Development in Practice

ISSN: 0961-4524 (Print) 1364-9213 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cdip20

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**To cite this article:** Sunet Jordaan, Ruth Stewart, Yvonne Erasmus, Louis Maluwa, Janine Mitchell, Laurenz Langer, Russell Wildeman, Natalie Tannous & Josee Koch (2018) Reflections on mentoring experiences for evidence-informed decision-making in South Africa and Malawi, Development in Practice, 28:4, 456-467, DOI: 10.1080/09614524.2018.1444733

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2018.1444733

Published online: 23 Apr 2018.

DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE, 2018
VOL. 28, NO. 4, 456–467
https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2018.1444733

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# Reflections on mentoring experiences for evidence-informed decision-making in South Africa and Malawi

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**ABSTRACT**
This article is based on the consensus that the availability and utilisation of research enhances policy discussions. The article reflects on the experiences within one approach: capacity building through mentoring. The UJ-BCURE programme aimed to increase the capacity of decision-makers to use evidence in decision-making via mentoring models. Mentoring is described as an interactive, facilitated process that promotes learning. The features of the models that have contributed to the programme's success are orientation workshops with mentees combined with participatory, needs-led, and flexible approaches. UJ-BCURE experiences are relevant to the field of evidence-informed decision-making in an African government context.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 24 November 2016
Accepted 11 October 2017

**KEYWORDS**
Aid – Development policies, Capacity development; Governance and public policy; Sub-Saharan Africa

## Introduction

Evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) is gaining considerable importance in Africa. It has long been associated with policy change, and was first used in the health sector where research is used to advocate for policy change (Punton 2016). The growth of the EIDM movement can be linked to an increased understanding that the availability and utilisation of research enhances the quality of policy discussions and policy outcomes (Court and Young 2003; Datta and Jones 2011).

EIDM centres on behaviour change in how decisions are made (Michie, van Stralen, and West 2011). To effect change in any system, three essential conditions need to interact to affect change in how decision-making happens. The first is capability. Capability captures the individual dimensions of the person involved: their psychological and physical capacity, knowledge, and skills to engage in mentorship activities. The second essential condition is motivation. Motivation includes the processes that energise and direct an individual's behaviour towards the mentorship programme and EIDM. These processes include habits, emotions, and analytical decision-making. The third essential condition is opportunity. Opportunity emphasises the importance of factors outside the direct sphere of influence of an individual that make behaviour change possible or that prompt it.

Programmes working with decision-makers within government to influence the demand for credible evidence are relatively new and are often referred to as pull initiatives. These pull initiatives have the potential to complement programmes that focus on the evidence supply side (or push initiatives) in which the primary focus is on researchers and their research (Landry, Amara, and Lamari 2001). Push initiatives are described as processes where researchers encourage the uptake of academic research evidence in decision-making, while pull initiatives focus on the needs of policymakers and consider a wider range of evidence beyond academic research. Pull initiatives are a more collaborative effort between the producers and users of evidence. The University of Johannesburg-led programme to Build Capacity to Use Research Evidence (UJ-BCURE) is one such pull initiative. One

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of the programme's unique features was its investment in its mentorship programme. Mentoring can be described as an interactive, facilitated process that promotes learning and development that is often used in a work environment, and which can be a formal or informal process (Punton 2016).

Mentoring support was pivotal to UJ-BCURE's approach to increase the use of evidence in decision-making. In recognition that workshops cannot always fulfil individual or team requirements for specific and practical EIDM needs and challenges, UJ-BCURE designed a mentorship programme to offer more tailored support. Between 2014 and 2016, UJ-BCURE implemented four models of mentorship: group mentoring of individuals (in Malawi); short-term individual mentoring (in South Africa and Malawi); long-term individual mentoring (in South Africa); and team mentoring (in South Africa). The programme occupied a unique position for harnessing emergent opportunities and stimulated South-South learning. The mentoring programme offered by UJ-BCURE put forward a context-specific approach to supporting the use of evidence in the broader policy-making contexts in South Africa and Malawi (Stewart 2015).

## Methodology

The insights in this article are based on reflections among the UJ-BCURE team, strengthened through a series of team workshops. Routine programme monitoring data have been complemented with views shared by the programme stakeholders and mentors (UJ-BCURE team 2015, 2016b; Stewart et al. in press).

An external evaluation of the programme has been commissioned separately by the programme funder (UK Department for International Development (DFID)). UJ-BCURE also conducted an in-depth review of the mentorship component of the programme using data from October 2014 to March 2016 (Maluwa 2016), as well as a reflection on the mentorship programme report that captured the mentorship-plus programme experiences until September 2016 (UJ-BCURE Team 2016d).

The primary sources of data consist of pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires that mentors and mentees completed in Malawi and South Africa, as well as key informant interviews with mentees in Malawi. Other data collection tools included workshop attendance registers, team mentorship workshop attendance registers, mentorship-plus agreement forms, mentorship-plus log sheets, and focus group discussions at the end of the team mentorship relationships (Table 1). The data collection process was supplemented by telephone and email conversations between UJ-BCURE staff and the mentorship participants in both countries.

The mentorship close-out workshop also catered for a detailed discussion of the mentorship process, and outcome diary entries on team mentorships were analysed and included in the reflection process.[1] This article considers all mentorship-related data and activities between October 2014 and August 2016. Quantitative data were analysed using Excel, and qualitative data were analysed using content analysis (Busch et al. 2005).

## Programme description

The Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme worked with government officials and policymakers to increase the use of evidence in decision-making in 12 countries in Africa and Asia. UJ-BCURE implemented the programme in South Africa and Malawi through a capacity

**Table 1.** Data collection tools.

| Tool | Number |
|---|---|
| Pre-mentorship agreement forms | 18 |
| Post-mentorship evaluation forms | 15 |
| Key informant interviews in Malawi | 4 |
| Mentorship workshop attendance registers | 20 |
| Focus group discussion sessions | 2 |

development approach that included workshops, mentorships, networking, and cross-government initiatives.

As part of the comprehensive programme described above, the UJ-BCURE mentorship programme focused on increasing the use of research in decision-making through capacity building. Under the mentorship approach, UJ-BCURE tested an approach to enhance capacity to use evidence in decision-making and support its application in the work environment. The mentorship activities were closely matched to pre-specified mentee needs. Through offering dedicated individual, and later team-based, mentorship support the programme set out to deepen EIDM capacity and the practical application of these capacities in real world decision-making contexts. Mentorships also offered an extended, in-depth opportunity for relationship-building between mentors and mentees which can provide a shift in the EIDM landscape (Langer et al. 2016).

UJ-BCURE reached 108 civil servants with its mentorship programme: 85 from Malawi, and 23 from South Africa. A number of mentorships in South Africa were repeated, resulting in a total number of 46 unique mentorship relationships. A repeat mentorship occurs when the same mentor and mentee repeat or renew their relationship after the initial six-week period. UJ-BCURE applied four different models of mentorship in two countries. The models included *short-term individual mentoring*, *repeat individual mentoring*, *group mentoring for individuals*, and *team mentoring*. The general six-week mentorship approach was specific to the mentee's workplace setting. This approach was complemented by mentorship-plus: an option to extend the mentorship into the actual workplace setting. The main objective of the mentorship-plus programme was to provide practical guidance to civil servants on how to access, appraise, synthesise, and use research evidence in their workplaces. In South Africa, UJ-BCURE mentees included individuals from the Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME); the Department of Basic Education (DBE); the Department of Science and Technology (DST); the Department of Social Development (DSD); the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA); the Department of Human Settlements (DHS) as part of the DPME team mentorship; and the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS). In Malawi, UJ-BCURE's mentees were members of the District Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinating Committee (DMECC) structures from the districts of Mchinji and Ntchisi. The Malawian mentees were all identified by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) in partnership with the UJ-BCURE local implementing partner.

### *Model 1: group mentoring of individuals in Malawi*

Group mentoring was a type of mentorship in which mentees coordinated their efforts to achieve individual goals while being mentored as a group (UJ-BCURE 2016c). The mentoring model comprised different components of EIDM, including accessing information and assessing the quality thereof, the strengthening of data management systems, research synthesis through cases of applied learning at district level on particular policy or implementation issues, and mentoring around greater evidence use during the annual review of District Development Plans (Citizens' Health 2015). The recruitment of mentees was preceded by four introductory workshops on EIDM in which 70 civil servants participated (84% male and 16% female). The mentorship support commenced with a mapping of desired outcomes, which included improved knowledge of EIDM, improved research and data management skills, and knowledge on how to develop sectoral databases. A total of 17 group mentoring sessions were completed over the course of 10 months in which 85 civil servants participated (76% male and 24% female); only 32% of these participants had attended the introductory workshop. As the mentorships took place after the introductory workshops, new civil servants became part of the process through the mentorships.

### *Results from Model 1*

The post-mentorship evaluation indicated that the model has been effective at increasing EIDM awareness and knowledge among mentees (Citizens' Health 2015). Other positive outcomes included: acquisition of skills in accessing, managing, and using research data; and improved

monitoring skills and problem formulation. Most of the desired programme outcomes were achieved to some extent. The only programme outcome that was not achieved was the acquisition of knowledge on how to develop sectoral databases.

The model did experience certain challenges. DMECCs are by nature intersectoral committees that are set up by MLGRD and consist of representatives from the fields of health, education, agriculture, and so on who work at local government level. Although such intersectoral learning is useful, mentees expressed in the post-evaluation that they needed more specific and extensive sectoral mentoring. Furthermore, some mentees experienced challenges related to working as an intersectoral group and it was highlighted that some mentees are more comfortable with individual mentoring. Consistent attendance was another challenging area as this mentorship model stretched over a couple of months. The sub-optimal attendance can be partially clarified by the absence within the UJ-BCURE programme of monetary incentives to encourage workshop attendance in Malawi. Instead, the programme implemented a different approach to ensure participants did not experience possible opportunity costs and hosted the events in the district to shorten travelling distances to the sessions and provided food for participants. Mediating measures to improve inconsistent attendance were not as successful as had been hoped. An analysis of the mentees' attendance shows that only 20% of the mentees in Mchinji attended at least 50% of the mentoring sessions, while in Ntchisi only 30% of the mentees attended at least 50% of the mentoring sessions offered.

In conclusion, the group mentoring of individuals in Malawi was to a significant extent productive in achieving positive outcomes. Outcomes can be improved by more frequent introductory workshops, balancing group mentoring with sectoral mentoring, ensuring the availability of mentors with wide-ranging technical expertise, consistent attendance by designing context-specific incentives, an increase in the number of group mentoring sessions, and a commitment by institutions that mentees are allowed time to attend the sessions.

### *Model 2: short-term individual mentoring in South Africa and Malawi*

The model involves capacity building in EIDM among civil servants in the DPME, the DBE, and DST in a one-on-one environment, within a one-off period of six weeks. Where feasible, this mentoring model is complemented with workplace visits (called mentorship-plus visits in the UJ-BCURE programme). At the start of the mentorship process, all mentees identified a specific output or set of outcomes they were aiming to achieve. These outputs or outcomes included, among others, an increased use of evidence, development of a new policy framework, development of an implementation plan, or producing a policy white paper. Mentors were contracted by UJ-BCURE based on their skills and expertise in the EIDM environment. The matching of mentees with mentors was based on the understanding of the particular needs of the mentee and the skills and expertise of the mentor (UJ-BCURE 2015). A total of 15 civil servants (13 women and two men) were mentored in South Africa through one-off individual mentoring. Eight of these mentees were from DBE, three from the DST, three from the DPME, and one from the DSD. Some mentorship relationships started as soon as the introduction between mentor and mentee had taken place; others took more time to get started. The programme also had six individual mentorships in Malawi to ensure the application of learning.

### *Results from Model 2*

Model 2 had mixed outcomes. During the pilot phase of the mentorship process, the programme did not consistently ensure proper matching between the mentor and mentee. The programme also did not track the mentorship relationships and specified outputs and outcomes during the pilot phase. This oversight was rectified with the appointment of a dedicated mentorship manager.

Two mentees had two short-term individual mentorship relationships, but with different mentors, due to a shift in the mentor's availability. The mentee expressed the need to continue with the mentorship, which was supported by the programme. This continued interest in the mentorship programme is an indication that mentees experienced a benefit in participating in the mentorship

programme. Eight short-term mentorship relationships started late in the programme, and their effect has not been measured or included here. However, there is a likelihood that some of these will be renewed to become long-term individual mentorship relationships.

The programme observed a trend indicating that often mentors committed more time to the relationships than mentees. Mentees regularly mention that work pressure prevented them from allocating adequate time to the relationship. In cases where the mentee allocated sufficient time for the relationship, the mentorship achieved the desired outcome as defined at the start of the relationship. It is pivotal that mentees have support from their line managers to allocate adequate time for the relationship.

The most common methods of communication between mentor and mentee include telephone calls, emails, and Skype. A total of eight short-term relationships included a mentorship-plus component. The mentorship-plus visits provided a personal context to the mentoring relationships and ensured that the mentor and mentee work towards a specific outcome as identified at the start of the mentorship relationship. The mentorship-plus visits also assisted the mentors to better understand the situational context of the mentee, creating an opportunity for mentors and mentees to have an in-depth face-to-face discussion about the outcomes they were working towards.

The short-term individual mentees came from various management levels. More junior staff members were included when requested by their line managers. The high level of seniority of mentees (54% of all mentees were from the director or deputy director level) highlighted the need for support at a senior government level in a trusted environment. Importantly the seniority of most mentees suggests that Model 2 is a key mechanism for supporting applied adult learning on EIDM by more senior government officials.

The one-off mentorship relationships that define Model 2 can be very successful if designed and conceived appropriately from the outset. The success of this model is highlighted by a comment from a short-term individual mentee in South Africa: "*For me, this mentoring relationship was a learning curve, and it did reach my expectations*." In the UJ-BCURE programme, only a few of the relationships managed to achieve their desired outcomes. Results can be enhanced by providing orientation workshops, careful mentor and mentee matching, a systematic process that defines mentorship goals at the beginning of the relationship, mutual commitment and interest as well as institutional support, continuous communication, mentorship-plus visits, and flexibility in the approach to the length of the mentorship relationship: all underpinned by solid monitoring of the process to allow for adaptation and learning.

### *Model 3: long-term individual mentoring in South Africa*

Model 3 is a variation of the short-term individual mentoring model and involves the renewal of a mentorship relationship where the involved mentor-mentee pair has had prior short-term mentoring engagement (Model 2). This approach worked well and resulted in numerous requests from mentorship participants to have their mentoring relationships extended beyond the initial six-week period. The option of renewal was entirely the decision of the mentor and mentee, and was occasionally suggested by the mentorship manager. Repeat individual mentorships were complemented with at least one mentorship-plus visit per mentoring period where possible. Specific mentorship goals are defined and agreed upon at the beginning of the renewed mentorship relationship. As in Model 2 mentorships, matching of a mentor with a mentee was based on the needs of the mentee and took into account the suitability of the experience and expertise of the mentor for those needs. A total of 11 individual civil servants (five women and six men) were mentored through repeat individual mentoring in Model 3; one mentee had two long-term mentorship relationships with different mentors. Three mentees were from the DBE, two from the DST, two from the DPME, one from the DSD, one from the DEA, and one was from the DWS.

### Results from Model 3

The long-term individual mentorship relationships are one of the most successful models implemented in the UJ-BCURE programme, based on the EIDM outcomes achieved. The success can be linked to the fact that renewals were demand driven and indicated commitment and ownership of the programme by participants. Most mentorship relationships had at least one repeat relationship, with many extended to a relationship of at least a year. Mentorship relationships were renewed to ensure that the mentoring support in the EIDM work environment was still available. Renewals also ensured that EIDM identified outcomes were met as often the original outcomes were not achieved in full during the initial mentorship period, or new outcomes were added by the mentee and mentor over the course of the initial mentorship relationship. UJ-BCURE was responsive in setting up renewed mentorship relationships. Some relationships were set up quickly and started off immediately, while others took much longer to evolve and involved much discussion between the mentorship manager, the mentor, and the mentee. In some cases, the mentee asked for a short break between mentorship relationships due to work pressure or other commitments. In other cases, the outcomes of a mentorship relationship were changed due to work demands.

As was the case with Model 2, the most common methods of communication in Model 3 included telephone calls, emails, and Skype, with the addition of WhatsApp and text messaging. Proper matching of mentees and mentors was an important element of the success of Model 3. For example, the expertise of the mentor as either a methods or subject expert depended on the specific needs of the mentee. Furthermore, the success of Model 3 was also dependent on context-specific timeframes and policy cycles within government departments. The programme found that the most important contributing factor to success was the agreement on specific goals and outcomes, even if agreements remained flexible. The majority of mentees were senior government officials (44% were directors and 18% were chief directors), with sufficient authority to change work processes so as to foster the use of evidence during decision-making. The mentorship-plus visits provided a personal context and ensured a longer-term basis for these mentorships as face-to-face visits led to deeper relationships; both mentors and mentees reported the benefits of these visits in developing trust and transparency. In some cases, the visits led to institutional relationships that are still in place after the end of the mentorship programme. While valuable, mentorship-plus visits are not without their challenges. For instance, when the mentor and mentee were based in the same province, there was a natural opportunity to meet more frequently – some mentor–mentee pairs had up to four visits per six-week period. However, out-of-province visits requiring notable investments in time and travel posed bigger challenges. The success of Model 3 has opened up discussions around the institutionalisation of relationships as an important legacy that assists with the sustainability of the UJ-BCURE programme beyond the scope of donor funding.

In conclusion, the success of Model 3 can be attributed to the opportunity to fine-tune mentorship relationships over time to achieve better results. Model 3 allows for more time to exchange skills and to understand the mentees' work processes and identify opportunities for change. To cement the success of this model, several conditions should exist. First, commitment and responsive communication between mentees and mentors is important. Second, orientation about the mentorship programme and proper matching of the professional fields, methodological needs, and shared interests of the mentor and mentee is essential. Third, mutual goal-setting by the mentor and mentee, institutional support for participation in the programme, and sufficient time to engage in the mentorship processes are important for overall success. Provision should be made for mentorship-plus visits to extend the learning into the mentees' workplace. Lastly, the length of the mentorship should be guided by sound monitoring practices.

### Model 4: team mentoring in South Africa

Model 4 comprises a type of mentorship in which the team leader expresses the need to have the EIDM capacity of the team supported, and thus brings in a mentor to extend the reach of individual

mentoring to the wider team. This model involved mentoring a team of people in a specific organisational setting, working towards achieving specific departmental outcomes within a pre-agreed timeframe (UJ-BCURE 2016a). Model 4 is a variation of Model 1, taking the sectoral context into account. The lead mentor for the team mentorship model was a UJ-BCURE team member and additional mentors were contracted by UJ-BCURE based on their skills and expertise that would assist in addressing the specific EIDM needs of the mentee team (UJ-BCURE 2016a). Mentor–mentee matching was based on the understanding of the needs of the team leader, the EIDM capacity of the team, and the skills and expertise of the mentor. Model 4 included tailored workshops, focused clinics, and sustained interaction via Skype calls, emails, and social networks.

### *Results from Model 4*

Teams engaged in Model 4 mentorships all had prior interaction with the UJ-BURE programme before starting their team mentorships. The setup of Model 4 was demand-driven and all three team leaders approached UJ-BCURE requesting team mentorships upon realising the EIDM capacity needs within their teams. The teams' mentorships centred around different workplace-relevant EIDM tasks; three examples are provided below.

In the first example, the team conducted a systematic evidence map and developed an interactive evidence interface to engage decision-makers on a policy issue. Trust, co-production, and a close relationship were pointed out as the main elements of success in this team mentorship. As a result of this mentorship, the team now has access to in-house tools and capacity to independently conduct evidence maps in the future. This increased EIDM capacity within the team has led to further demands for evidence synthesis by other government departments.

The second example of team mentorships started with a careful and rigorous process of the team identifying key themes and topics for their team mentorship, using these to tailor their team mentorship around outcome-based monitoring and evaluation systems within a government department. Most of the mentoring was conducted during workshops designed specifically for the team. It was agreed that the first of these workshops ought to be broad in scope and that the team and the mentor would define follow-up work that needed to be done at the end of the workshop. Feedback from the team indicated that more time was needed to link EIDM concepts to the practical reality, including the dissection of a theory of change, outcome interrogation, and indicator setting which would strengthen the overall departmental system.

The last team's mentorship found its origins in an individual mentorship. The format of this team mentorship consisted of three workshops that covered various steps in the EIDM cycle, with email communication between workshops. The focus of this team mentorship was to enhance a specific policy that was being developed by the team. The mentorship enabled learning from colleagues with different work roles and perspectives. The team's success highlights the importance of closely relating the mentorship to work being undertaken at present, the importance of identifying specific objectives, the need for all team members to have agreed to the objectives of the mentorship, and the challenge of being mentored on a topic that is tied to larger institutional timeframes.

In conclusion, Model 4 has shown that one of the major vehicles of change in the UJ-BCURE mentorship programme was the ability to design strong activities that targeted and built up to the outcomes that a particular team was working already towards. The mentoring activities, albeit resource and time intensive, enhanced the most relevant EIDM skills in an applied manner. Model 4 worked well because it was designed around the needs of the specific teams and enabled mentees to work towards a common goal. To institutionalise the success, the following conditions should exist: commitment from the team members; processes that are tailor-made to the needs of the team; emphasis on the distinction between mentoring and consultancy or technical assistance; correct matching of skills and personalities; consistency in participation and face-to-face interaction; understanding of the political environment; and practical application of the EIDM methodology.

## Discussion

Lessons learnt and reflected on in this article are relevant to two distinctly different academic fields: the field interested in the impact and effects of mentoring, and the field interested in enhancing EIDM. The uniqueness of the UJ-BCURE experience comes from the ability of the programme to create linkages between these two fields. UJ-BCURE's mentorship models were part of a wider approach to capacity building that included inception activities, landscaping reviews, needs assessments, resources development, and the development of networks. Separating the individual contribution of the mentorship models to the overall results of the UJ-BCURE programme is difficult and the findings of this article should be considered within the wider context of the programme (Stewart et al. in press). The relevance of the lessons learnt within the mentorship models stem from the fact that the mentorship models were implemented with a very specific goal: increase the use of evidence in decision-making.

The key factors of success included the use of orientation workshops, investments in relationships as a fertile mechanism to facilitate change, the needs-driven nature of the mentorships, the careful matching of mentees and mentors, the length of the mentorships, and the flexibility within the programme to adapt the mentorship approach taken to each specific circumstance. These factors are expanded below.

*Importance of orientation workshops*: EIDM capacity-building orientation workshops enhanced the awareness of and demand for EIDM. Workshops were conceived as a first step in the longer causal chain of how the evidence use of decision-makers could be supported by external actors. Workshops were instrumental in starting the mentorship relationships and UJ-BCURE programme has shown that there is considerable overlap between workshops and mentorships. In the case of team mentorships, the team leader had prior engagement through the workshop programme, which provided the starting point for negotiating and designing the team mentorship support. The expansion from individual mentorship to team mentorship represents a significant spill-over effect from the UJ-BCURE programme.

*Relationships as the fertile mechanism to facilitate change*: Relationships are paramount in setting up mentorships as well as in maintaining them. Pre-existing relationships contributed to the implementation of the various mentorship models. These pre-existing relationships included trust between the UJ-BCURE team and the various government departments with which they worked.

*Mentorships are needs-driven*: Mentorship models were dependent on addressing the specific, identified needs of mentees in the mentorship relationship. These needs included the necessity of creating common goals at the start of any mentorship relationship in any of the four models.

*Importance of the right mentor and mentee match*: Matching of the mentor and mentee is critically important. Furthermore, matching a team leader with a good mentor is important. Good mentors possess a balance between soft and technical skills, the ability to build relationships, and an understanding of the expectations of the mentees.

*Length of mentorship relationships*: Knowing when to start a mentorship relationship and for how long it should continue is challenging. Lengthy mentorships can lead to procrastination and risk becoming unproductive. General guidance from UJ-BCURE recommends that the focus of the mentorship should be on achieving the goals and objectives set out at the start of the mentorship relationship and not on the timing. Furthermore, mentors and mentees should be mindful of each other's commitments and time constraints.

*Importance of varying the approach of match circumstances*: Having processes in place that provide mentors and mentees with structures and guidance is essential. Guidance was provided by the UJ-BCURE programme with two sets of mentorship guidelines: one for team mentorships and one for individual mentorships (UJ-BCURE Team 2015, 2016a). These documents guided the responsibilities of the mentors and mentees involved in the mentorship relationship. However, the mentorship approach should be adapted to varying circumstances. For example, UJ-BCURE included options

to extend mentorship timeframes (longer than the original six-week relationship for individual mentorships and longer than three months for team mentorships).

The UJ-BCURE programme was donor-funded, which posed challenges to sustainability of the success of the programme as well as limits to the institutionalisation potential. The programme has proactively tracked early signs of sustainable change and sustainability of the mentorship programme. In light of this, UJ-BCURE has made concerted efforts to embed the various mentorship models in a collection of government departments, including an option for mentored government officials to provide mentorship (with internal capacity) to different departments. Furthermore, the early signs of growing independence in EIDM are noticeable with mentees having become less likely to need third-party support in their efforts to increase their use of evidence in decision-making. UJ-BCURE's experience has highlighted the large demand for evidence maps in other government departments. Under the guidance of the team mentorship, the team has successfully adapted the methodology developed by International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) to a South African context and now possesses practical tools, processes, and management knowledge, as well as an internal information technology platform, to produce evidence maps. The team is in a well-established position to develop evidence maps without external support and carries a natural mandate to provide these services to other departments. The learning within the UJ-BCURE programme has pointed to the various options available for institutionalising mentorship models. Different formats of coaching, mentoring, and employee career development are already taking place in various departments. The mentorships can be an extension of current activities, provided there is leadership within departments that supports this. Mentors need some kind of incentive to be involved in a mentorship relationship. Furthermore, practical aspects such as transport costs, Skype calls, and data usage need to be considered. Departments could explore their professional development budgets for this purpose.

## Understanding causality and attribution

UJ-BCURE's mentorships were purposefully designed to deepen EIDM capacity through the direct application of learning. It is not possible to entirely separate the impact that mentorships have had from the influence of workshops attended by mentees. However, through the linked workshop-mentorship programme it has been possible to better understand the extent to which UJ-BCURE capacity building is making a difference.

The mentorships have been popular and the number of mentorships increased drastically over the final year of UJ-BCURE (2016b). In year one of implementation, there were five individual mentorship relationships; in year two of UJ-BCURE there were 17 mentorship relationships; and by August of year three, there were 24 individual mentorship relationships. Mentees also became more diverse in terms of their departmental affiliation as the programme progressed. This diversity, together with the growing demand for capacity building in the use of evidence for decision-making, created the opportunity for UJ-BCURE to expand offers of mentorships to different government departments.

The UJ-BCURE programme has documented incremental changes in the capability of mentees. Mentees have consistently demonstrated capacity to run formal searches on academic databases when searching for evidence. Mentees highlighted that their improved access to research, with one mentee having developed a research strategy for her department and another having conducted a literature review in a more systematic manner. Furthermore, mentees now have the knowledge and skills to co-produce evidence maps using formal evidence synthesis methods. One team mentorship co-produced an evidence map during the programme, and the knowledge and skills enhanced to achieve this are still used after the end of the UJ-BCURE programme. Because of the strengthened capabilities among mentees of the UJ-BCURE programme, there was an increased use of evidence in new policies (for instance, by at least one team mentorship and four long-term individual mentorship individuals) development plans, and implementation plans for new policies during the

programme implementation period. This established wider application of EIDM provides an opportunity to further institutionalise relationships with existing mentor organisations.

Factors that have contributed to the success of the various mentorship models include flexibility in our programme implementation, UJ-BCURE's expertise, and the way in which the mentorship relationships were designed. Each factor is explained further below.

*Flexibility*: The flexibility of the programme has allowed the mentorships to evolve according to the needs of the mentees. The initial piloted timeframe of six weeks could be adopted as a starting point. Furthermore, the tools used to facilitate, guide, and structure the mentorships have been kept broad. This flexibility to adapt to various factors supports successful mentorship relationships. The development of guidelines assisted in ensuring that all mentors and mentees understood what was expected of them. Willingness to refine these guidelines and reduce the bureaucratic burden on participants for pre- and post-mentorship paperwork was also important.

*Leading institutional expertise*: The UJ-BCURE team had extensive evidence synthesis experience and systematic reviews before the start of the programme and from July 2015, the mentorship programme had a dedicated manager, which ensured that the mentorship relationships were successfully supported. UJ-BCURE's reputation, experience, and expertise contributed to the acceptability of the mentorship programme among potential mentees and led to trust in the mentorship models, which was pivotal to build relationships.

*Design of mentorship relationships*: UJ-BCURE's mentorship models have been designed by carefully matching the mentor with a mentee, taking various attributes (such as background, availability, and seniority of position) into account. The programme emphasised the importance of one-to-one mentoring, mentorship-plus visits, and team mentoring for supporting senior civil servants in deepening and applying their EIDM learning. The design of the mentorship models was accomplished through establishing specific outcomes from the outset of a mentorship relationship. This specifying of outcomes not only assisted in ensuring the needs of the mentee were met, but also helped ensure the mentorship relationship still complied with the remit of the UJ-BCURE programme to build capacity in EIDM and support the application of that capacity in real-world settings.

In general, the longevity of individual relationships that have been grown in mentorships seems to support the sustainable application of EIDM in many ways. As trust deepens in the relationships between mentors and mentees, opportunities for establishing new mentorships, piloting team mentorships, and submitting joint funding proposals for future work has snowballed from these existing relationships. Additionally, these mentorship relationships are leading to institutional connections between the mentor's organisation and the mentee's department. The mentorships have led to new, value-adding opportunities for applied learning, including a chance to explore more technical issues in evidence use.

## Conclusion

The depth and quality of evidence used by decision-makers influences the effectiveness of policies. The uptake of evidence in policy-making processes is a priority of the global development agenda. Despite the growing momentum around evidence use, there is a counter-balancing view that research evidence is a relatively minor factor in most policymakers' decision-making (Newman et al. 2013). UJ-BCURE's experience with capacity building through mentorship provides a bridge between these seemingly contradictory viewpoints. The assumption made is that if capacity is built for EIDM, the importance of evidence will be elevated, leading to an increase in the demand for credible evidence. The overall success of the UJ-BCURE mentorship programme can be associated with the fact that the mentorships build EIDM capacity as an evidence pull initiative, instead of an evidence push initiative. UJ-BCURE's findings are in line with the overall findings from the Science of Science Use systematic review which finds reliable evidence that interventions like the mentorship programme which build decision-makers' skills to access and make sense of evidence are effective ways to increase research use by decision-makers (Langer et al. 2016). To be effective in increasing

EIDM, interventions need to simultaneously enhance both the capability and motivation of participants to use research evidence. In UJ-BURE's case, this capability and motivation-building was accomplished through the mentorship-plus visits, the practical orientation workshops, and the application of evidence synthesis skills and real-world policy tasks.

## Note

1. Outcome diary entries systematically record and track incremental changes influenced by the programme.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) under the BCURE Grant: [Grant Number PO6123].

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