

Translating Research into Policy: Utilizing Evidence in the Education Sector

This brief looks at how research can shape better education policy—when it’s shared in the right way, with the right people. It explains how evidence products like systematic reviews, toolkits, and evidence gap maps help turn complex research into practical guidance. It also outlines how to track whether evidence is making a difference, why stakeholder engagement matters, and how Policy Influence Plans can help ensure findings reach decision-makers. Finally, it introduces Policy Labs as a hands-on way to test and scale solutions, bringing research and policy together in real-world settings.

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Evidence-Based Decision-Making Products (EBDMPs) in Education

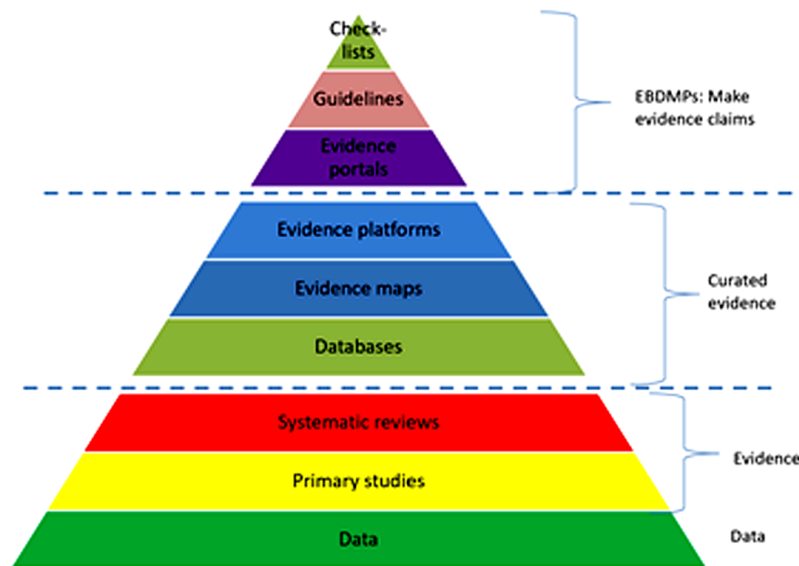
The Role of Evidence Products

Effective education policy depends not just on generating evidence—but on making it usable. Researchers often produce valuable findings, but these don’t always reach decision-makers in a form they can use. **Evidence products** solve this by translating complex research into clear, practical tools that support policy and program decisions.

These products—like toolkits, systematic reviews, and evidence maps—highlight key takeaways, identify knowledge gaps, and recommend actions. Instead of expecting busy policymakers to sift through research papers, evidence products help them focus on what works, where, and for whom.

Think of the evidence ecosystem as a pyramid. At the base are raw data and single studies. As you move up, these are synthesized into reviews and maps. At the top are Evidence-Based Decision Making Products (EBDMPs)—designed to support timely and informed decision-making.

Fig.1: The evidence architecture pyramid



Types of Evidence Products

Here are several types of evidence products that support education policy decisions:

- **Systematic reviews:** Pull together results from multiple studies to offer a reliable picture of what works in a given area.
- **Evidence Gap Maps (EGMs):** Visual tools that show where strong evidence exists—and where more research is needed. These tools can guide funding priorities by pinpointing where new studies are needed.
- **Guidelines and toolkits** Present strategies that have been tested and found effective.

Examples of Evidence Products

- o **The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)** provides a widely recognized [Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#), which presents findings on effective teaching strategies into an accessible format. QRF has developed an [Arabic version of this toolkit](#).
- o **The Youth Endowment Fund Toolkit** compiles evidence on interventions to reduce youth crime, providing policymakers with an overview of interventions that have been tested and proven effective.

- [WHO Parenting Guidelines](#) offer structured recommendations for improving early childhood development and have been adopted in numerous countries to influence policies on parenting classes and early learning interventions.

The fundamental advantage of EBDMPs is their ability to eliminate the need for decision-makers to read primary studies, making research findings more actionable and policy-relevant. By presenting evidence in a structured and digestible way, these products ensure that insights from research translate into meaningful improvements in education policy.

Approaches to Monitoring Policy Influence

The journey from research to policy impact is rarely straightforward. Even when high-quality evidence is available, translating it into meaningful policy changes requires sustained effort. Successful policy influence usually involves multiple actors, negotiation, and ongoing engagement with policymakers. Monitoring these engagements can tell us whether research findings are shaping decisions in practice.

The figure below illustrates the policy influence monitoring (PIM) process used by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). All 3ie grantees were required to develop a Policy Influence Plan (PIP) and report on its progress at least once a year. The PIP outlined the specific policy or practice the research aimed to influence, identified the key decision-makers involved, and described how the research team planned to engage with them.

Fig.2: Monitoring policy influence: the use of 3ie policy influence plan



International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

POLICY INFLUENCE PLAN

The plan outlines the context for, and approach to, policy influence to be adopted for the study. The plan includes identification of at least six key stakeholders who have the potential to influence policy on the basis of the evaluation findings. The plan outlines the nature of the planned interaction between the principal investigators and other project staff and these key stakeholders. The policy-stakeholder engagement plan must be submitted for first tranche payment.

CONTEXT

What is the political/social/cultural/economic environment that could affect both the timing and design of your evaluation and the opportunities for the findings to influence policy?

GUIDELINES

What is the current use of evidence in policy making in the country in general, and in the sector of your study, and the concerned implementing agency, in particular. This section should consider political economy and other social or cultural factors which may affect the chance to influence policy.

Possible resources include:
OECD Political Economy Analysis, www.oecd.org/dac/governance/political-economy/
Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, <http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/political-economy-analysis>; ODI, <http://www.odi.org.uk/programmes/politics-governance/work-political-economy-analysis.asp>

Unlike direct interventions, the effects of policy influence are not always immediate or easy to measure. The process can be complex, often involving gradual shifts in public debate, growing awareness among policymakers, or slow changes in laws and regulations. That's why tracking policy influence calls for a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Key Approaches to Monitoring Policy Influence:

- **Tracking engagement with policymakers:** Record when research findings are shared with government officials, cited in policy documents, or used to shape education reforms. This can include meeting notes, reports, or official citations.
- **Stakeholder surveys and interviews:** Use interviews with policymakers to understand if—and how—research influenced their thinking or decisions. Perception surveys can also help assess how credible and useful they found the evidence.
- **Case studies of policy change:** Highlight real examples where research led to a shift in policy. For instance, the South African Youth Wage Subsidy gained momentum after being discussed in the media and in parliament.
- **Media and public discourse analysis:** Monitor how research is mentioned in news stories, blogs, or social media to gauge its visibility and impact in public and policy conversations.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging stakeholders is essential to turning evidence into policy. It helps align research with real-world priorities, builds trust in the process, and increases the chances that findings will be used and accepted.

Stakeholder roles:

- **Shaping relevant research:** Help define questions that reflect the needs and priorities of decision-makers and communities.
- **Supporting the use of evidence**
 - Interpret findings and place them in local context
 - Build buy-in and trust among decision-makers
 - Encourage community support for evidence-based action
- **Expanding reach and visibility:** Provide access to policy networks, forums, and other spaces where evidence can inform debate and decision-making.

Fig.3: Examples of empowering stakeholders



The use of evidence-based decision-making products (EBDMPs) such as checklists empowers junior staff to course correct working practice of seniors eg nurses and surgeons



Providing workshops for teachers on evidence and evidence-based teaching methods empowers them to think and act on ways to improve their teaching and contribute to educational policy reform.



Training local community members in data collection and analysis on water quality, empowering them to advocate for stricter water pollution controls.

Preparing a Policy Influence Plan

A clear and thoughtful Policy Influence Plan (PIP) helps turn research into real-world impact. Without a focused strategy, even high-quality evidence can be overlooked. A PIP acts as a roadmap—guiding how researchers connect with decision-makers and make sure their findings reach the right people, at the right time.

Developing a Policy Influence Plan

1. **Setting clear goals:** Creating an effective Policy Influence Plan starts with setting clear goals

What policy change are you aiming to support?

Examples might include:

- Increasing investment in teacher training
- Reforming national testing policies

2. **Identifying the key people and groups** who can influence that change

such as:

- Government officials
- Civil society organisations
- Academic institutions
- Media representatives

By defining your goals and audience from the start, you can shape a strategy that connects research to the people who can act on it.

The plan should **name specific individuals**—not just institutions—to ensure targeted and effective engagement.

3. **Choosing the right strategies** to influence policy is just as important.

Some situations call for direct engagement with government officials, while others may benefit from raising public awareness or building support through the media.

Possible strategies include:

- Face-to-face consultations with policymakers
- Policy briefs that clearly summarise research findings
- Opinion articles (Op-eds) and media publications to shape public debate
- Workshops to help policymakers build skills in using evidence effectively

4. **Regular monitoring and review** help keep the Policy Influence Plan relevant and responsive. Setting clear indicators makes it easier to track progress, learn from what's working, and adjust strategies along the way.

A well-designed influence plan helps bridge the gap between research and real-world change—ensuring that valuable insights lead to action, not just sit in reports

Policy Labs: An Innovative Approach to Evidence-Based Policymaking

What are Policy Labs?

Policy Labs are collaborative spaces where policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders work together to design and test policy solutions in real-world settings. They promote innovation by combining evidence with hands-on, participatory decision-making.

Unlike traditional top-down approaches to policy, Policy Labs focus on:

- **Inclusive engagement** – bringing in diverse voices to create practical, grounded solutions
- **Experimentation** – trying out different ideas to see what works
- **Iteration** – refining and improving strategies based on real-world feedback and results

How Do Policy Labs Work?

Policy Labs follow a structured, hands-on process for turning challenges into tested solutions:

1. **Define the Problem**

Work with stakeholders to identify key policy issues.

Example: High rates of student absenteeism in secondary schools.

2. **Explore and Analyse**

Conduct research and consult experts to understand root causes.

Use behavioural insights to uncover what's preventing change.

3. **Design Policy Solutions**

Run creative workshops to brainstorm and prototype possible interventions.

Make sure ideas align with existing education policies and systems.

4. **Test and Evaluate**

Pilot promising solutions in real-world settings.

Use methods like Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) to assess what works.

5. **Scale What Works**

Refine effective interventions and apply them more broadly. Then feed insights into national or regional policy frameworks for lasting change.

Fig.4: How policy labs work

Table 3: Methods and tools used by policy labs

THEORY		
INQUIRY	Analysing the problem Behavioural bottlenecks analysis, Data discovery cards, Data science, Evidence safari, Film & sound, Pattern recognition, Personas, Perspective cards, Policy canvas, Portraits, Priority grid, Stakeholders map, Target group, User decision journey, User segmentation;	Creating solutions 'Backstage' policy levers, Brainstorming, Concept posters, Crowdsourcing, Explore your ideas, Future scenarios and speculations, How might we?, Idea sketch sheets, Ideas days/'jams', Ideation sheets, Logic models, Role cards, Service blueprints, Speculative design;
	Redefining the policy issue 5 whys, Change cards, Hopes & fears cards, Project focus, Stakeholders map, Target group, Theory of change;	ACTION
	Exploring the situation Behavioural bottlenecks mapping, Cultural probes, Design ethnography, Desk research, Film ethnography, Interviews, People shadowing, Service safaris, User journeys;	
	Testing solutions Desktop prototyping, Experience prototyping, Experiments (including Randomised Control Trials), Proto - & provotypes, Serious games.	
REALITY		

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on [Andrews, 2015](#); [MindLab, 2017](#); [Kumar, 2012](#) and web content

By following this approach, Policy Labs create a space where policy ideas are shaped by evidence—and tested in practice—before being rolled out at scale.

Policy Labs and the Government:

Policy Labs can have different relationships with government, depending on how they are set up and funded:

- **Government-controlled**
Fully run and funded by a government department or public agency.
- **Government-led**
Operated within a government body but only partially funded by government, with some external support.
- **Government-enabled**
Run by non-governmental organisations but largely funded through government contracts.

- **Independently-run**

Operated by organisations in the private or nonprofit sectors, without government funding. These units are most similar to think tanks that aim to influence public sector innovation and reform through independent research, advocacy, and the promotion of new ideas.

Table.1: Advantages and Challenges of Policy Labs

Advantages and opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Small and flexible, allowing to rapidly design and test innovative solutions ▶ Participatory approach enables engagement in policy making ▶ Innovative/design led approach enables exploration of alternative solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Scaling innovations across broader government systems; change in political leadership can reduce support ▶ May lead to disillusionment among participants if results disappointing or policy changes not realized ▶ Some face constrained budgets, limited staffing and insufficient capacity

Further Reading:

White, H. (2019). The twenty-first century experimenting society: the four waves of the evidence revolution. *Palgrave Communications*, 5(1), 1-7. Available at:
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