a field focusing on methods of research uptake), and the remainder did not specify. Three-quarters of respondents also said that further upskilling would be beneficial (Figure 4), but did not specify what skills were missing. The question was worded very broadly, and further exploration would be required to understand whether upskilling would be a priority relative to other potential initiatives.

Although the small size and nature of the sample precludes definitive conclusions, our interpretation is that most study participants considered themselves to have an adequate base level of skills to communicate and understand research. More skills training would be welcome, but opportunities to apply such training are limited by time and budget constraints (and other structural factors), discussed below.

What skills could be explored in subsequent research? As noted above, when research communication is seen as a process, stakeholder engagement skills become particularly important; however, our research did not explore specifically whether respondents would value training along these lines.

Figure 3 Degree of confidence in communicating and understanding research

Statements illustrating demand for research communication skills

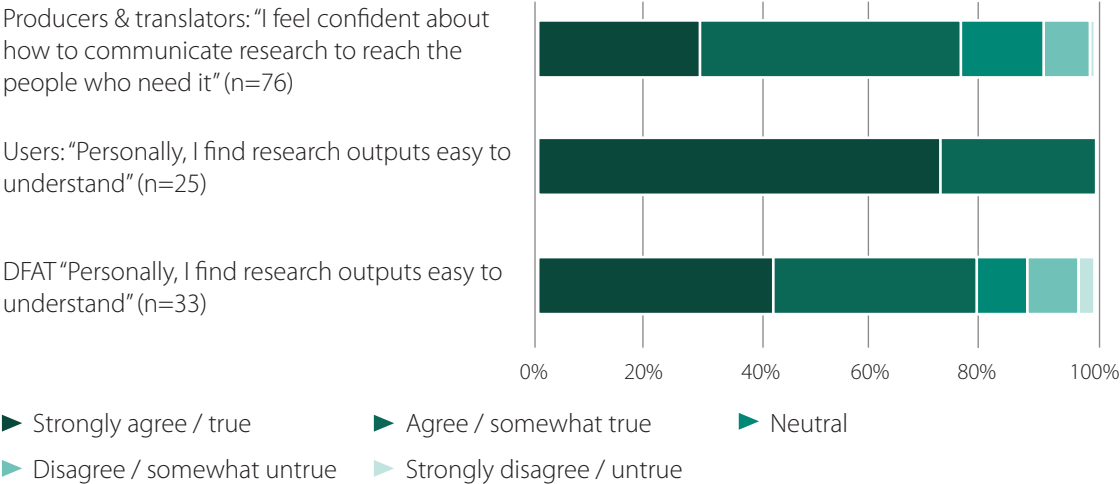
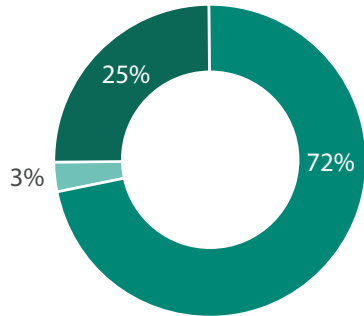


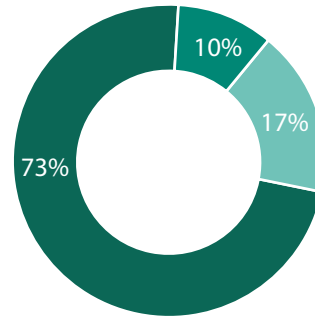
Figure 4. Formal training in research communication or uptake (research producers' survey)

Have you received and formal training in the field of research communication or uptake in the past? (n=69)



▶ Yes ▶ No ▶ Not sure

Is further upskilling in research communications and uptake something that would be potentially beneficial to you? (n=69)



▶ Yes ▶ No ▶ Not sure

Mixed incentives for undertaking research communication

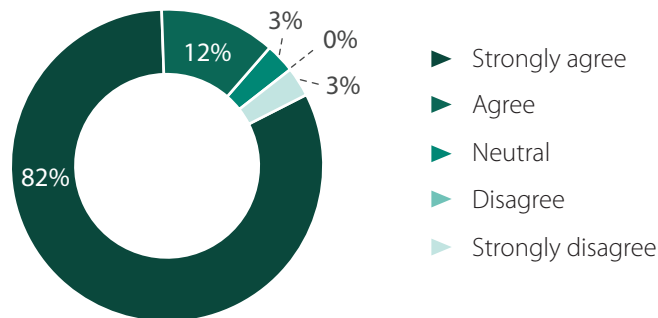
People who predominantly produce research (mostly working in universities) frequently stated that a lack of time and budget were barriers to undertaking research communication. This was true whether the researcher undertook the research communication directly (e.g., writing a journal paper, then writing a blog), or whether the researcher worked with a communication specialist.

These time and budget constraints were sometimes framed as structural or institutional issues. That is, while researchers overwhelmingly valued the influence that research can have in real-world policy and practice (Figure 5), promotion and funding structures within their organisation prevented them from spending more resources on research communication. (Note: the overwhelmingly supportive results in Figure 5 may be influenced by a form of selection bias – namely, that those who chose to undertake the survey were already favourably disposed to research communication.)

Box 12 presents illustrative comments on the nature of these constraints. Two focus group participants commented that, in the university sector at least, there seems to be increasing sets of criteria on which a researcher's performance is assessed. Some of these incentives encourage research communication, while others may not.

Figure 5. Majority of research producers valued influence of research

I value the influence research can have in real-world policy and practice situations (n=63)



▶ Strongly agree
 ▶ Agree
 ▶ Neutral
 ▶ Disagree
 ▶ Strongly disagree



Box 12. Mixed incentives for university-based researchers to undertake communication

Quote (a) – A university researcher described research communication as a ‘sacrifice’ of some career opportunities, because it is not incentivised within universities.

“Academics’ engagement with practitioners] is encouraged here but it’s not incentivised ... Much of our funding is external through our job tenure is only as long as the external grants keep coming in. and if you want a job on central government funding just a typical university job sort of things that people look for in your CV potentially teaching experience but mostly journal articles. Anything that you’re doing that doesn’t place in those lines in your CV isn’t great for your career. At least if you’re planning a conventional act in my career. ... I just sacrifice some of my career opportunities to put time to interacting with development practitioners (which is something that for me doesn’t bother me).” [Interviewee 05, academic at a university]

Quote (b) – In the Sydney focus group, participants said that research communication is valued at universities, but it competes with other priorities.

“**Speaker 1:** My observation is that researchers in the university setting are under conflicting pressures. So the criteria that offer you promotion are not aligned with the criteria by which your teaching load is allocated, which is not aligned by the criteria by which the unis are being ranked in the international rankings. And so it’s not only that people are being told to do more and more with less. It’s that actually which thing do they prioritise? ...

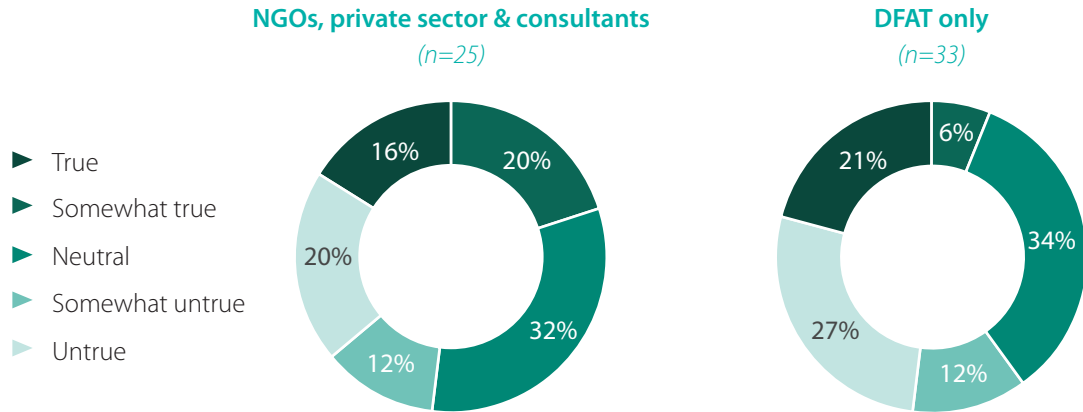
Speaker 2: Academia has its own standards, and ... at the same time, we feel pressure from all of these [other] stakeholders... Before [university employers] asked about publications, citations. Now they ask, “Okay, what is your impact? How do you engage the community? How do you engage the policy makers?” And it’s just added onto our workload.

Lack of time to find, read, and synthesise research outputs?

We expected predominantly practice-based organisations to say that they lacked time to find, read and synthesise research. We were surprised to find that about half of our survey respondents indicated that they did have sufficient time to do so (Figure 6), although we noted that the small sample of 25 was skewed towards larger organisations with 100–1,000 employees, which potentially had more resources to support research uptake. In a separate survey, DFAT respondents appeared to be generally more time-poor, although still 40% of respondents (n=33) suggested that they did have time and budget to engage with research. Nonetheless, free-text responses to surveys did strongly indicate a preference for synthesised research, with many respondents in the DFAT survey and research users’ survey stating that they lacked ‘time to synthesise results’ (or concepts to this effect).

Figure 6. Whether time and budget available to find, read and synthesise research

In my organisation, we have time and budget to find, read, and synthesise research



Academic paywalls

A recurring theme was that non-university staff were not funded to access academic journals. Articles are often locked behind paywalls, and databases indexing journal articles (such as Web of Science, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost) were similarly inaccessible. Figure 7 reports results from the research users' survey. It shows that only three respondents from NGOs reported having paid access to academic research databases – and of those three, one person was an adjunct academic (i.e., connected to a university). The majority of respondents relied on staff members having personal access (e.g., as a student or adjunct staff member of a university).

Figure 7. Overall poor access to research databases

To what extent do staff at your organisation have access to research databases?



Academic journals and conference papers were frequently reported as being used by respondents in the research users' survey, although other types of reports (which are more likely to be publicly available) dominated the most frequently used sources of research (Figure 8). By comparison, DFAT employees generally used academic journals less (Figure 9; note that only 20% of DFAT respondents indicated using academic journals 'very often', compared to over 40% of other research users).

Survey respondents clearly valued academic research. In both the DFAT survey and the research users' survey, respondents were asked to identify what source of research they used least, and what source they would like to use more. These free-text responses frequently mentioned the inaccessibility of academic articles, and the desirability of accessing such articles (Box 13).

Figure 8. Most frequently used sources of research (research users' survey)



Figure 9. Most frequently used sources of research (DFAT survey)





Box 13. Academic papers are often inaccessible, despite being highly sought after

What source of research do you use LEAST, and why? (selected survey responses)

- ▶ "Articles locked behind a paywall are more often than not ignored" (NGO)
- ▶ "JSTOR etc [are] too expensive, NGOs can't afford access" (NGO)
- ▶ "Peer reviewed journal articles [are used least] due to lack of online library access to content free-of-charge" (NGO)
- ▶ "Simply not registered [for academic databases]. Hard copies not convenient to access or store" (NGO)
- ▶ "Paid subscriptions – hard to access" (DFAT)
- ▶ "Our organisation doesn't have easy access to online research databases." (DFAT)
- ▶ "Journals you have to subscribe to, as they are harder to access" (DFAT)
- ▶ "Subscriptions are not financially viable" (DFAT)

What source of research would you most LIKE to use more, but don't use much?

- ▶ "Academic search engines" (NGO)
- ▶ "Academic journals" (NGO)
- ▶ "Search subscription research databases" (NGO)
- ▶ "Subscription research databases; less likely to access due to cost and time needed to review and synthesize information presented" (NGO)
- ▶ "Peer-reviewed journals" (NGO)
- ▶ "Difficult to access journals without having an affiliation with a university, however as trying to work in an evidence-based space this information is considered most valuable." (Private sector)
- ▶ "Journal articles - access and paywalls. A summary of recent research in key thematic areas would be a useful synthesis of research services" (Private sector)

Importance of adaptive programming

Participants in the Melbourne and Canberra focus groups discussed in detail a theme that had been touched on in other parts of the study. The theme was that there appears to be an increased acceptance of funders seeking 'adaptive programming'. In general, the flexibility afforded by adaptive programming was welcomed, although some criticism was levelled at funders asking for adaptiveness in proposals, but ultimately seeking to control planning from the outset.

Box 14 illustrates the key message, that adaptive programming is welcome but funding bodies and commissioners of research must actually be prepared to embrace a degree of uncertainty.



Box 14. Critiques of static planning frameworks and support for adaptive planning

Quote (a) – Participants in the Canberra focus group criticised 'static log frames'.

Historically, research organisations have liked the idea of a log frame, where you set out all the activities you can do over the next four years. The problem with that is it locks you into ticking boxes: "Okay, I've done that, done that literature review, done it."

In action research, you're learning as you're going through the [research] process. You're refining what needs to be done and maybe you need to go in this direction or that direction, because that's where the key problems are. The problem with a static log frame is it locks you into a certain research process that may, at the end of it, be a pretty sterile output.

Maybe once you get into the project, you start to realise, "Oh, they key issues are over here, but we need to focus on this." But you can't move there because of your flipping log frames that's locked you in.

Organisations are gradually moving away from the static log frame, and more [towards] a participatory action research framework that allows an adaptive research process. ... That way, we can do a bit of research, implement, see what's working and what's not working, go back and adjust our research and so on.

Quote (b) – In the Melbourne focus group, one participant suggested that adaptiveness is ostensibly supported by funders, but not reflected in their design requirements.

[In the past few years] every single DFAT design I've reviewed says, "This is going to be a flexible and adaptive program," and nobody, quite frankly, seems to know what that actually means. It gets interpreted in a million ways and it's become a bit meaningless. A lot of the programs I work with now are supposedly 'flexible and adaptive' but have an incredibly rigid log frame.

But the thing is, there is literature on [adaptive management]! There are academic articles, there's people who have created their whole careers around adaptive program management. But ... it's a trendy phrase, [and] it's been plucked out and put into things [with] no discussion of what it means. It's [become] a vapid concept when it shouldn't be a vapid concept. It actually has content behind it, but DFAT has to do more work to explain to partners what they mean by that approach.

I think also that DFAT advisors actually often don't want an adaptive program. They think they do, but they want to control everything!

Research communication within large organisations

Although this Snapshot has focused mostly on research communication and uptake between organisations, there was some discussion about internal communication of knowledge within large organisations. In certain fields, knowledge may become concentrated within the minds of pre-eminent persons, whose busyness prevent them from sharing knowledge more broadly within their own organisation (let alone the world at large) (Box 15). While not a focus of the Snapshot, internal barriers to research communication are worth considering, particularly for large practitioner organisations not primarily engaged in research production.

Box 15. Information may be siloed within parts of large organisations



Sometimes, pre-eminent practitioners have difficulty finding opportunities to share knowledge. As a result, according to one focus group participant, their knowledge may be lost.



There is a bit of a generational divide that we find is a major barrier to us extracting research or pushing research forward. I would suggest maybe 50 to 60 percent of our current roster are over 55, usually white, usually male, usually called Keith. [laughter]

And they're great. They're super qualified at what they do. and the UN loves them because they've got massive historical institutional knowledge. . . . But that knowledge is not being written down unless Keith has involved himself in some kind of academic practice up till now, which is not likely. It's very challenging to get that knowledge.





**RESEARCH FOR
DEVELOPMENT
IMPACT NETWORK**

A collaboration between
the Australian Council for
International Development
and Australian universities

The Research for Development Impact Network

E: rdi@acfid.asn.au | W: www.rdi.org.au