Research Uptake Self Assessment Tool

A participatory tool to assess research uptake capacity amongst programmes in international development

Andrew Clappison, Julia Powell and Frances Seballos

Photo: Gates Foundation

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Contents

Other resources needed

- Research Uptake Self Assessment Tool (RUSAT) PowerPoint slides (to adapt)
- RUSAT Cards (several sets will need to be printed and cut)

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[1] This tool was developed and adapted by Andrew Clappison (andrew@commsconsult.org), Julia Powell (J.Powell@ids.ac.uk) and Frances Seballos (F.Seballos@ids.ac.uk) from an original tool, developed for the Policy Influence and Monitoring (PIM) project funded by 3ie, and based on the Five Competencies Framework (Collison and Parcell, 2001). We are extremely grateful to the PIM project for allowing us to adapt and expand this tool. We very much welcome feedback from those people who use this tool and would welcome the opportunity to develop it further with others. We have set up an online space for people to discuss and explore ways of enhancing and adapting the tool. You can access this space on LANSA's website http://lansasouthasia.org/content/research-uptake-self-assessment-tool

Part 1. Introduction: ‘Research Uptake Self-Assessment Tool’

Background

Donors are increasingly calling for research programmes to think actively about how they are going to communicate their research, engage with key stakeholders and support its uptake into policy and practice. The UK’s Department for International Development funds research as one of its core strategies to alleviate poverty (Department of International Development, 2013). At the heart of this strategy is a desire to (1) see that future spending on development programmes is evidence-based; and (2) that the research programmes DFID funds are responding to direct demand amongst stakeholders and/or seeking to generate demand through appropriate engagement and communication with key actors.

Developing the capacity of stakeholders to assess and use evidence, and working with knowledge brokers to communicate, engage and build demand for research are recognised strategies for improving potential for research uptake. However, less attention has been given to developing the capacity of research teams (covering researchers, research managers, and other project staff) in this area. Before devising any capacity building activities, it is of course important to have a shared understanding of the strengths and experiences across a research programme team. LANSA developed the Research Uptake Self-Assessment tool[2] as a means to share knowledge around research uptake and enable research teams to assess their capacity in this area.

It is important to emphasise that this tool is designed to foster discussion and planning around the capabilities required for effective research uptake among team members; it is not designed to audit the capacities of research teams or individuals. The tool is structured with some linearity, and contains numerous assumptions about what good practice is. It is widely recognised research uptake is not a linear process and that ‘good’ uptake practice may differ in different contexts, but in order to ensure the tool was efficient and could be implemented effectively the decision was made to retain this linearity, and encourage those using it to draw out through their discussions why certain capabilities and processes may not be applicable to them.

Objectives of the tool

This tool was developed in order to assess the capacity of multiple research partners involved in the Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia (LANSA) research consortium, and is designed for a group or workshop setting. The tool has four principle purposes:

1. Assess the level of research uptake capacity amongst research teams working together on a multi-partner programme;
2. Inform the programme’s research uptake plans and strategy;
3. Identify capacity gaps and create plans to increase team capacity; the tool can also be used to monitor progress in research uptake capacity amongst research teams throughout the course of a programme.
4. Improve understanding of research uptake (what it is and why it is important) across the research team.

Who is it for?

The tool was developed for researchers, research managers and knowledge brokers. It works under the assumption that research uptake skills, activities and approaches should involve all members of a research team at some level, not just those specifically employed to manage research uptake. Although the tool was specifically developed for self-assessment in a workshop setting by LANSA research teams it could be used by any research team and could be adapted to assess organisational capacity. The workshop could include staff with responsibility for communications and M&E.

In organisations with a flat structure, all researchers contributing to a research programme should participate. Where there is a large team and it is not possible to get all the researchers together, priority should be given to those with the greatest time commitment to the project. In organisations where the decision making power is concentrated in a handful of senior researchers, ideally all senior researchers involved in the programme should participate. Support and endorsement from management and senior researchers for strengthening capacity in research uptake is essential to ensure researchers are made aware of its strategic importance.

Which capacities does the tool cover?

1. Capacity to understand and articulate how the research programme can support development
2. Capacity to understand needs of decision makers and adapt to the policy and programme context
3. Capacity to engage relevant stakeholders and understand their interest and ability to use evidence
4. Capacity to use relevant communication tools, channels and resources (including M&E)

Key steps

1. ***Individual survey***
   Prior to the workshop, participants are asked to complete an individual survey. This provides an opportunity for the facilitator to gain some insight into the knowledge, practices and attitudes held by individuals within the team. This will help the facilitator tailor the discussion according to the participants' attitudes to research uptake. The individual survey should normally be completed in advance of the workshop. It might be interesting to revisit the survey, at points throughout the programme, to see if attitudes, practices and knowledge have changed.

2. ***Introduction to research uptake***
   In order to get the most out of this tool all workshop participants are guided through what research uptake is, and what their role is within the research programme's wider uptake strategy or 'research to policy process'. It is important to recognise that uptake involves a range of skills, activities and approaches. The exercise involves questioning participants to understand who they think is responsible for these skills, activities, and approaches (see facilitation notes below for further guidance).

3. ***Introduction to tool***

Facilitators should outline the purpose of the tool and how the session will run, while also clearly stating that this should be seen as an opportunity to reflect on current practice, and identify how capacity gaps can be filled. It is important to emphasise that the session is not intended to assess the capacity of individuals.

4. ***Card selection process (in pairs)***
   The group splits into pairs and is asked to work through the cards, identifying their capabilities and providing examples where possible to demonstrate their experience. Examples should draw on the research programme being assessed, though other experiences can be shared later in the workshop.

5. ***Introduction to research uptake capabilities (see above) and overview of team scores***
   Before revealing the scores from the card selection process (above) the facilitator describes what each of the capability areas relate to. This will help participants discuss in an informed way whether they feel the scores reflect the team's true capability (below).

6. ***Review of scores and final consensus sought over their accuracy. This process is supported by participants sharing the examples they provided through the card exercise.***
   Participants have a significant amount of time during this part of the exercise to explore whether their scores are a true reflection of their capability in a particular area and reach some type of consensus over these. It is at this point that participants share examples to justify their card selections. The group should ask themselves if these represent a good example of the capability they are illustrating. There probably won't be time for all examples to be shared. If the participants are unable to draw out many examples relevant to the existing team (i.e. if it's too early in the lifecycle of the project) try to encourage participants to draw down on other experiences. This will help others see more clearly what a particular capability looks like in in practice.

7. ***Participants collaboratively explore how capabilities can be strengthened***
   This is the final part of the tool and the one that brings all the elements of it together. At this point the team should be encouraged to explore the team's relative strengths and weaknesses, and to identify the key areas they want to strengthen. The facilitator(s) should seek to push the team to explore how those capability areas might be strengthened. The facilitator should have a good idea of individual competencies following the individual survey, so if gaps are not addressed or existing skills are not recognised the conversation should be steered toward these.

What does the tool allow research programmes to do?

Raise level of knowledge and awareness around research uptake
In implementing this tool, we strongly recommend that participants are provided with some background information on the key principles and ideas behind research uptake (see facilitation notes). This, together with the fact that participants are encouraged to explore each capability area and provide examples of its use among the group, means that the tool has the potential to raise knowledge and awareness around research uptake.

Understand the capacity strengths and weaknesses of individuals and a project team
The tool provides an interesting approach to capacity assessment by focusing on both individual and team capacity. By comparing the scores for pairs and the whole team we are able to see instances where high individual capacity is not reflected in the overall capacity of the team, and thus might be deemed to represent 'latent' capacity. The tool provides the opportunity for participants to explore their capacity as a group and look for ways of addressing shortfalls.

Test and explore assumptions around what capacities are important in different contexts
The tool is made up of a series of assumptions about what effective research uptake practices look like and what key capacities are required in order to implement these (see "limitations" below). Although there are assumptions attached to the capacities that are tested through this tool, the workshop provides participants (if facilitated appropriately) with the opportunity to test and explore those capacities, and draw out any that may not be appropriate to them.

Explore ways of raising knowledge and capacity in particular areas
The final element of the tool asks participants to identify those capabilities they are keen to strengthen and develop. This is an opportunity to get participants to reflect on their team's weaknesses and explore which capacity areas they want to strengthen, how they might be able to do this, and (if relevant) where specific training or capacity building interventions may be needed.

What are the limitations of the tool?

It contains assumptions
Any understanding of how research uptake happens, or what capacities support it, is based on a series of assumptions (both in terms of what signifies progression in terms of the level of capacities held, and the types of capacities that support uptake). Given the complexity of the process of research influencing policy it is difficult to predict what capacities and organisational structures will help facilitate uptake in any particular context. However, through having a clear understanding of the context we can, to some extent, test the validity of the assumptions and select the most appropriate capacities in response. As the tool is intended to prompt dialogue rather than offer a singular perspective on best practice, the assumptions will be addressed through the discussion process. It is of course important for the person facilitating these discussions to understand that the tool does make assumptions and that these might not always represent the most suitable approach.

The tool also works under the assumption that everyone within a research team has some level of responsibility for research uptake. It's necessary to acknowledge that some members of the team will have more responsibility than others. However, a joined-up and strategic approach that considers the roles of all staff will make research uptake far more effective.

You need time to implement it
You should leave around half a day 3.5-4 hours to fully implement this tool, including both the individual survey and the group work. This is why we recommend this tool is integrated into a workshop format and ensure people are aware of the time commitment required. Although this is a limitation to the tool, it should also be seen as a valuable opportunity to create understanding about important capabilities which can support planning and strategy in the area of research uptake.

We recommend the tool is implemented during the inception phase of a research programme, and then at key points over its lifecycle. This represents a significant commitment to testing and building capacity around research uptake. This is important because building understanding of which key skills are not present gives a research programme the opportunity to address these and ensure that research uptake activities are planned and implemented appropriately, and that perceived gaps can be filled.

It may prove challenging for certain members of the team

Assessing the capacity of the full team working on a particular research programme can be difficult given the differing levels of knowledge and understanding around research uptake across a particular team. It's possible that some members of the team may find some of the concepts and capacities introduced as part of this exercise challenging. This is why it's very important to follow the facilitation notes (accompanying this tool) and introduce the key concepts and capacities that will be discussed, and be prepared to answer specific questions related to them. The tool is also designed to help participants raise their understanding of different concepts, supported through active facilitation. Another issue to bear in mind is the power dynamics within the team. A desire to impress managers and peers may impede openness about individuals' own capacity.

The facilitator should have an understanding of research uptake to facilitate the conversation

To maximise the potential of the tool it's important that the facilitator has a good understanding of research uptake. This will ensure that participants understand the concepts and capacities discussed. Individuals without a background in research uptake may be able to use the tool, but they should first make themselves familiar with the facilitation notes and read some background material from the Bibliography below. DFID's Research Uptake: A Guide for DFID-funded research programmes is recommended.

Preparation needed

1) Read this guide and any other recommended readings, as necessary;
2) Look at the PowerPoint, and adapt it to suit how you plan to run the session;
3) Prepare the materials:
    a. Send out the individual survey and use the results to adapt the session to suit the team;
    b. Print and cut the cards out;
    c. Assemble any materials you need like flipchart, post-it notes, pens etc.
    d. Make sure the room has any equipment you need, e.g. a projector if you are using slides;
    e. Agree roles with your co-facilitator beforehand.
4) Familiarise yourself with the timings (see Part 2).

Bibliography

Collison, C. and G. Parcell (2001) Learning to Fly, Oxford: Capstone.

Department of International Development (2013), *Research Uptake: A Guide for DFID-funded research programmes*

Overseas Development Institute (2009) Strategy Development: The Five Competencies Framework

Baser, H and Morgan, P (2008) Capacity, Change and Performance Study Report, European Centre for Development Policy Management

Part 2. Facilitation Guide

Facilitator's guide to timings for each session

Quick individual survey (INDIVIDUAL)	In advance of workshop
Introduction / purpose of the tool (PRESENTATION)	10 minutes
What is research uptake and who is responsible? (GROUP EXERCISE)	20 minutes
Card selection: Introduce process (PRESENTATION)	10 minutes
Card selection process and refine card choice (DISCUSSION IN PAIRS)	30 minutes
Introduce capabilities and next session (PRESENTATION)	10 minutes
BREAK (facilitators works out aggregate team levels)	30-45 minutes
Team's top-line strengths (PRESENTATION)	10 minutes
Review of scores and final consensus sought over their accuracy. This process is supported by participants sharing of the examples provided through the card exercise. (GROUP DISCUSSION)	60 minutes
Ideas/ actions to strengthen capacity (GROUP DISCUSSION)	15-30 minutes
Wrap up including next steps (PRESENTATION)	10 minutes
TOTAL TIME	235 minutes (max)

Individual survey

Objectives:

- Generate background understanding of individual knowledge, attitudes and practices

Resources:
Individual questionnaire (provided)

Time required:
10 minutes

Description:

- The individual survey should normally be sent to participants prior to the workshop. When requesting participants to complete the survey make sure that its purpose is made clear in the context of the wider tool.

Comment:

- It is important to put people at ease and make sure they know they aren't being assessed, but that they are assessing their own capacity, their fit within the team, and identifying both strengths and areas they may want to strengthen.

Workshop introduction	
Objectives: - Participants understand purpose of activity; - Participants are clear about agenda for session; - Participants are put at ease; - Generate background understanding of individual competencies	
Resources: PowerPoint slides (provided for you to adapt)	**Time required:** 15 minutes
Description: - Introduce yourself - Agenda for the session (slides) - Explain purpose of the tool (slides) - Explain that this is the beginning of a process.	
Comment: - Reiterate and make sure that participants know they aren't being assessed but they are assessing their own capacity, their fit within the team, and identifying both strengths and areas they may want to strengthen.	

What is research uptake and who is responsible?	
Objectives: - Participants consider what activities are involved in research uptake; - Participants consider who is responsible for research uptake; - Participants understand/identify the four main research uptake capability areas: Strategy / Policy Context / Stakeholder Engagement / Communications	
Resources: PowerPoint slides (provided for you to adapt), flipchart	**Time required:** 20 minutes
Description: - *Step 1*: Start with a short presentation introducing research uptake (slides). - *Step 2*: Encourage participants to think about the range of capabilities (skills, activities and approaches) that are required to support research uptake. Get them to write on post-its or write directly on to a flip chart. The facilitator could write these up on the board or collect post its and group them according to different types of capabilities. - *Step 3*: Once participants have identified a range of capabilities ask participants to identify who is responsible for these, and the level of capacity within the team in these areas. - *Step 4*: Ask participants if they are or have been involved in other programmes where research uptake is important and/ or have had any training to help them engage in research uptake activities.	

Comment:

- Research uptake involves a range of capabilities: skills, activities and approaches.
- Depending on the level of knowledge in the group you could prompt team members to group the capabilities into common areas (e.g. 1 engaging stakeholders, 2 media work, 3 writing research summaries).
- Look at description of RU.
- When exploring the skills, activities and approaches in step 2 use post-it notes and explore responsibility and capacity of the group by asking "Who does those?"
- Is it likely that one person is going to be good at all of those activities and that is why we are spending most of this session focussing on the team's strengths and understanding who else we may need to work with. Try to ensure that this individual does not dominate the conversation.

Card selection process

Objectives:

- Participants understand how to do the exercise;
- Participants assess their team's Research Uptake capacity.

Resources:	**Time required:**
RUSAT cards (provided, but need to be printed and cut up)	40 minutes

Description:

Describe the exercise and split people into pairs:

- Each pair has a pack of cards that cover 4 capability areas (and 12 individual capabilities) (See description of cards below).
- Each card has a statement associated with a level of experience in a particular capability area.

Instructions for participants:

- ***Step 1**:* Ask each pair to look at each card and decide whether the statement (more or less) applies to their team or programme;
- They have 15 minutes to select the statements that apply to the team or programme;
- If they are selecting a card that signifies a level of experience, be sure to encourage them to provide concrete examples that demonstrate the capability exists;
- These examples will be discussed in the group later;
- If participants don't understand something on the card, encourage them to put the card aside, and revisit it at the end.
- ***Step 2**:* Once participants have finished, or 20 minutes into the exercise (whichever is soonest) tell participants:
- 1) Count the cards you have selected;
- 2) There are 4 capability areas, depicted by four colours;
- 3) Ideally they would have selected 12 cards.
- ***Step 3***: Give participants 10 minutes to review their cards and eliminate similar sounding cards covering the same capability area.
- ***Step 4**:* Collect the cards in and keep the selected cards separate from the discarded ones. Make a note of the two people who selected the cards.

Comment:

- If you feel the group of participants are unlikely to be honest about capacity constraints within the team, you can mix all the cards up so that the higher capability cards are not ordered as such. In some instances this might be necessary, but in most cases we would expect participants to understand that they have to share examples to validate their choices, thus making false claims very obvious.
- The tool aims to support and build dialogue around research uptake and the required capacities and all participants should take part in the appropriate spirit of reflection and learning.
- Make sure the selected cards are handed to the facilitator and placed in an envelope with the names of the two people they respond to (you will need these again shortly).

Introduce capabilities and next session (and break)

Objectives:

- Participants understand the capability areas

Resources:	**Time required:**
PowerPoint slides, Table to facilitate working out overall scores	10 mins (35 mins for facilitator)

Description:

- *Step 1*: Explain that you will aggregate and present back the team's key strengths based on a series of core capability areas
- *Step 2*: Present an example of a score sheet (slide).

Comment:

During the break the facilitator/s adds up the scores of participants (this will take approximately 35 minutes) (See instructions for scoring below).

Group reviews scores and finalises them, validating them through examples

Objectives:

- Review of scores and final consensus found over their accuracy.
- Participants exchange knowledge about their experience using examples recorded on the cards;
- Participants identify their strengths as a team;
- Identify core strengths that could be shared with others (LANSA partners and internal staff).

Resources:	**Time required:**
Flip chart score sheets, PowerPoint	60 minutes (Incl. 10 min intro)

Description:

- *Step 1*: Present the combined scores back to participants
- If there are eight or more participants, break up into groups of four or fewer
- Make sure there is a mix of experienced (higher scores) and less experienced (lower

scores) in each group;
- *Step 2*: Ask the group to go through at least one card for each capability area (strategy, communications, stakeholders and policy) using those with the highest card (5) to share their examples. There is around 10 -15 minutes for each capability area;
- Participants should be encouraged to briefly share the experiences they thought of during the individual exercise; including what we can learn from it; why it had impact; what role was played by researchers and who supported them
- Listening participants should be encouraged to probe the examples given to make sure they understand what was done and why it was important/ effective / successful and how the experience can be applied by the team/ programme.

Comment:
- If the group breaks into two, the facilitators should split between the two and make sure time is made available at the end for the groups to report back.
- This exercise will reveal to the team where expertise lies. For example, they may not know that colleague A has a large twitter following, colleague B has influential friends in government, and colleague C is often asked to provide comments to the media. An expert list could be drawn up after the exercise with the names of individuals alongside their specific expertise, skills or knowledge. This could be drawn on to support specific Research Uptake activities in the future.

Action/s to strengthen capabilities

Objectives:
- Participants identify capabilities they are keen to strengthen and develop plan to develop them.

Resources:	**Time required:**
Capability flipchart sheet, flip chart	15-30 minutes

Description:
- *Step 1*: The scores are shown again, and participants are asked if they agree with those areas where capacity was identified as being less strong ;
- *Step 2*: Discussion of team's relative strengths and weaknesses by broad capability areas;
- *Step 3*: Participants are encouraged to brainstorm ideas on how to strengthen areas they have identified that they want to strengthen.
- *Step 4*: Group is asked to discuss agree which actions they want to take forward

Comment:
- It might be worth prompting participants to identify people they may want to have as mentors (both internal and external to their team)
- Depending on how many ideas are brainstormed it may not be possible to implement all. It is important to have a discussion to identify actions that most people support – to help prioritise. When people are involved in decisions to do something they are more likely to cooperate or support it.

Wrap up and next steps	
Objectives: - Participants are clear about purpose of the exercise they have been involved in and clear about next steps.	
Resources:	**Time required:** 10 minutes
Description: - Facilitator sums up the session and summarises what was learned about capacity levels and restates the next steps (i.e. intended actions by the team to raise their capacity).	

Part 3. Individual Survey for researchers

Review the statements below, and indicate whether you agree or disagree by circling the relevant text.

1) My primary role is to produce excellent quality research that appears in well respected journals. It is the job of others to disseminate my research to a wider audience.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

2) I normally meet with key stakeholders as I plan my research so I can get their feedback, and, if relevant, adapt my research to meet their concerns.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

3) I primarily work in international development research as way to improve the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

4) In order for my research to have an impact I need to engage with the people who have power and influence to make the necessary policy or programmatic changes.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

5) When stakeholder discussions are organised on topics that overlap with my research interests I regularly join these meetings to share my findings.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

6) Apart from my articles in peer reviewed publications, I always write and present my research findings in an easy-to-understand language and style (i.e. through policy briefs, research briefs, blogs, news articles etc.) for non-academic decision makers and other stakeholders.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

7) I understand policy and/or programme decision making processes (e.g. how and when decisions are made and who makes the decisions) relevant to my research topic.

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

8) I organise my research around decision making processes (for example by timing the research and writing recommendations to inform consultations in the run up to the formulation of new government or programme policy).

agree strongly / agree / neither agree or disagree / disagree / disagree strongly

Part 4. Instructions and Aids for Scoring the Team

Key for cards

Capacity area	Colour reference	Letter reference	Description
Strategy	Yellow	A	Capacity to develop and monitor a research uptake strategy
Policy	Green	B	Capacity to understand and adapt to the policy context
Stakeholders	White	C	Capacity to understand and engage with stakeholders and decision makers
Communications	Purple	D	Capacity to communicate

Instructions for scoring

1) Take each pair's pile of selected cards and look at the letter/number codes at the bottom.
2) In the table, fill in the number in the row with the same letter code (note cards are colour coded).
3) Then fill in the values. Using the key below fill in the value column.

Key

Number code		Value
AA1	=	1
AA3	=	3
AA5	=	5
No AA card selected	=	1

Examples:

- If only AA5 from the AA code was selected, then the value is 5.
- If no AA card was selected the value is 1.

The value is the final score, unless two numbers from the same letter code are selected[3].

4) Average the two values to get the score. For instance, if both AA1 and AA3 were selected. 1 and 3 becomes 2, so the score is 2. See figure 1 below.
5) After filling in all the pairs' tables, input the scores into the organisation table. See figure 2 below and work out the average scores by dividing the total with the number of participants.

[3] This is only likely to happen in those cases when you feel like it is appropriate to mix all the cards together See "Comment" under card selection process facilitation notes.

Scoring Matrix

Table 1 Example of filled in scores for pairs

		Number/Value	Score (see key)
Strategy	AA	5	5
	AB	1	1
Policy	BA	1 5	3
	BB	1	1
	BC	3	3
Stakeholders	CA	0	0
	CB	3	3
	CC	3	3
	CD	1	1
Communication	DA	5	5
	DB	3 5	4
	DC	1 3	2

Table 2 Example of table for group scores

		1	2	3	4	5	Total	Avg.
Strategy	AA	xx			xx	xx	20	3.3
	AB							
Policy	BA	X	xx	xx		x	16	2.6
	BB							
	BC							
Stakeholders	CA							
	CB							
	CC							
	CD							
Communication	DA							
	DB							
	DC							