



Education

THE USE OF EVIDENCE IN EDUCATION POLICY: A PILOT STUDY IN VICTORIA

RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR
THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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Executive Summary

This document reports on a Monash University study, undertaken with the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), into the use of evidence in education policy-making. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with 25 DET staff who were involved in the development of three selected policies, coupled with documentary analysis and (where possible) observations of policy development in process. Emerging findings were shared with 40 DET staff at an interim verification workshop during the project.

Key Findings

- Evidence was being used in many and varied ways in the policy process, but its role was more significant in the earlier stages of constructing the policy narrative as compared with the later stages of testing and communicating the narrative.
- DET policy-makers were using a wide range of evidence types (e.g. assessment data, evaluation evidence, research evidence, international/national practice and stakeholder/expert testimony), but this breadth of evidence types was not always matched by a breadth of evidence sources.
- Analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of DET's current evidence use practices suggests a need for capacity building in four main areas: evidence use *skills*; evidence use *systems*; evidence use *relationships*; and evidence use *leadership*.

Implications

The Department and its staff should take note of the encouraging signs within this study of movement towards an increasingly evidence-engaged culture. To capitalise on these developments, future improvements in evidence use need to focus on:

- extending the current systematic use of varied kinds of system performance data to similarly *sophisticated use of other types of evidence, in particular varied genres of research evidence*;
- broadening the current supportive organisational culture around evidence use *to encompass organisational systems and structures* as well as organisational expectations and leadership;
- supporting staff learning and development around not only the technical expertise involved in using evidence but also the *relational expertise involved in collaborating with others*;
- encouraging a transition from evidence use processes that are largely tacit, undocumented and private towards *evidence use processes that are more explicit, articulated and shared*; and
- understanding and working on *evidence use as a whole-system issue* that relates to improving practice as much as improving policy, and policy implementation as much as policy development.

Finally, it is critical that efforts to improve future evidence use through strategic action are matched by parallel efforts to better understand evidence use through empirical investigation.

Key Findings

What evidence is used

- DET policy-makers emphasised the **varied types of evidence** that are used, which included different kinds of: assessment data (state, national, international), research evidence (DET commissioned, independent academic, external reports), evaluation evidence (DET program evaluations, external program evaluations), international/national practice (leading jurisdictions), and stakeholder/expert testimony (internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, consultants, advisors, research partners).
- Different evidence sources were often used in combination but the precise **mix varied for different policies** (e.g. one of the three policies had less opportunity for stakeholder consultation evidence) and at **different stages in the policy process** (e.g. analysis of assessment data for early problem definition followed by academic research, leading jurisdictions evidence and program evaluations for identifying key drivers and possible interventions).
- There was concern amongst some interviewees that the current **breadth of types of evidence is not necessarily matched by a breadth of evidence sources within individual categories** such as research, due to a tendency to use similar sources, to focus on sources that are well-known, familiar and comfortable, and to start with evidence sources that are easy to locate.

How evidence is used

- The three policy processes examined for this study provided examples of **evidence being used in a whole range of different ways**, such as ‘to define the problem’, ‘to flag a case for change’, ‘to keep things on the agenda’, ‘to clarify international practice’, ‘to clarify state/national trends’, ‘to identify key drivers/levers’, ‘to challenge proposals’, ‘to challenge assumptions’, ‘to get buy-in from key audiences’, ‘to design interventions’, ‘to identify possible interventions’, and to ‘select interventions’.
- The relationships between these various types of evidence use make a lot more sense when **the policy process is understood in terms of the development of a ‘policy narrative’** (Figure 1). It becomes clear that: (i) evidence plays a more significant role in the early construction of the narrative; (ii) evidence is part of the negotiation between competing narratives; and (iii) evidence is involved in the communication of the narrative.
- The processes involved in using evidence were described by interviewees as **collaborative** (i.e. involving a range of players within and beyond the Department and requiring skills in developing relationships and building shared understandings) and **tacit** (i.e. involving largely undocumented processes that are developed as part of the work). What is important is that while **the**

collaborative nature of evidence use was described by interviewees in a positive light, the tacit nature of the process was talked about in more negative terms ('nothing very sophisticated', 'not super scientific').

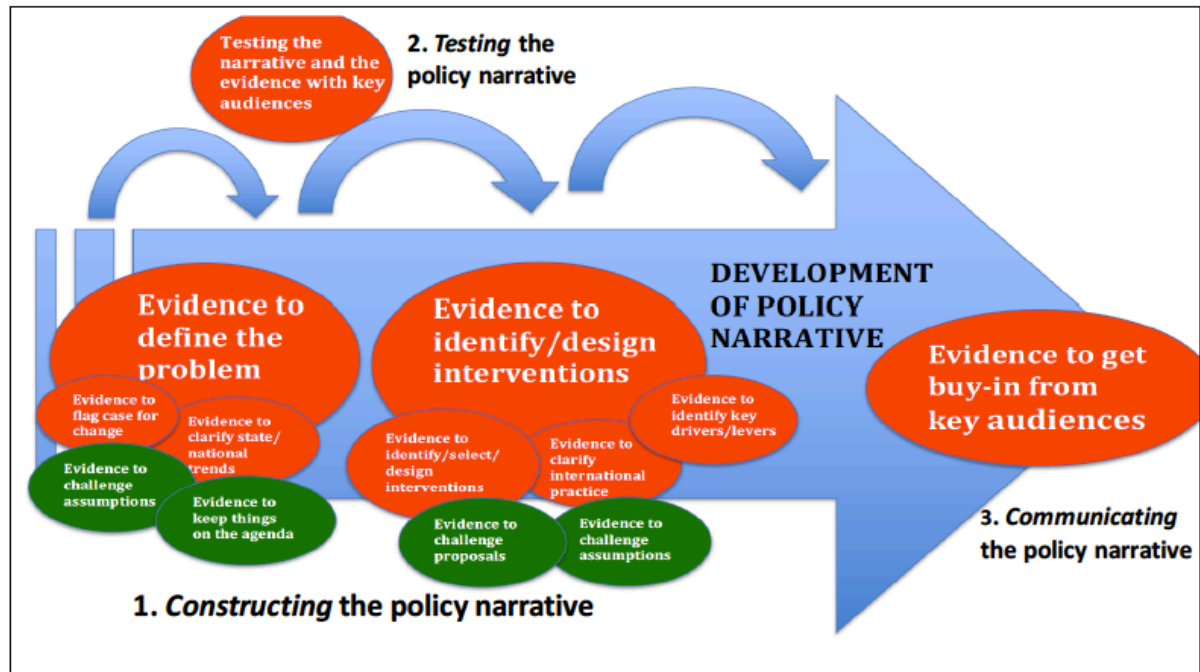


Figure 1: Different Uses of Evidence in relation to the Development of the Policy Narrative

Current strengths and weaknesses

- In terms of **current strengths** in DET's evidence use practices, four main areas emerged in this study: *supportive organisational culture* (that had increasingly established use of evidence as the norm in policy making); *effective leadership* (that had raised expectations and promoted critical scrutiny of evidence); *collaborative processes* (that had ensured diverse perspectives and built shared understandings); and *systemic developments* (that had improved analysis of system-level performance data).
- Alongside these, though, were a number of important **current weaknesses**, including:
 - weaknesses in the evidence* (due to overreliance on easily accessible sources and a lack of rigorous program evaluation evidence);
 - weaknesses in the evidence systems* (due to ineffective knowledge management processes and insufficient openness and trust);
 - weaknesses in the evidence skills* (due to variable staff capability in locating, appraising, analysing and synthesising high quality evidence);
 - weaknesses in certain policy stages* (due to more limited involvement of policy implementers in early policy stages and more limited use of evidence in later policy stages).

Future capacity building

Analysis of these various areas of strength and weakness in terms of what evidence is used, how evidence is used, who takes part in using the evidence and when evidence is used (Table 1), suggests a need for **capacity building** in four main areas:

- **evidence use skills** (through staff recruitment, knowledge exchange and formal learning, around skills in identifying, appraising and interpreting evidence);
- **evidence use systems** (through improved mechanisms for accessing external research and sharing evidence internally and more explicit evidence use protocols and frameworks);
- **evidence use relationships** (through recognition for the importance of developing relational expertise as well as technical expertise, and strengthening early involvement of regional staff); and
- **evidence use leadership** (through continuing to encourage thoughtful approaches to evidence use and proactively supporting new initiatives relating to the areas noted above).

Implications

This study set out to better understand the challenges and complexities surrounding this use of evidence within DET policy development. Through in-depth analysis of interviews, documents and observations relating to the development of three specific policies, it has generated fresh insights into the types of evidence that are being used by DET staff and, more importantly, the ways in which evidence is being used in DET policy processes. And drawing on these insights, it has been able to highlight key strengths and weaknesses in the Department's current use of evidence and to identify priorities for building capacity in the future. With all of this in mind, there would seem to be three major implications emerging from this study.

The first implication is that **the Department and its staff should take note of the encouraging signs within this study of movement towards an increasingly evidence-engaged culture.**

Indications of this movement were seen in: the complex range of evidence types being used by staff and the varied uses to which this evidence was being put within the policy process; the collaborative nature of many of the processes around identifying, exploring and using evidence; and the repeated reports by interviewees of leadership support for, and scrutiny of, the role of evidence in DET policy work. There was also a definite sense from the staff interviewed for this study that evidence use was an issue that they were willing to talk about, interested to reflect on and keen to improve.

A second implication, therefore, is that **there seems to be both a genuine appetite for improving future evidence use and clear priorities for the kinds of capacity building that will be required**

to enable this to happen. Throughout this study, interviewees were quick to reflect critically on their evidence use practices and articulate specific ways in which these could be improved at an individual, team and/or organisational level. To be able to capitalise on their suggestions and respond constructively to the challenges they raise, this study suggests that the next phase of improvements in evidence use within DET will need to come through:

- extending the current systematic use of varied kinds of system performance data to similarly *sophisticated use of other types of evidence, in particular varied genres of research evidence*;
- broadening the current supportive organisational culture around evidence use *to encompass organisational systems and structures* as well as organisational expectations and leadership;
- supporting staff learning and development around not only the technical expertise involved in using evidence but also the *relational expertise involved in collaborating with others*;
- encouraging a transition from evidence use processes that are largely tacit, undocumented and private towards *evidence use processes that are more explicit, articulated and shared*; and
- understanding and working on *evidence use as a whole-system issue* that relates to improving practice as much as improving policy, and policy implementation as much as policy development.

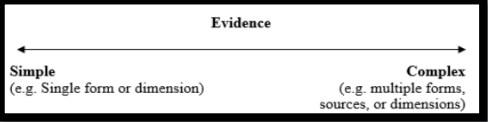
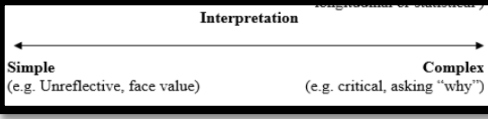
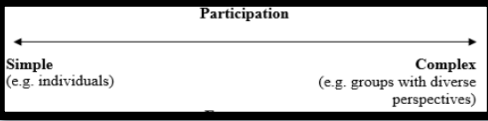
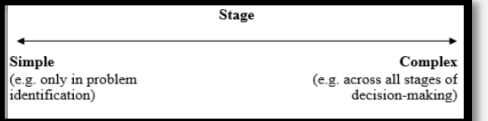
Finally, and building on these suggested directions, this study (we hope) demonstrates **the importance of not only seeking to improve evidence use through strategic action but also seeking to understand evidence use through empirical investigation.** In this sense, this study is a first step exploration of evidence use practices and issues in the context of three specific Victorian education policies. There is, then, a strong case for follow-up studies, with a similarly collaborative spirit, to better understand the challenges and complexities of evidence use right across the Victorian education system. In other words, research on evidence use processes *across the system* for continuous improvement *in practice and policy settings* with many and *varied actors and stakeholders.*

For further details about this project, see:

Rickinson, M., de Bruin, K., Walsh, L. and Hall, M. (2016) *The Use of Evidence in Education Policy: A Pilot Study in Victoria.* Department of Education and Training: Melbourne.

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Table 1: Strengths and Weaknesses in Current Evidence Use and Implications for Capacity Building

Dimensions of Depth of Evidence Use (adapted from Farley-Ripple, 2015)	Strengths	Weaknesses	Capacity Building
<p>(WHAT)</p> 	<p>Clear indications of...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + increased use of system data + use of varied types of evidence 	<p>but ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of variety within some types e.g. same old research sources - primacy of system data - concern about staff searching skills - poor access to research databases - lack of program evaluation data 	<p>Therefore there is need for capacity building in:</p> <p>Evidence use skills Critical reflection around what is used when and why</p> <p>Capacity building around searching skills</p> <p>Evidence use leadership Strong leadership around program evaluation</p> <p>Evidence use systems Improved systems and procedures for searching</p>
<p>(HOW)</p> 	<p>Clear indications of...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + helpful analysis by data analysts + confidence in ability to understand Victorian performance story + strong culture, leadership and expectation around evidence use + leaders have championed more critical thinking about application of evidence 	<p>but...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concern about critical appraisal skills - analysis processes seem to be tacit i.e. no agreed templates/procedures - access to certain data/analyses can be difficult - unclear systems for sharing info between teams 	<p>Therefore there is need for capacity building in:</p> <p>Evidence use skills Capacity building around appraisal skills</p> <p>Evidence use leadership Continued leadership around use of quality evidence</p> <p>Evidence use systems More explicit processes and procedures for analysis</p> <p>Better systems and culture for sharing analyses and ideas across DET</p>
<p>(WHO)</p> 	<p>Clear indications of...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + existence of workplace processes that supported collaboration e.g. advisory groups etc. + increased recognition of benefits of collaborative processes 	<p>but ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unclear systems for sharing info between teams - some gaps e.g. regional staff 	<p>Therefore there is need for capacity building in:</p> <p>Evidence use systems Better systems and culture for sharing analyses and ideas across DET</p> <p>Evidence use relationships Support for the importance of relational expertise</p> <p>Critical reflection around who is involved and when</p>
<p>(WHEN)</p> 	<p>Clear indications of...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + evidence being used in different ways at different times + evidence analyses are returned to and updated over time + evidence used more often 	<p>but ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more in problem definition and less in later stages e.g. strategy development 	<p>Therefore there is need for capacity building in:</p> <p>Evidence use skills Critical reflection on what is used when and why</p> <p>Evidence use systems More emphasis on maintaining evidence use in later stages</p>

* Farley-Ripple, E.N. (2015) "Deep" evidence use: a framework for practice and capacity building', Paper presented at AARE Conference, Fremantle, December 2015