Complexities of linking researchers with policymakers in Africa

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Abstract

Research uptake aims to address the gap between research and its potential beneficiaries. It aspires to develop and refine approaches to catching, maintaining and sustaining the attention of target audiences so that knowledge generated through research can be utilized to address clear and present needs. Rather than a one-way flow of information, artfully broadcast from ivory towers dotted across the landscape, research uptake promotes a continuous feedback loop – an interaction between practitioners and researchers that should permeate both national discourse on policy and the shaping of research agendas. This article examines some of the challenges and approaches to research uptake present in developing country contexts through a case study of an intervention in Uganda.

Keywords: research uptake; research evidence; policymaking; academia; Uganda

Key messages

- The lack of engagement between government policymakers and university-based researchers is an acknowledged problem worldwide.

- Various approaches to addressing this lack of engagement have been identified, however very few of these discuss attempts to trial these approaches in the challenging contexts of a developing country.

- This article documents the theory, implementation and impact of a short pilot study that trials research uptake approaches in Uganda, and offers practical ways forward for those attempting similar activities in developing country contexts.

Introduction

The examination and development of theoretical approaches to supporting research-informed policymaking has a long history (Caplan, 1979; Cunningham and Weschler, 2002; Davies, 2004; Argyrous, 2012; Newman, 2014; Oliver *et al.*, 2014b). While material addressing the practicalities of implementing such approaches has been produced (Zussman, 2003; Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Banks, 2009; Oliver *et al.*, 2014a; Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, 2014; US Congress, 2015), there is less material that specifically addresses developing country contexts (Crewe and Young, 2002; Sutcliff and Court, 2005; Court and Young, 2006; Jones, 2011). This represents a

significant gap in current scholarship and practice, as the unique pressures present in developing county contexts mean that many of the lessons applicable to developed countries do not necessarily apply. This article discusses findings regarding such practicalities in Uganda from experiments conducted by the Development Research Uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa (DRUSSA) programme. The initiatives undertaken – to bring Uganda-based academics together with Ugandan government policymakers to address national development priorities with reference to locally produced research – demonstrate initially positive indications for a practical model for future research uptake support structures in developing country contexts. This article reflects upon the realities and challenges of supporting research uptake structures, practices and skills, and examines the relationship between the theory of research uptake and the practicalities of supporting it in a live setting in Uganda.

Barriers to knowledge exchange

Cvitanovic *et al.* (2015) identify a number of critical barriers inhibiting knowledge exchange among academic researchers and decisions-makers, including the inaccessibility of scientific language and the existence of institutional barriers that limit the extent to which researchers and decision-makers can prioritize knowledge-exchange activities. In the case of Africa, the region as a whole greatly increased both the quality and quantity of its research output – albeit from a low base – in the decade 2003–12 (Blom *et al.*, 2015). Yet in many countries, and in many instances across Africa, public policy processes are only weakly informed by research-based evidence, and even less so by research evidence generated by locally based researchers (Blom *et al.*, 2015). In a Joint Call for Action in Kigali, Rwanda (2014), five African governments – those of Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal and Uganda – confirmed the need for specific action to improve the relevance and quality of research from African higher education institutions to address African development goals (HESTI, 2014).

This is a clear indication that quality research produced by African universities is all too frequently insulated from those who could benefit from it – in part by a combination of attitudinal, practical and procedural impediments resident within higher education institutions across a number of countries. Certainly, the challenges faced by Ugandan universities in this respect are many (Muriisa, 2014). The gap between researchers and policymakers is not, however, to be laid solely at the feet of Ugandan researchers and universities (Grobbelaar and Harber, forthcoming). As is common across Africa, the use of evidence in policy formation and decision-making is curtailed by a low capacity for seeking and handling research evidence in government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) (Kirkland *et al.*, 2010). In this sense, while a demand for relevant, locally produced research exists among senior government officials, the MDAs lack regular contact with researchers as well as the capacity to make effective use of research once it has been made available.

Ugandan stakeholders – including academic researchers and policymakers – identified several issues that they believe specifically inhibit the demand for Ugandan-produced research evidence from Ugandan government MDAs (DRUSSA, 2014). They noted that research evidence has a weak influence on policy because political leaders generally do not see academic debate as relevant to contemporary policy challenges. Consequently, although the MDAs typically have research and statistics departments, many do not link well to academia. They tend, for example, to conduct their own surveys rather than seek existing evidence, thereby wasting valuable resources in duplication. Moreover, the skills gaps in MDAs, related to sourcing and engaging with

research evidence, have led to an over-reliance on consultants, who are not typically incentivized to share their expertise and capacity with the MDAs.

These challenges mirror those commonly observed across similar contexts worldwide, where a lack of adequate absorptive capacities for new knowledge, across a range of areas, can pose a challenge for non-academic consumers of research (Becheikh *et al.*, 2010). The very different priorities of politicians and/or policymakers compared to researchers is a perennial issue (in Uganda and throughout the world), as the politicization of issues and attendant time constraints can erode the value attached to rigorous research approaches to policy analysis (Edwards, 2005; Ellen *et al.*, 2011; WHO, 2012; Oliver *et al.*, 2014b). In addition to the vagaries of political influence in the formulation of policy, there exists a gulf in experience and culture. The translation of knowledge and insights from research into operational policy requires close dialogue and consultation between researchers and policymakers. However, these actors inhabit separate worlds. At times they find it difficult to understand one another, in part because they rarely interact.

The lack of, or limited, appreciation of the nature of policymaking compounds the complexity of knowledge-sharing and policy-orientated utilization (Clay and Schaffer, 1984). The relationship between research, policy and practice is complex, multifactorial, non-linear and highly context specific. What works in one situation may not work in another. The development of effective strategies in complex environments is not straightforward. While many policy processes do involve sequential stages – from agenda-setting through decision-making to implementation and evaluation – some stages take longer than others and several may occur more or less simultaneously. Many actors are involved: ministers, parliament, civil servants, the private sector, civil society, the media and, in the development sector, donors – all trying to influence the process and each other (Young and Mendizabal, 2009).

The policy implementation process, as distinct from the policy formation process, is also inherently complicated. This is an often underappreciated and poorly acknowledged factor. Policy formulation and implementation are not – as is often assumed – discrete, successive phases, whereby implementation simply follows the precepts laid down in the preceding formulation. The same factors that influence the formulation of policy also occur in the implementation process. Therefore, the disconnect between the priorities of the researchers and those of the policymakers may lead to outcomes at variance with the results the formulated policy was intended to achieve (Barugahara and Tostensen, 2009). The policy process is intricate and impacted by many internal and external factors. Therefore, for researchers working to impact policy, whether actively or indirectly, an equally multidimensional approach is required (Nguyen, 2014).

With regard to influencing policy outcomes, research is, at best, only one element in the complicated mix of factors and forces behind any significant governmental policy decision. For most governments, most of the time, policies are the outcomes of the bargains and compromises, beliefs and aspirations, and cross-purposes and double meanings of ordinary governmental decision-making. This is why it is usually a mistake to adopt a model that imagines policymaking as a rational, orderly or unitary and linear progression from problem to decision and solution. Close observation of how public policies are actually made and executed leads to a more complicated picture of outcomes that are affected by personality, chance, imperfect understanding and negotiation. To say that research has exerted an influence in a particular case is only to say that the influence of research has counted as one of numerous influences. The thread between cause and effect in a policy decision invariably gets tangled in

the coalitions and contradictions of policy processes in any country. Therefore, while awareness-raising among all stakeholders is a necessary first step towards building a self-sustaining evidence-seeking culture, this heightened awareness must be translated into context-sensitive models of collaboration between researchers and policymakers with a view to achieving a greater uptake of research findings for development goals (Shaxson, 2010).

Previous studies recommend a number of possible, proactive measures that can be taken to support dialogue between researchers and policymakers, leading to increased research uptake. These include the presence of academics at policy forums and on advisory boards, the initiation of collaborative research projects, MDA sabbaticals/placements for academics and targeted professional development in audience-specific communication skills for individual staff and stakeholders (Moore *et al.*, 2009; Oliver *et al.*, 2014b). Each of these approaches theorizes opportunities for both the sharing of knowledge and insights, and the demystification of different researcher and policymaker methods, processes and priorities, for the purpose of facilitating collaboration.

Research uptake models

Cvitanovic *et al.*, (2015) suggest three approaches for overcoming the barriers to knowledge exchange and research uptake as a whole: (1) novel approaches to knowledge exchange (for example, knowledge co-production, knowledge brokers, boundary organizations and embedding science in policymaking or vice versa – see Figure 1); (2) enabling environments; and (3) institutional reforms needed to complement efforts to improve knowledge exchange. The DRUSSA programme experiment adopted the option of using novel approaches to knowledge exchange. It explored the embedding approach, which hypothesizes that embedding professional researchers (locally based academics) in decision-making agencies can improve knowledge exchange among researchers and decision-makers, resulting in an improved culture of seeking effective, evidence-informed decisions.

Figure 1: Knowledge exchange models
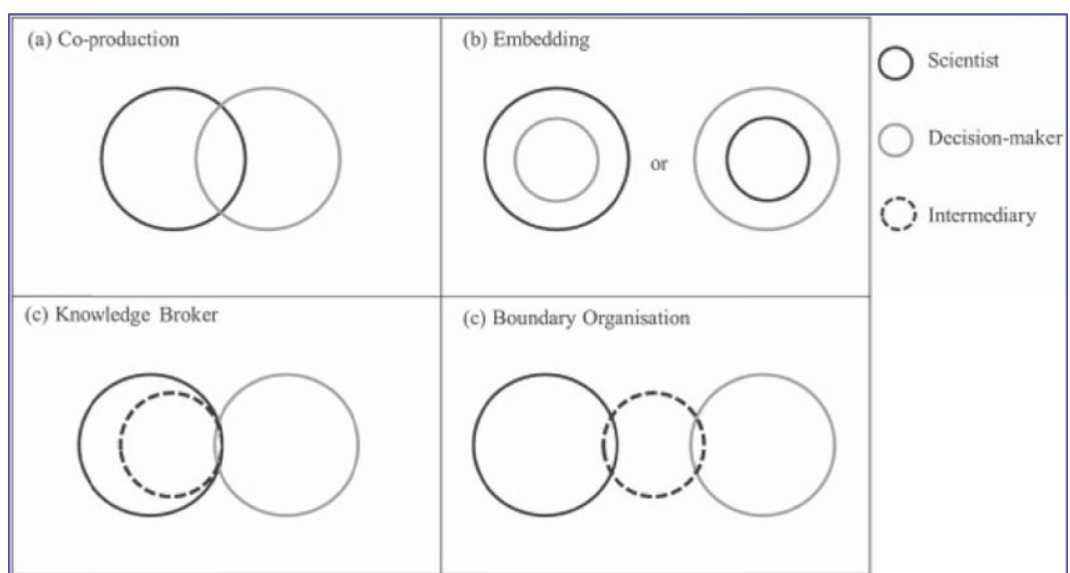
Source: Cvitanovic *et al.* (2015: 29)

Cook *et al.* (2013) argue that embedding professional research within organizations dominated by decision-makers will improve the likelihood that priority knowledge gaps will be answered, with the information quickly spreading among decision-makers and informing decisions. The embedding method adopted for the DRUSSA study represents a straightforward adaptation of existing approaches, in which Ugandan academics were placed within a selection of Ugandan government ministries and their interactions observed and evaluated against a baseline. The approach was expected to lead to increased appreciation of, and understanding and demand for, university-produced development research evidence.

Research methodology

The nature and frequency of interactions between MDA policymakers and university-based researchers were identified as the primary indicators for measuring the impact of this study. Changes in the level of policymaker–researcher interactions were measured using a pre–post evaluation method, using a standardized survey questionnaire that was administered in two waves, conducted between June and August 2014 (prior to the placement of DRUSSA policy fellows) and repeated in July and August 2016 (after the DRUSSA policy fellows had completed their posts). The survey sought to establish: (1) the academic profile and track record of the ministry staff in MDAs with policymaking responsibilities; (2) the confidence and competency levels among staff at various levels to conduct activities relating to the use of research evidence; (3) areas of policy formulation and implementation in which the MDAs had previously been, or were currently, involved; (4) current academic links maintained by the MDA at the institutional level; (5) the level of interest in, and demand for, research evidence by the MDAs; and (6) the formal and informal academic links maintained by MDA staff. The questionnaire was administered to 94 MDA staff in units with responsibilities for policy drafting and human resources management to assist in the selection of appropriate policy fellows and to establish a baseline for measuring quantitative changes in research variables that define policymaker–researcher linkages. The research variables specifically identified included: (1) formal engagement between policymakers and researchers, measured by (i) the frequency of policymaker interactions with professional researchers seconded to the MDAs and (ii) policymaker interactions with university units dedicated to research dissemination; and (2) informal engagements measured by personal academic contacts maintained by policymakers. Uganda has not implemented similar programmes in the recent past, so the changes in parameter values during the reference period for the two waves of surveys could be primarily attributed to DRUSSA activities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with directors, commissioners, heads of departments/sections and staff members at the participating MDAs (Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD), Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) and Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF)) and with the professional researchers (policy fellows) seconded to each ministry from Ugandan universities (policy fellows were drawn from Makerere University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology and Ndejje University). The interviews provided qualitative data on beneficiary perspectives regarding the effect of the policy fellowships on policymaker–researcher linkages and the perceived challenges and changes in evidence-seeking culture within the MDAs. The interviews were conducted face-to-face during the programme completion review.

The findings

The results of the pre–post surveys show an increase in the level of interaction between policymakers and researchers. Crucially, this was not confined to interaction between embedded policy fellows and the ministry staff with whom they engaged directly, but included reports of increased interaction between ministry staff and external university research units, and an increase in the development of personal networks between ministry staff and university-based research personnel. These coincided with a reported increase in the frequency of the use of research evidence to inform ministry work. Although the impact of external factors cannot be discounted, these developments were directly attributed by the participants to the activities of the policy fellows.

Engagements with professional researchers

Figure 2 illustrates the level of policymaker engagement with professional researchers seconded to the MDAs, measured using a frequency scale ranging from 'daily', 'often' (once a week), 'regularly' (once a month), 'infrequently' (less than once a month) to 'never'. The percentage of respondents that reported engagement with professional researchers seconded to their workplaces on a daily basis increased from 0 per cent in 2014 to 18.8 per cent in 2016. The proportion of those reporting no interactions declined from 64 per cent in 2014 to 11.6 per cent in 2016. The relatively short period over which these changes took place supports the effectiveness of an embedding approach in bringing these two categories of policy actors into contact.

Figure 2: Engagements with professional researchers

	Daily	Often	Regularly	Infrequently	Never
2016	18.8	15.9	15.9	18.8	11.6
2014	0	12	8	16	64
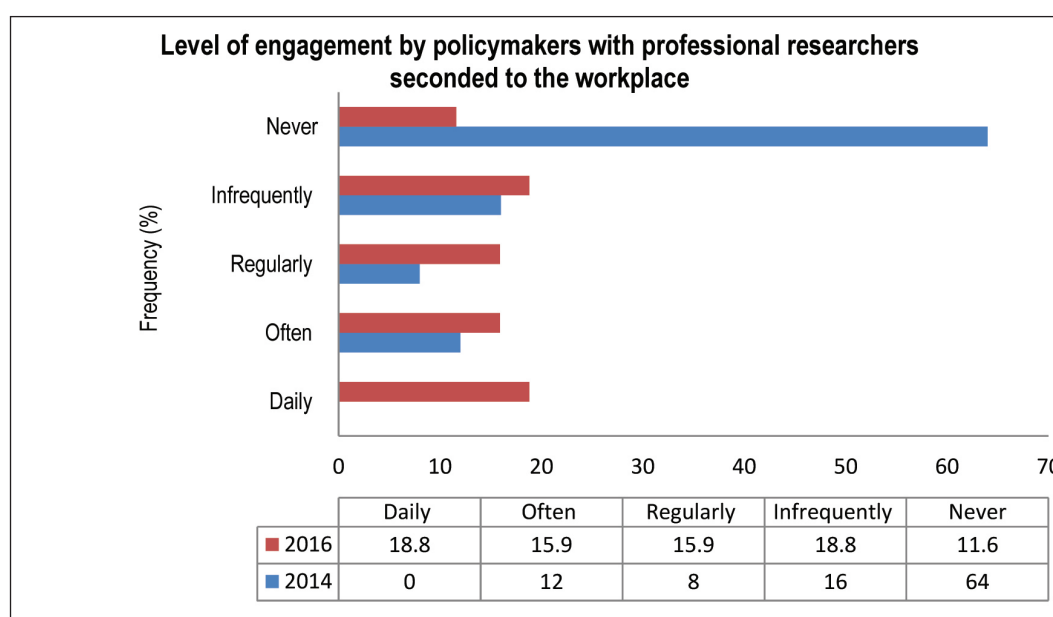
Engagements with university research units

The percentage of respondents that reported engagement between MDA staff and university units dedicated to research dissemination on a daily basis increased from 0 per cent in 2014 to 5.8 per cent in 2016. The percentage of those reporting no interactions reduced from 64 per cent in 2014 to 18.8 per cent in 2016, representing a 45.2 percentage point drop in ministry staff that had never engaged with universities (see Figure 3). The nature of the engagement reported varied widely. In at least one instance

in each ministry, follow-up communication and engagement between researchers and policymakers occurred in relation to a current, specific policy development issue. More generally, policymakers reported a perceived benefit in simply opening potential lines of dialogue with university units dedicated to research in areas relevant to their work. This is reflected in the reported growth over the period of the study in informal engagements between policymakers and academics.
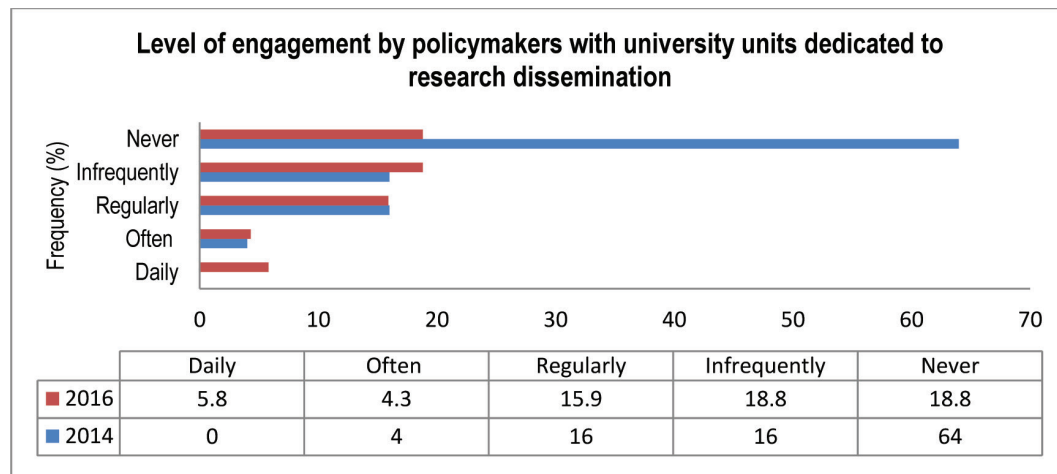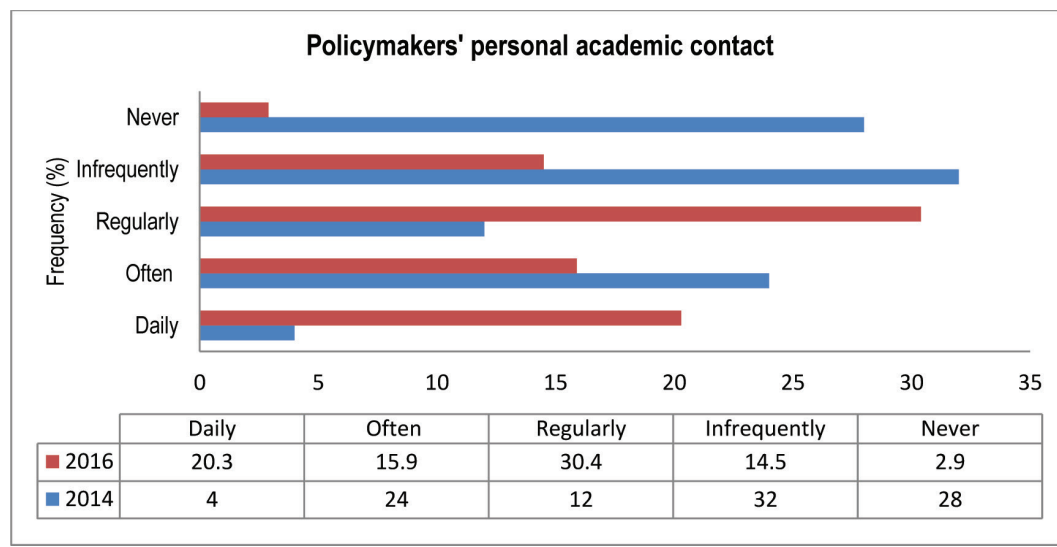
Figure 3: Engagements with university research units

Level of engagement by policymakers with university units dedicated to research dissemination

	Daily	Often	Regularly	Infrequently	Never
■ 2016	5.8	4.3	15.9	18.8	18.8
■ 2014	0	4	16	16	64

Figure 4: Personal academic contact

Policymakers' personal academic contact

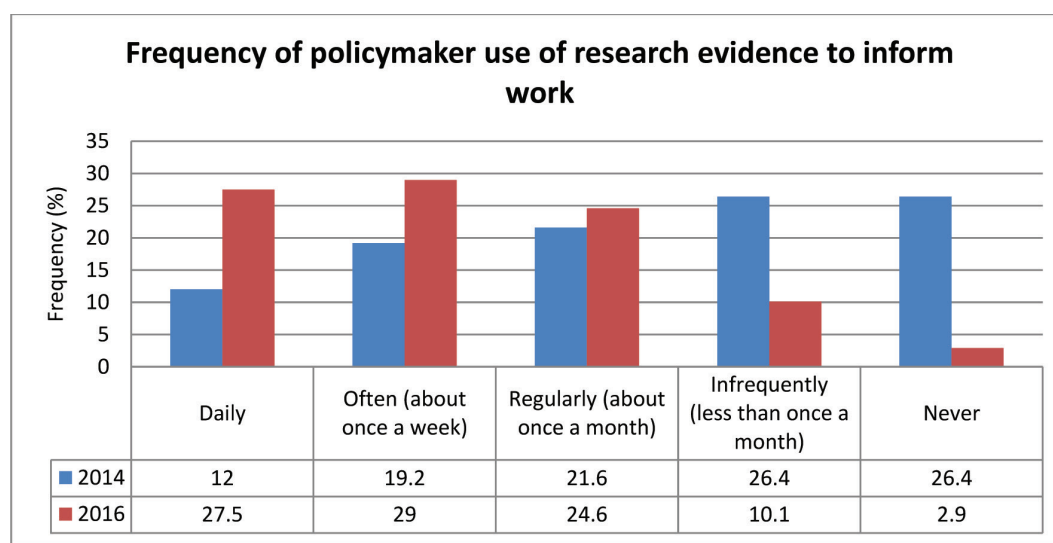|	Daily	Often	Regularly	Infrequently	Never
■ 2016	20.3	15.9	30.4	14.5	2.9
■ 2014	4	24	12	32	28

Engagements with personal contacts at universities

Informal engagements, measured by personal academic contacts, were the most commonly reported form of interaction between policymakers and researchers in 2014, and this remained the case in 2016. These are characterized as basic, non-transactional and embryonic forms of policy–research engagement that are expected to be sustained and formalized in the long term. Further long-term follow-up will be required to evaluate tangible outcomes of this interaction. The proportion of respondents that

reported engagements with personal academic contacts on a daily basis increased from 4 per cent in 2014 to 20.3 per cent in 2016, representing a 16.7 percentage point increase from the baseline. The proportion of those reporting no interactions reduced from 28 per cent in 2014 to 2.9 per cent in 2016, representing a 25.1 percentage point drop in ministry staff that had never engaged with personal contacts at the universities. Figure 4 illustrates the frequency of informal contacts.

Frequency of use of research evidence to inform work

Alongside the increased contact between policymakers and researchers, there was also a reported increase in the frequency of the use of research material to inform work within the participating MDAs. The percentage of those who claimed never to use research evidence to inform their work fell dramatically from 26 per cent in 2014 to just under 3 per cent in 2016; concomitantly, those who reported using research evidence to inform their work more than doubled over the same period (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Frequency of use of research evidence to inform work

Frequency of policymaker use of research evidence to inform work

	Daily	Often (about once a week)	Regularly (about once a month)	Infrequently (less than once a month)	Never
2014	12	19.2	21.6	26.4	26.4
2016	27.5	29	24.6	10.1	2.9

Conclusion

These findings indicate that the three ministries experienced a change to working cultures and established networks that support evidence-based approaches to decision-making, and that these changes occurred in the context of a process of embedding professional researchers within the ministries. Individual testimony of participants directly attributes these changes to engagement with the embedded policy fellows.

It is not certain that these changes will be maintained in the medium and long term. It is unclear if they will endure without further support for the placement of policy fellows. Moreover, the impact of the development of these nascent networks between the policy fellows, policymakers and the wider community of Ugandan academics is currently unknown and would benefit from further study. The strength of any such further study would be increased through the examination of counterfactual examples.

The link between researchers and policymakers in Uganda has evolved over the years with the emergence of contemporary policymaking approaches that promote open and joined-up policy processes (DRUSSA, 2014). Yet several barriers impede full

realization of the role of research evidence in policymaking and policy implementation (Kirkland *et al.,* 2010). Limited interaction and constructive engagement between the policy and research communities remains endemic (Muriisa, 2014; Grobbelaar and Harber, forthcoming). These issues are not unique to Uganda, or to developing countries in general (Becheikh *et al*., 2010). This article has sought to identify effective approaches to addressing these issues in a developing country context, where policymakers labour with limited human, infrastructural and financial resource to access, interpret and effectively incorporate research evidence as part of their work (DRUSSA, 2016). The challenges faced in Uganda will not be quickly or easily overcome. However, it is hoped that the positive findings of this experiment stand as a 'proof of concept' for research uptake approaches in developing country contexts and can encourage the establishment of formal and sustainable links between policymakers and academics in Uganda and more broadly.

Policy implications

The policy and practical implications emerging from the adaptation of established theoretical approaches to supporting research uptake to accommodate practical realities in Uganda are as follows.

An emerging future consideration for the MDAs and partnering universities is to institutionalize a policy fellowship to enable well-defined and long-term collaborations between researchers and policymakers in defining research agenda, framing policy-relevant research questions and utilizing research results in policymaking (Newman *et al*., 2013; Munene, 2016). In that regard, the three ministries stated that the process of formalizing and strengthening their collaboration with universities for continued research uptake through internships, policy fellowships, research partnerships and other mechanisms requires further support through the intensification of legislative and programme interventions (Nath, 2011; DRUSSA, 2016).

Strong support structures need to be in place for the embedded researchers. Particularly in the context of short-term placements, pre-placement induction training is needed to familiarize fellows with ministry processes and structures (Adu, 2015; Kiamba, 2016). There are a number of resources available that could be used to develop such structures (Court *et al*., 2005). In addition to the detailed reports generated by the DRUSSA programme, the Overseas Development Institute has devised a strategy to assist policy entrepreneurs and researchers working to expand the impact of their knowledge on policy, in a method termed the RAPID (Research and Policy Development) Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA). The ROMA helps policy entrepreneurs, researchers and organizations to develop the skills, capacities and networks necessary to understand, engage with and influence policy, with a view to achieving evidence-based policy change through the maximization of the impact of research on policy (Young and Mendizabal, 2009; Young *et al*., 2014).

In terms of support material for policymaker capacity development, the International Network for the Availability of Publications (INASP) has developed a complementary tool called the Evidence-Informed Policy Making Toolkit. It was developed independently over the same period as the current study and is an adaptable suite of resources created to support civil servants and parliamentary staff to use evidence in policymaking in developing countries (Ademokun *et al*., 2016). It focuses on finding, evaluating and communicating evidence, as well as on developing practical implementation plans. The Evidence-Informed Policy Making Toolkit is available for adoption and use by researchers and policymakers, and its use in conjunction with the

approaches documented in this article are deserving of future study for compatibility and efficacy.

Notes on the contributors

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