

Driving continuous learning as a grant maker

Evidence review

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In partnership:



Institute for Voluntary
Action Research



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Authorship and acknowledgements

This review has been written by Rebecca Moran with Eliza Buckley and Richard Jenkins.

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About this report

In April 2019, Comic Relief commissioned the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) to undertake an evidence review in order to help it reflect on two questions:

- **What and how do other funders learn from their work, and how do they use this learning to improve?**
- **How do funders encourage and support a focus on ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees?**

Having undertaken the review, Comic Relief and IVAR felt there was useful learning for others working in trusts and foundations, particularly within evaluation or learning roles. This report is based on a literature review and 11 telephone interviews with key informants.

The literature review focused on the topics of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in the context of philanthropy, as well as the idea of adaptive management. It included a range of sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, grey literature, organisational briefing papers and blogs. In total, we explored just under 100 sources (see Appendix One). Direct contact was made with Grantmaking for Effective Organizations (GEO) and the Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI), who kindly shared a number of internal and external documents related to the review questions. We also sought several resources from the Center for Effective Philanthropy and content from both the US and UK Evaluation Roundtables¹ has been included where appropriate.

Our sample of key informants comprised six independent funders and four voluntary sector infrastructure organisations. They were selected to provide insights into how independent trusts and foundations think about – and respond to – topics and issues related to the two review questions and to understand the perspective of a selection of infrastructure/support organisations working in the MEL field. The majority of interviews were with individuals in a MEL role, so the perspectives of Chief Executives and Grant Managers or Officers are not included in this review.

Terminology

GEO	Grantmaking for Effective Organizations
IPA	Innovations for Poverty Action
IVAR	Institute for Voluntary Action Research
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning

We use the terms 'grantee', 'grant holder' and 'funded organisation' interchangeably to refer to the organisations that UK trusts and foundations financially support.

¹ The Evaluation Roundtables are networks of foundation leaders in the UK and US and Canada aimed at improving evaluative and learning practices in foundations, for more visit www.ivar.org.uk/getsupport/the-evaluation-roundtable/

Foreword

Comic Relief has always had a strong focus on monitoring, evaluation and learning in the work that we fund and in our own practice. With the launch of our new strategy in 2018, this has been re-emphasised in our ambition to be a truly learning-led organisation and fund organisations that are similarly committed to continual learning and improvement. For the Evaluation and Learning team in Comic Relief, this has prompted a lot of thinking about what we actually mean by learning – about what, for whom, on whose terms and how – and how our processes and approaches can best align to this. To help inform our thinking we commissioned this report from the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) to see what other funders were doing around this.

This IVAR publication provides a range of valuable insights, practices, challenges and ways of thinking for funders. But it has also highlighted the emergent nature of much of this work in the sector; ‘learning’ has now become an almost ubiquitous word thrown about by many funders and charities and as a result has become increasingly vague in terms of what it actually means for a funder, for those they fund and, crucially, the relationship between the two.

For thinking about Comic Relief’s own internal learning processes, what has stuck out for me in this report is the importance of focus and clarity in organisational learning ambitions for a funder. Whether you have the relevant scale and focus to be ‘buying’ specific outcomes from your grantees, or whether you are more interested in supporting the organisations who work within your set of broader issue areas, better articulating the learning priorities that match your focus as a funder would help resolve a lot of the cross-purpose discussions about learning. It would also provide a clearer basis for that holy grail of funder collaboration. This report also highlights valuable examples of properly embedded day-to-day practices, values and leadership within funders to ensure learning is a shared, meaningful process as opposed to a set of ad hoc products produced by MEL ‘experts’.

In terms of supporting learning for those we fund, this report provides a useful challenge for us and other funders – if we are serious about supporting learning (as opposed to proving effectiveness in ‘our’ funded project), we need to think beyond indicators and outcomes and data collection methods. Indeed such a focus may simply atomise or destroy any coherence of learning across that organisation’s work as it struggles to juggle pockets of very different monitoring and evaluation practice. We instead need to consider those organisational cultures, capacities and processes that enable an organisation to value and use learning. Without those, a funder’s focus on ‘learning’ will simply put it alongside other things that organisations have to do to keep the funder happy. The report shows how the power dynamic of the grant maker/grantee relationship is critical here, and how what a funder wants to learn can lead to very different focuses in how ‘learning’ is approached and supported for funded organisations. So alignment of interests between a funder and those they fund is essential to really push forward learning and adaptation at an organisational and sector level – whether that alignment is on very specific outcomes, or on the practice of being learning-led (and recognising that what you each want to learn might be different).

Finally, there is a useful note of caution that we are taking out of this report – these things take time! To do this right, and get to where we want to be, we are going to have to be patient, strategic and collaborative both internally and externally and we look forward to working with other funders and funded organisations on this exciting journey.

Jake Grout-Smith

Evaluation and Learning Lead, Comic Relief

1. Continuous learning – grant-making's new frontier?

A shift is taking place in the UK funding world. Learning is emerging as a key element of contemporary grant-making. In 2019, we (IVAR) were commissioned by Comic Relief to review a range of evidence – and engage with other funders and infrastructure organisations – to explore two main questions:

- What and how do other funders learn from their work, and how do they use this learning to improve?
- How do funders encourage and support a focus on ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees?

The day-to-day practices we discovered are ahead of much available research we found through our literature review. To date, research has largely focused on measuring and demonstrating outcomes rather than on learning as a continuous, adaptive process.

1.1 What's driving the shift?

First, there seems to be a greater willingness among funders to question their own approach, challenge their biases and reflect on the counterfactual. This seems to come from a greater recognition that current accountability frameworks can force funded organisations into a box where they must prove their success rather than learn from the moments when things don't turn out as expected. And things often don't turn out as expected – not because organisations have 'failed', but because they are working in complex and uncertain environments where things are changing all the time. In these circumstances, success depends largely on the grantee's ability to adapt to those changes. So, **the second major driver for a new emphasis on continuous learning is recognition of the need to embrace ongoing adaptation.** In traditional grant-making, by the time the evaluation report is delivered, it's too late. As one interviewee explained: *'the application of learning to improve project implementation ... is at the heart of adaptation'*. Grant-makers are becoming more explicit about the focus of their learning in relation to the type of funder they are, the drivers/constraints they have and the capacity this requires.

If organisations need to adapt, and funding and funders need to change with them, what are the insights and practices that help, and what can funders do to ensure that learning (their own and that of funded organisations) is supported and not hindered? This is what we set out to find through this review.

1.2 Driving continuous learning in foundations

This review reinforces much of what we already know about organisational change – that it depends on leadership, that culture is key, that it takes a range of everyday practices to make aspiration a reality and that it requires resources. But insights also emerged that specifically apply to making the shift to continuous learning in grant-making organisations.

Leadership that shows curiosity and incentivises learning

If learning is a priority, things change at an organisational level because Chief Executives and Trustees are curious and incentivise this within their staff team. At the same time, learning is most effective when organisations are clear about what questions motivate them and it is embedded in strategy and practice. As one funder observed: *'honing in on some questions you want to answer is important ... otherwise, you could have a million different interesting questions'*. Generally, we found funders are interested in varying combinations of:

- How to set more realistic goals and outcomes for their learning
- Making more time for 'So what?' questions
- Understanding or gathering evidence about existing or emerging problems in society
- Ensuring their financial assets are used in the most useful way
- Enabling grantees to achieve outcomes

A funder's focus and purpose for learning will shape:

- The questions being asked
- The type of knowledge and data that is required and valued
- The methods used to collect and gather data
- The balance funders strike between prioritising their own learning needs with supporting grantees to learn
- Where in the decision-making process data and evidence is used
- The degree to which data is collated and shared, and with whom

Organisational culture that is compatible with, and provokes, reflection

Creating spaces for honest reflection and appraisal is important. So is embracing organisational norms and behaviours that build learning habits into an organisation's day-to-day routine and practices. We discovered that knowing what your organisation wants to learn about is crucial.

Acquiring new skills and capacity

There is no single way to arrange learning: it may need a team, a dedicated individual or it may be shared across an organisation. However, responsibility for learning is everyone's task. It needs time and space – at decision points, throughout the organisation and throughout the year. We found that, where there was a dedicated staff member or team, they needed both facilitation skills and an analytical ability to be able to frame the right probing questions that would get people thinking while also *'...supporting the range of different parties to be able to unpack what is happening'*.

Valuing a range of information and knowledge gathering techniques and sources

If learning is continuous and embedded, grant makers need a range of information and knowledge-gathering techniques and sources to take the step back required to gain insight and perspective. Practitioners we spoke to underlined the importance of thinking critically about collecting, coding and storing data to be able to identify and respond to trends in grant-making practice and the implications they have on the organisations that are funded. Alongside knowledge management tools (databases, staff directories, blogs, intranets, learning logs and so on), many spoke of the huge value of taking into account the experience and intelligence acquired by Grants Managers through their relationships with grantees. Continuous learning means finding ways to ensure this tacit knowledge is valued and used.

The following practices were highlighted as useful catalysts for learning:

- Regular reviews, including ongoing 'learning conversations' and end-of-grant reviews
- Regular reflective periods, e.g. every six months
- Collective consideration of new evidence and research
- Board papers
- Publications to share data and findings

There was strong recognition that learning was evolutionary and incremental. It means making a commitment to ongoing shared reflection and being able to sit with emergent issues without rushing to conclusions.

Advice and reflections

1. Be clear about the purpose of learning within the organisation and how it will be used.
2. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.
3. It takes time to embed the conditions required to support organisational learning.
4. Learning takes time and is an iterative process.
5. Don't try to do too much too quickly and be aware of people's capacity to take on new information at any one time.
6. Effective learning is about being responsive to need – at times it may be messier, and more unstructured, than at others.
7. Review data coding and data storage systems regularly to minimise bias; balance the need to structure with allowing themes to emerge from data.

1.3 Encouraging and supporting grantees to learn

Perhaps one of the most radical consequences of the shift towards continuous learning is what it means for the relationship with grantees, as it raises the question of whether and how funders can resource grantees to learn, as well as how they structure the relationship in terms of everyday grant management practices and accountability. We took the opportunity to explore these questions and consider how evaluation and reporting practices will need to be reframed if, as our research suggests, there is a move from 'buying services' to 'supporting adaptation'.

Organisational capacity and culture

Practically, funders need to be realistic about grant holders' capacity to learn and their ability to influence this. Grant holders face the same issues as funders – such as organisational leadership and culture, internal capacity and capability and what systems and processes will support learning – as well as having to deal with the dynamics created by resource dependency.

Leadership and culture

Funders can boost organisations' capacity through funding, but they can't control culture, so there are important lessons about who funders choose to fund: *'if [learning] is not set as an organisational priority, it is going to go nowhere'*. On the other hand, faced with survival *'learning can feel like a luxury'* for hard-pressed organisations, and much of the information will be held by those 'doing the job' who may feel they don't have time to record it. Funders can help by not only resourcing organisations to collect information and data, but also ensuring they have the capacity to reflect and make use of it, and actively demonstrating that they value this.

This may not mean creating lots of infrastructure. As one informant observed: *'a small organisation that doesn't have a lot of resource and doesn't call it [monitoring evaluation and learning], is just [being] a reflective organisation'*.

Power dynamics

There is a risk that 'learning' becomes another thing that grant holders feel they need to demonstrate, and something that might create tension if it's not what other commissioners or funders are interested in. Funders need to be clear about whether they seek to support 'learning' for themselves or for the funded organisation. Having better recognised what their learning interests are, funders also need to recognise the implications this has on the learning relationships they can develop with organisations. Data-driven outcome learning across a cohort of grantees, for example, will look very different from a focus on learning how to support grantees' organisational capacity regardless of specific outcomes.

An important caution stems from the focus of the grant maker. Are funders genuinely concerned with the organisation and its capacity to learn or just the project they are funding and 'proving' its success? In a market where many organisations are trying to differentiate themselves by offering a model that 'works', it can be difficult for them to feel safe enough to share with a funder that things have not turned out as expected, even when it's the sort of failure that leads to learning. Organisations need to question whether they need – or indeed, want – funders to support their learning. But there is also a significant onus on funders to genuinely demonstrate their commitment to learning, both in the tone they use and in the way they create and maintain trust to balance power dynamics. These aspects will be felt by the grant holder in the nature of the support offered and the way in which the funder manages the grant.

Offering support

As already mentioned, one way funders can support organisations' learning is by acknowledging that real learning requires more resource and time, and that it costs more than simply gathering and reporting monitoring data. It is also important to be realistic about the length of grants designed to support learning, particularly if the focus is on organisational capacity to learn rather than individual project learning.

But the most significant shift that comes with a focus on learning is ensuring that the grant holder can change course if needed during the grant period.

We found that much current practice and thinking around 'funding plus' is relevant here – in particular, the offer of support to build grantee monitoring and evaluation capacity. A focus on learning also gives significance to 'funding plus' approaches that emphasise the health of an organisation as a whole: *'The best impact support links analysis to organisational culture and strategy ... building a wider culture of learning, rather than suggesting organisations can reach a perfect impact measurement destination'.*

Funders can also provide opportunities to share and facilitate learning. But this requires time, resource, careful facilitation and relinquishing their own agenda: *'If you're committed to learning [as a funder] you've got to recognise that it's not always going to be the stuff that you care about that people will want to learn about'.*

Reframing relationships and accountability

If the shift from demonstrating outcomes to continuously adapting to change is a key driver for learning, then current monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems will need to be reimagined. As one participant said: *'If we think progress reporting is helping organisations learn, it is not.'*

When learning is a central concern, 'accountability' means holding organisations accountable not just for how the money was spent, but for learning too. It means that, aside from the basic requirements of organisations demonstrating to funders and stakeholders that they are using money wisely, any information and data collected must support practice-based learning. We found that learning and accountability can be complementary goals. Relevant insights on aligned reporting include the need for funders to be mindful and proportionate in relation to the information they collect from organisations.

However, once learning is taken on board, funders need to rethink the meaning and measures of 'success' that lie at the heart of current accountability frameworks. So, instead of asking about what happened, they should ask how things went and what learning took place. While high-level outcomes may remain constant, other indicators and methods may need to change as the intervention is delivered.

Putting that into practice is not easy. It also places further emphasis on the importance of relationships that can take account of individual circumstances rather than trying to ensure all organisations fit into the same neat boxes. Relationships that focus on learning can be more intense and may not always be possible or appropriate. However, *'shifting the focus to prioritise learning questions ... can change the conversation to one that is more open, fluid and potentially, more honest'.*

It's important to note as well that this emphasis on the relationship means that funders must be prepared to be held accountable for using any information gathered for the purposes of improvement.

Mutuality

Our exploration of accountability in the context of learning raised the mutual nature of the grant holder/grant maker relationship in a new way. When both are learning, there is a greater recognition of equality in the relationship. Participants in our review also noted that, given the risk of power imbalances distorting grantee

learning, it is important to discover and build on grantees' own learning needs, and find areas where their learning interests coincide, particularly around benefits for beneficiaries.

Advice and reflections

1. Develop relationships that are based on trust and mutual interest, and encourage honest and open dialogue.
2. Reframe accountability and learning within monitoring and evaluation frameworks and recognise that they are complementary objectives.
3. Give funding that creates space for strategic reflection and development as well as resource for monitoring and evaluation activity.
4. Develop a nuanced approach to learning relationships across a varied grants portfolio.
5. Use 'funding plus' mechanisms to invest in organisations.
6. Redesign reporting to encourage reflection and learning on both sides.
7. Create opportunities to share and facilitate learning between grantees and other stakeholders.

1.4 Final remarks

You can't make people learn. That is true both for foundations and those they fund. There is a shift among funders and commissioners from purchasing results to becoming backers of trusted partners who are intrinsically motivated to improve their own practice. We found that much of the way this is done is still in development. However, if this adjustment – from proving to improving – signals part of a wider change in mindset, then it is likely to mean an evolution in funders' own skills, as they share power with, and are held accountable by, those closest to the action. That has an impact on funders' decisions, not just about the organisations they fund but also the people they recruit as Grant Managers and Trustees, and on how they talk about themselves to stakeholders, regulatory bodies and the public. We'll continue to track and feedback changes, but we suspect that, over time, this might mean turning much of the current model on its head.

2. Learning in foundations

Organisational learning is a hallmark of flexible, responsive and impactful organisations.²

In this section, we explore what the review findings tell us about what and how funders learn from their work – and how they use this learning to improve practice. The findings cover a range of issues related to learning in philanthropy, learning organisations and strategic learning. Where appropriate, we use anonymised examples from our key informant organisations as case studies to illustrate the findings.

Learning is a topic that continues to concern many in the philanthropic sector, particularly due to the role it plays in supporting organisations to adapt and respond to achieve their organisational goals. In 2019, GEO published the ‘Learning in philanthropy’ guidebook and *The Foundation Review*, a key journal in the field, dedicated its March edition to the topic of learning. Ensuring that money and time is being invested in the most effective ways has always been a priority for philanthropy. This has led to considerable interest in the best ways to gather monitoring data around outputs, outcomes and impact, and evaluating how and why different services or interventions work, for whom, and in what contexts.³ Nevertheless, the sector continues to explore how funders make best use of the information they collect and how they can ensure that it is used to improve everyday practice.

The literature on ‘learning organisations’ and ‘strategic learning’ has drawn attention to and explored the range of conditions, practices and techniques that support funders to enable and apply learning.

[A learning organisation can be understood as one that is] skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.⁴

Strategic learning is the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches – including evaluation – to inform decision making about strategy.⁵

² Taylor, A. and Liadsky, B. (2018) ‘Achieving greater impact by starting with learning: How grantmakers can enable learning relationships at the grant application stage’, p. 2.

³ See, e.g. Charities Evaluation Services (2010) *Does your money make a difference?: Good practice in monitoring and evaluation for funders*, London: CES.

⁴ Garvin (1993) cited in IVAR (2017) *Learning in responsive grant-making: A look at the literature on learning organisations*, London: IVAR, p. 5.

⁵ Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2011). *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation

Specifically, four factors continue to be highlighted as important:

1. **Organisational management and leadership:** e.g. modelling and rewarding learning behaviours; releasing resource in support of learning cultures; and embedding learning into strategic processes and decision-making
2. **Organisational culture:** e.g. the values, norms and daily behaviours that enable individual and collective learning
3. **Knowledge management practices:** e.g. systems and practices related to the acquisition, creation, storage and transfer/sharing of different forms of knowledge within the organisation
4. **Organisational resources:** e.g. the role, function and skills required of grant-making professionals – both MEL and programme staff – as well as how those resources are being used to support learning⁶

2.1 Organisational leadership and management

Organisational leadership and management play a crucial role in supporting and enabling internal learning:

... top-down support for organizational learning was one of the most frequently identified necessities for success in organizational learning. Within this category, three subcategories emerged: visible and active support for organizational learning; allocation of organizational resources, such as staff, time, incentives, and funding; and communicating clear goals and a vision for organizational learning that aligns with the organization's goals.⁷

Leadership and management help to articulate the value of learning in an organisation and ensure that it is appropriately resourced and rewarded, and that organisations hold themselves to account for acting on, and responding to, learning.

A lot of it comes from the CEO. They are very, very explicit about how key evaluation and learning is to what we are able to achieve as an organisation. There is never anything we do that doesn't go anywhere ... we always reflect back on the last meeting and some of the implications we discussed for our work and look at how we have followed through on some of those things.
Key informant, funder

Management and decision-making structures also affect the extent to which learning feeds into strategic decision-making.⁸ Some of the funders in this review have mechanisms in place to bring thematic learning to the attention of funding committees and Board members to ensure it is embedded within decision-making. However, finding space and time for this within the day-to-day focus of making funding decisions can be a significant challenge.

The risk appetite of leadership and management – and the accountability and performance mechanisms they choose to have in place – also influence the type of

⁶ See, e.g. IVAR (2017) op. cit. 5; GEO (2019) *Learning in Philanthropy: A guidebook*, Washington: GEO; Leahy S. K., Wegmann, S. and Nolen, L. (2016) 'Through the looking glass: Foundation Evaluation and Learning and the Quest for Strategic Learning', in *The Foundation Review*, vol 8 (5), pp. 22-37; Chubinski J., Adcock, K. and Sprigg, S. (2019) 'Challenges and Opportunities in Philanthropic Organizational Learning: Reflections From Fellow Grantmakers', in *Foundation Review*, vol 11(1), pp. 62-78.

⁷ Chubinski et al. (2019), op. cit. 7, p. 65.

⁸ Ibid.

learning opportunities possible.⁹ One of the informants emphasised the importance of signalling to grant officers that learning was as important as other performance measures.

What we need is to put more value on it ... I think [the Grant Managers] value it but they also think that it is time away from the things that they're judged on which is still about how much money they're spending and how quickly they're moving applications through the system.

Key informant, funder

In an address to the GEO Learning Conference in May 2019, Tanya Beer noted that Trustees play a particular role in incentivising learning, through their choices about the level of certainty expected from staff and the degree to which 'expert knowledge' is required in fairly technocratic decision-making structures.¹⁰ She suggested that some ways to overcome this include:

- **Altering the concept of 'performance and accountability'** to ensure that action based on learning is noticed and rewarded
- **Leaders and managers setting more realistic outcomes and goals** – what Tanya refers to as '*right-sizing expectations to outcomes that are more tightly in your sphere of control*' – so that interventions or strategies are not prematurely pulled, or inappropriately judged, simply because the initially intended level of progress has not been reached
- **Making more time for 'so what' – as opposed to 'what' – questions at key decision-making points**, encouraging staff to use their knowledge and insights to answer meaningful questions rather than simply describing what is taking place

Just those handful of small tweaks can really start to shift the kinds of conversations that the board has in that space and signal to staff that, in fact, what it means to be an effective foundation in a complex change situation is not that you hit what you said you'd hit when you predicted you would hit it two years ago, when you proposed that strategy. But that you are actually an effective observer, a navigator, and a responder to system dynamics as you do the work.¹¹

Some of the funders examined in this review are adopting these behaviours in different aspects of organisational practice. Case study 1 no longer sets targets for their grants; Case study 2 is open to reviewing and amending outcomes during grant terms; and Case study 4 is clear that 'impact' is not the only way to judge performance. Instead, they place intrinsic value on '*maintaining attention on an issue*', even if it seems intractable.

⁹ GEO (2019), op. cit. 7, p. 78.

¹⁰ Beer, T. (2019) *Realigning foundation trustees to incentivise learning*, Washington: Center for Evaluation Innovation

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

The purpose of learning, and the way it is thought about within foundations, plays a role in shaping organisational learning practices. Our findings suggest that three broad purposes underpin foundations' learning practices:

1. **To understand or gather evidence about existing or emerging problems in society:** where this is the case, we have seen funders taking account of the external context, as well as thematic knowledge and expertise (e.g. commissioning research or hiring specialists) in their learning processes, to help them reflect on how to adapt or refine funding priorities (see Case studies 1 and 5).
2. **To ensure that financial assets are directed in the most useful way:** in these cases, programme evaluations are often prioritised (see Case study 7) and/or funders are finding ways to identify patterns and trends within their current funding portfolios to learn more about how and when different funding arrangements are most successful (see Case studies 1 and 2).
3. **To enable grantees to achieve/deliver outcomes:** some funders are finding ways to reflect on their own grant-making practices, and the additional support they provide grantees, to learn more about how their interactions with grantees can help those organisations to succeed in meeting their outcomes (see Case study 2). Here, funders are also using their monitoring, evaluation (particularly developmental/formative approaches) and reporting processes to ensure that programmes have access to data and evidence that they can use, and be encouraged to reflect on, in order to adapt programmes and interventions over time (see Case studies 6 and 8).

Depending on the purpose, funders are then using this learning to improve or adapt four areas of their work:

- **Grant-making strategies:** the who, the what and the how
- **Interaction with grantees/partners:** e.g. rethinking reporting structures or the types of conversations held with grantees
- **'Funding plus' offer:** includes thinking critically how a funder can add value to a field
- **Knowledge management practices:** e.g. improving data collection, coding and storage mechanisms in alignment with purpose or strategic questions

In practice, the purposes outlined above often overlap. Learning about the best way to work with grantees to enable them to achieve or deliver their outcomes and/or understanding more about the problems in society that grantees are trying to respond to will arguably help ensure that financial assets are being directed in the most useful way. This helps explain the variety of practice that this review found across participating funders and emphasises the importance of clarity of purpose when it comes to understanding the most appropriate learning activities for a given context.

Case study 1

Grant-making

- Total grants awarded (2018/2019): 315 grants totalling £36.1 million
- Funding priorities: six strategic funding priorities
- Accountable to: Board of Trustees

Purpose of learning

- *'To fulfil our strategic purposes as effectively as we can' by understanding what is happening in the fields and sectors we fund, and gathering and reflecting on information about our own performance and effectiveness*

Organisational leadership and management

- Publicly committed to the value of collective learning: *'We believe that learning is a collective effort ... we support grantees to collect, share and use evidence, to test new approaches and to evaluate and improve their practice ... [we support a] reciprocal environment of knowledge exchange and support a transparent approach to philanthropy'.*
- Organisational strategy plays a strong role in determining what the learning questions are, and therefore how the evidence and data are analysed. For example, the strategic objectives do not generally lend themselves to aggregating grantees' data about impact.
- There is a recognition that learning behaviours and skills need to be modelled and acknowledged by management *'... so that people get the message that this is something the organisation values and appreciates'.*
- The Director of MEL forms part of the leadership team, ensuring that evidence and learning has a voice at the most senior level in the executive.

Organisational culture

- Routinely pauses and reflects across different teams, including the senior leadership team and the grant-making panels. For example, it recently presented a paper on cultural democracy to a grant-making panel. *'It wasn't a decision-making moment ... it was just that opportunity to learn and think about what the possible implications might be [for future funding]'.*
- Values staff knowledge and expertise. For example, at the end of each grant period, Grant Managers are asked to reflect on the main things that have been learnt that relate to the organisation's own practice.
- The MEL team works closely with the grant-making team, so the process of reflection and learning is seen to be everyone's responsibility: *'[The team is] there to facilitate the learning ... but, in a way, it's everyone's responsibility ... it is not the evidence and learning team doing something on its own and then presenting stuff'.*

Knowledge management practices

- Invests in a range of data/evidence sources, including: commissioned research and evaluations; desk-based research; grantee perception survey; grant-making database; end-of-grant conversations.
- Identifies critical junctures at which to pause and reflect on data and evidence. For example, the MEL team facilitated a period of reflection within individual teams following the results of the grantee perception survey.
- Undertakes routine analysis of the grant-making database to better understand grant-making practice, e.g. to answer questions such as *'Are we attracting new applicants?'.*
- Evaluates clusters of grants to understand the success and effectiveness of different funding models. For example, 'Explore and Test' and 'Core Funding' grants are coded in relation to, respectively, their overall 'success' and/or 'value added'. This is based on whether the 'Explore and Test' grant came to a firm conclusion about the future of the pilot (positive or negative) and whether core funding *'moved an organisation on'.* The funder has used this analysis to:

- Identify factors that make these types of grants more or less effective
- Reflect on the support that the foundation could provide
- Identify organisations for future funding

Overall, this coding exercise is '*... a way for the foundation to understand whether those types of grant were a useful thing to offer and were they achieving what we hope they would*'.

Organisational resources

- Four members of the MEL team
- Skills needed to support and encourage learning include:
 - Curiosity
 - Being able to home in on priority questions – what do you want/need to understand better?
 - A commitment to improve
 - '*Being able to stand back*'
 - Data analysis skills (to ensure that evidence is not '*over-interpreted*')

Case study 2

Grant-making:

- Total grants awarded: In 2017, £44.6million was awarded.
- Funding priorities: Five main funding priorities
- Accountable to: Original founders

Purpose of learning:

- To reflect on the success of different grants to influence future funding decisions and priorities
- To reflect on what more they can do to support grantees
- To pass on what is learnt to other funders and the sectors they support

Organisational leadership and management

- Organisation-wide theory of change.
- Strong leadership support and commitment to valuing and resourcing learning: '*... the big driver came from [the CEO] ... the message was that we need to be spending the same amount of resource on understanding what's happened as a result of what we've funded, as we do on allocating it ... it was really clear that this is absolutely part of the [senior team's] role*'.
- Open to publicly sharing the organisation's approach and commitment to learning, while acting on that learning in order to change or improve organisational practice.

Organisational culture

- Multiple opportunities are provided for individual and team reflection.
- An appreciation of the need for adaptation and change within the grant-making period (e.g. reviewing and amending outcomes); this is not seen as 'failure' but part of doing the job.
- Value the experience of Grant Managers/Officers and use this as a valuable source for learning.

Knowledge management and acquisition

- Conduct and record mid-way and end of grant 'learning conversations', which are administered by grant officers. The aim is to:
 - Reflect on, and at times amend, grant outcomes based on current progress and/or learning.
 - Explore what more could be done to support the grantee to achieve their intended outcomes, such as identifying appropriate networking opportunities or offering funder plus.
 - Identify learning from each grant that may be useful to discuss as an organisation: *'The "what can we learn" field is super helpful ... what's recorded there is something that the grant manager feels could be useful for other people to know from that piece of work'.*
- Ranking system used on their grant-making database. The rank A–D is awarded by grant managers based on the extent to which the original outcomes were achieved. (A = they have achieved or exceeded their outcomes; B = they have achieved most of their outcomes; C = they missed some outcomes; D = they were mostly missed.) They also rate the effectiveness of grantee organisations overall and the effectiveness of their own support during the grant (Excellent, Good, Improvement Needed, or Poor).
- The ranking system enables the team to identify and reflect on patterns within their grant-making in order to draw out lessons for future grant-making practice and priorities. For example: *'We saw a pattern that these are ... poorly performing grants that need a lot more of our support ... instead of it being an anecdotal feeling, you could look at the results of those grants and see that it was a pattern'.*
- The ranking system has been reviewed and amended over time to ensure it is fit for purpose (at one point it had a tendency to be overly positive about the organisation's own performance).

Resources

- Three members of the MEL team
- Require people with facilitation skills, as well as those able, to 'ask the right questions': *'... I curate a conversation ... you need to have somebody who is quite good at asking those probing questions or spotting the relevant things to ask about at a learning meeting. If somebody doing my role wasn't there, the conversation wouldn't be productive'.*
- Data analysis skills are essential: *'... the thing that doesn't work is to expect the learning ... and interesting stuff to just appear from the data ... it's always difficult to look at this data unless you're asking a question'.*

2.2 Organisational culture

Organisational culture plays a critical role in the pursuit of organisational learning; it can help to encourage an environment where honest reflection and appraisal – including recognising and thinking about 'failure'¹² – can take place without fear of repercussion or embarrassment.¹³ The degree of delegation and risk held at

¹² Fail Forward offers some useful suggestions to help organisations think through how they can begin to do this (e.g. ideas for intelligent failure; how to write a failure report; double-loop learning, etc). See <https://failforward.org/resources#materials>

¹³ See Examples 1, 5 and 6; also GEO (2019), op. cit. 7.

different levels within an organisation can also affect whether individuals are incentivised to give time to learning and the extent to which they can act upon it.

Managing a learning organisation requires a managerial approach to mistakes which is healthy and balanced, and which encourages staff to take certain risks and to be honest about the consequences of their actions.¹⁴

A number of the funders that we talked with are working to establish norms and behaviours that encourage staff to pause and reflect on learning. The literature reinforces the importance of these ideas,¹⁵ with increasing attention being drawn to building 'learning habits'. Julia Coffman identifies five learning habits¹⁶ that can support funders to develop a learning culture:¹⁷

1. **Making thinking visible:** what are our assumptions and hypotheses, and as such, what needs to be learnt?
2. **Asking powerful questions:** these are questions that, if answered, will make a difference to the way we work
3. **Combating biases:** not just from things we have gathered from our own limited vantage point
4. **Attending to causal inferences:** exploring relationships between our actions and their outcomes
5. **Answering the 'now what?' questions:** what does it imply about our future action and how do we ensure our insights are applied?

Case study 3¹⁸

Grant-making

- Total grants awarded (2018): £18.8 million
- Funding priorities: nine different funding programmes
- Accountable to: Board of Trustees

Purpose of learning

- To achieve the Foundation's strategic objectives which include: being the best grant maker we can be; getting alongside communities; sharing expertise; and working in partnership.

Organisational leadership and management:

- The Foundation's four strategic objectives are focused on how the Foundation believes it should behave in pursuing its mission. Learning content is therefore very focused on its own grant-making practice.
- A sub-committee of the Board and senior management team has been formed to work on a set of top-level, cross-organisational KPIs, designed to give the Board proper oversight on performance against strategy.
- Making time and space for learning has been a conscious priority for managers, otherwise other time constraints can get in the way. *'It's easy just to say, oh we're too busy today we'll just cancel it ...'*
- Attention to building and actively using learning to improve day-to-day practice can be a motivating tool for staff as it offers a way for their ideas,

¹⁴ Ramalingam, B. (2006) *Tools for knowledge and learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organisations*. London: ODI, p. 5.

¹⁵ See GEO, 2019, op. cit. 7, p. 18.

¹⁶ See Appendix 3 for an overview of routines that support these habits.

¹⁷ Coffman, J. (2018) '5-A-Day: Learning by Force of Habit', Centre for Evaluation Innovation.

¹⁸ Based on IVAR (2019, forthcoming) UK Evaluation Roundtable 2019 Teaching Cases.

reflections and experience to impact on organisational practice: *'You know yourself the frustrations that people have in organisations are usually about the fact that they think something should be different and they're never asked if it should be different, and even if they say it, no-one will listen ... this isn't an organisation where people are like that'.*

Organisational culture

- Actively takes steps to ensure that the organisation's culture is one that is open to challenge and critique, both internally and externally.
- Recognises the need to develop open and trusting relationships with grantees.
- Encourages connections and relationships across teams to ensure that learning is shared across the organisation. For example, holding Grant Manager meetings as opposed to programme-only meetings, to ensure that Grant Managers can share experience, knowledge and best practice across the Foundation's range of programmes.
- Shares organisational learning through grant management relationships, funding advice sessions, programme delivery relationships and periodic group discussions. They have also started to convene grant makers and charities around particular themes.

Knowledge management practices:

- Values a range of evidence sources in the process of learning, including grant management information, formal reports, publications, academic research and informal intelligence.
- Developed ways for staff to record their reflections (weekly logs) and use these on a regular basis (discussed as team every two months). This has demonstrated (and created enthusiasm and commitment for) the value of learning.
- Re-designed their grant-making database (Salesforce), as well as their report grading structure, to ensure that the data is collected in a way that is useful, meaningful, and enables the Foundation to not only capture informal intelligence from across the organisation but also provide an easier way of analysing cross-cutting themes across the organisation's range of programmes and grants.

Organisational resources:

- Recruited a dedicated Head of Learning and Development in order to help the organisation operationalise its mission, objectives and values by making learning a dynamic and active part of everybody's work.
- Proactively supports staff to explore new ideas and try new approaches.
- Developing staff's reflective skills by encouraging them to ask questions like 'how do you really know that?'.
- Additional training has been given to staff who are interested in becoming social media champions in their teams and taking an active role in sharing ideas and learning through blogs and other forms of messaging.

Case study 4¹⁹

Grant-making

- Total grants awarded (each year): £15–20million
- Funding priorities: social progress and well-being for everyone

¹⁹ Ibid

- Accountable to: original founders

Purpose of learning

- To improve funding outcomes in partnership with grantees

Organisational leadership and management

- Learning is central to the organisation's ethos and strategy: *'My learning, and our team's learning, is refined on a daily and weekly basis in terms of how we operate, who we work with and what we do – it's a continual and evolving process'*.
- Focuses on supporting organisations, however intractable an issue may seem, rather than on 'impact': *'[rather than] sticking your head in the sand and pretending the wall doesn't exist. It's maintaining attention on the issue'*.

Organisational culture:

- Learning is being built into the day-to-day practices and culture of the organisation: the focus on day-to-day reflection and challenge rather than *'working, working, working then gathering everyone together and reporting'*.
- Attention is given to creating meaningful and trusting relationships with grantees in three ways:
 - Focusing conversations on the 'what next', as opposed to the 'what just happened' so that the conversation is about what the Foundation can do to support the organisation going forwards.
 - Demonstrating a commitment to the organisations they fund by offering core and long-term funding.
 - Creating a platform from which grantees can be open and honest. They do this by making a commitment to the organisation first: *'... commit, learn, refine ...'*.
- Flexible budgeting structure (i.e. resources are not officially capped) to support an adaptive mindset.
- Place value on staff observation and insights.
- Utilise formal techniques to provide a level of consistency during team reflection and learning. For example, Polarity Management (thinking through unsolvable tensions), Myers & Briggs (to improve communications with people), and Six Thinking Hats (brainstorming from different perspectives): *'they give us a language and a moving off point for conversations ...'*.
- Create opportunities for staff to be together, compare experiences and reflect on emerging meaning and patterns. For example, Friday office days and an annual two-day away day.

Knowledge management practices

- Is still grappling with how to record organisational learning. For example, they are thinking about *'what is essential to pass on, that colleagues need to learn from?'*

Organisational resources

- Rather than responding to unsolicited applications, actively seeks out grantees, which helps ensure the latter are willing and able to relate to the foundation in a way that suits both parties.
- 10 members of staff
- Learning is part of everyone's role

2.3 Knowledge management practices

Knowledge management practices refer to the ways in which organisations ‘acquire, create, refine, store, transfer, share and utilise knowledge and information’.²⁰ An organisation’s purpose for learning drives the type of question asked, the type of knowledge and information that is needed to answer those questions and the way in which data and information are coded and analysed. The literature on ‘strategic learning’ strongly supports this, emphasising the need to connect evaluation and evaluative activity to the pursuit of learning.²¹

We can see this clearly in the following examples:

- **Case study 2:** one of the main reasons to learn is to reflect on what more they could be doing to support their grantees. As such, the reflection of individual grant officers becomes critically important, leading the foundation to find ways of capturing that reflection to share it internally.
- **Case study 5:** the focus is on emergent learning and responding to changes in the external context. As such, obtaining and collating knowledge and insight from experts and commissioned research is critical.
- **Case studies 6 and 7:** both focus on acquiring knowledge and data that helps them to assess their contribution and progress towards a set of pre-defined outcomes or impact measures. As such, there is a strong focus on collating and interpreting monitoring and programme evaluation data.

This review also highlights that simply collecting the ‘right’ data and storing it in ways that support its intended analysis is not enough. It is essential (and challenging) to set time aside for good quality data analysis and interpretation.

*I think there’s probably some people thinking that this is going to be a magic tool, that when you put data in it gives you every answer that you need and there won’t be any analysis needed.*²²

The thing that doesn’t work, is to expect the learning and things that you want to know and interesting stuff to just come up and just appear from the data ... it won’t be easy to spot ... you have to start looking for things otherwise you won’t be able to find them. So that is challenging.

Key informant, funder

The way in which knowledge and information is packaged also affects how effectively funders learn from their practice. Recent work exploring the use of internal MEL bulletins²³ highlights the importance of including multiple organisational stakeholders in designing the content of the bulletins, as well as having a ‘next

²⁰ See King (2009), p. 4, cited in IVAR (2017), op. cit. 5.

²¹ See GEO (2019), op. cit. 7; Coffman and Beer (2011), op. cit. 6; Carr M., Hembree, B. and Madden, N. (2019) ‘Strategic learning in practice: A case study of the Kauffman Foundation’, in *The Foundation Review*, vol 11 (1), pp. 7-21.

²² IVAR (2019), op. cit. 19.

²³ See Rogers, A. and Malla, C. (2019) ‘Knowledge translation to enhance evaluation use: A case example’, in *Foundation Review*, volume 11(1), pp. 49-61.

steps' section in order to provide actionable knowledge and information. Within the literature, additional tools used to help organisations organise their knowledge and information include:²⁴

- Staff directory of knowledge and skills
- Communities of practice
- Web blogs
- Intranet
- Exit interviews
- After action reviews
- Action learning sets
- Learning logs

²⁴ See Ramalingam (2006), op. cit. 15; Leahy et al. (2016), op. cit. 7, p. 32.

Case study 5

Grant-making

- Total grants awarded (2018): 39 grants totalling \$24 million
- Funding priorities: three strategic funding priorities
- Accountable to: Trustees of a family foundation

Purpose of learning:

- To reflect on what their role should be in a particular arena, in order to have the biggest impact.
- To adapt in response to changes in the external environment: *'... learning about what's emerging and how can we respond to changes that are happening around us'.*

Organisational leadership and management:

- A commitment to learning forms part of the organisation's explicit values.
- Holding themselves publicly accountable for responding to what they learn (e.g. publicising their response to the outcome of their Grantee Perception Reports).
- Adopting a 'non-blame' management style: *'... it does inhibit learning if people don't feel comfortable saying "I think we could have done this in a slightly different way" ... and managing people in a non-blame way is really important'.*

Culture of the Programme:

- Provide regular learning and reflection opportunities to ensure that people are comfortable with each other and are able to be honest and open about things that have not worked as expected. They hold bi-annual, two-day programme meetings attended by the full programme team as well as the President and the lead trustee for the programme. These sessions:
 - Reflect on the past six months in order to consider what they may do differently in the future.
 - Reflect on new evidence and research to collectively decide how they should respond.
 - Provide a space for evolutionary/incremental conversations to take place: *'... because they're happening every 6 months, it allows us to say "this is an issue coming up ... we don't know what to do about it so we're going to go away and come back ..."'.*
- The level of autonomy and breadth of the programmes support the ability to adapt and respond to learning: *'... individual programmes are relatively autonomous ... our programme strategy is very broad. That means we can change and move around that strategy without having to go through any formal process of changing our strategy'.*

Knowledge management practices:

- Build up expertise within individual members of the team on key funding priorities (e.g. strategic litigation).
- Draw in external expertise (e.g. someone with particular success in the area of strategic litigation to help understand the pros and cons of strategic litigation as a funding priority).
- Commission research to help the organisation consider its role in various arenas

Organisational resources:

- One Evaluation and Learning Officer, who plays an advisory role across the whole organisation
- Allocate dedicated time to reflection and internal conversation
- Allocate funds to acquiring knowledge in multiple ways and funding plus activities to support grantees

Cae study 6

Grant-making:

- Total grants awarded: In 2017/2018, £3.3 million was invested into new projects and the foundation worked with 70 local and national organisations to test new approaches to tackle major health issues
- Location of funding: 2 Inner-City Boroughs
- Funding priorities: Major urban health issues
- Accountable to: Board of trustees

Purpose of learning:

- To maximise impact with the resources available and identify 'the opportunity spaces' to act.

Organisational leadership and management

- Strong support for the value of evaluation and learning at the most senior level: *'...a lot of it comes from the Chief Exec. They are very, very explicit about **how** key evaluation and learning is to what we are able to achieve as an organisation... this trickles down to the Directors and then that trickles down into each team...it's very explicit that everything that comes with impact - evaluation and learning is absolutely central to our work'.*
- Learning is seen as central to achieving the foundation's strategic goals: *'We see learning as an absolutely fundamental tool in order for us to maximise the impact that we can create within our communities'.*
- Hold themselves to account to ensure that they are either acting upon or sharing learning: *'There is never anything that we do that doesn't go anywhere...we always try to hold ourselves and our project partners to account...asking "have we done anything real as a result?" [For example], at the start of each insight review meeting, we reflect back on the last meeting and some of the implications for our work that we generated through the previous meeting and [look at] how we have followed through on some of those things'.*

Organisational culture

- Internal culture of regular analysis and reflection: *'Learning to us means true reflective practice... we try to pull together quantitative and qualitative data, make sense of it, play that back to ourselves internally and then we have a conversation about 'okay, what are the key challenges this is presenting to us, what are the opportunity spaces and what are the implications for us in terms of how we work and how we make decisions?'*
- Hold organisation-wide, quarterly 'Insight Review Meetings' so that the staff team can hear about insights from the previous quarter and reflect on implications for future work: *'...what are the implications for how we work...our direction of travel...the way that we invest...and programmatic design and project ideas'.*

- Value the knowledge and insights of staff: *'Some of our insights come from our portfolio managers as they are working on the ground and they are identifying challenges and opportunities to working in particular places'.*
- Adopt an open attitude to risk, which comes with an acknowledgment of the responsibility to learn: *'We are able to spend relatively freely so we can take risks, but ... we therefore have a responsibility to learn about what is and what isn't working and why'.*
- Regularly ask the 'so what' questions: *'We place as much value on understanding why things are working or why things aren't working, just as much as the hard figures... if something seems to be working really well we will ask 'why is that? Who is it working for and who isn't if working for, and in what context?'*
- Believe in building honest, trusting relationships with funding partners (i.e. grantees) to provide a platform from which honest learning relationships can be established: *'We have a close working relationship between our portfolio managers and our projects... our portfolio managers very much have the conversation about what are the insights, what are the learnings that are coming out of your project and how are you using them to feed into improvement or developments. So they are kind of live conversations that happen pretty regularly'*

Knowledge management and acquisition

- Diverse evidence base including: programme managers' insights; commissioned research; project evaluations; conversations with stakeholders and partners (i.e. grantees).
- Encourage projects to adopt rapid-cycle, formative evaluation approaches where appropriate, to ensure they have access to quick, up-to-date information: *'What we want to do is make the data flows and the decisions, and the acting upon that, as efficient as possible'.*
- In the process of piloting an online 'Impact Platform' that will enable partners to upload information and data (quantitative and qualitative; outputs and outcomes) as they have it. This will mean that both the funder and funded organisations will have access to a live information dashboard. Internally, the data will be aggregated into an Impact Scorecard, which will be mapped onto each individual programme's theory of change. The system will also be able to draw data from other platforms including partner data storage systems, as well as national datasets. The idea is that this will provide 1) live information for decision making, 2) the ability to track progress against annual programme targets and 3) ensure that partners are not held to fixed 6 or 12 monthly reporting cycles.

Resources

- One member of staff has 'Impact and Evaluation' in their title but in general they recruit individuals who demonstrate a commitment to, and understanding of, the importance of evaluation, learning and reflection in achieving impact.
- Commission external research and evaluation
- Invest in partners who also demonstrate a commitment and appetite for evaluation and learning: *'When we are reviewing project applications we look for the strength of their organisational appetite around evaluation and learning, but also their proposals about how they would continuously reflect and learn on what isn't working and feed that into continuous development'.*

2.4 Organisational resources

Our case study funders have different approaches to resourcing their organisations' learning function:

- **Case study 6:** has a single member of staff with 'learning and impact' in their title
- **Case study 7:** has tried different ways of resourcing MEL over time and each division now chooses to resource it differently
- **Case study 8:** has a geographically dispersed MEL team

This variation is also found in the literature, with one study concluding that '*no one model emerged as a clear example of how foundations could better structure these functions*'.²⁵ While there is no 'right' way, it is important to think critically about the skills needed to support organisational learning, in addition to the technical expertise historically required of M&E staff. These could include curiosity, a commitment to continuous improvement, facilitation skills, change management, asking the right questions and systems thinking.²⁶

It is about supporting the range of different parties to be able to unpack what is happening. I think it's about being able to connect the dots. I think there is also an analytical role in putting this together ... I think it goes beyond the technicalities of measurement and that sort of thing. I think there are far more softer areas which are critical because you can't learn for people, but you can facilitate people to have that experience and to learn from what they are doing and somebody needs to do it, as I said it doesn't happen by chance.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

... you need to have somebody who is quite good at asking those probing questions, or spotting the relevant things to ask about at a learning meeting. If somebody doing my role wasn't there, the conversation wouldn't be productive.

Key informant, funder

The demand for funders to have these skills within their staff teams, and thus the need to nurture and develop them, is arguably demonstrated by the existence of a range of emerging forums, including the Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network and Lab for Learning in the US, and IVAR's recently established Evaluation Roundtable Community of Practice. All these seek to support evaluation and learning staff in facilitating internal learning. However, alongside this, our findings highlight the continued importance of equipping staff with technical skills, such as data analysis, to help assure the quality of judgements and ensure that issues around bias and data quality continue to be reviewed.

Data quality is a central concern of the foundation and is something that our leadership have really stressed our team in particular to focus on and we have prioritised as a team ... we have got to make sure that the data and feedback that

²⁵ Nolan, C., Long, M. and Perex, D. J. (2019) 'Evaluators as conduits and supports for foundation learning', in *Foundation Review*, vol 11 (1), pp. 95-106

²⁶ See Coffman, J. (2017) 'FaceTime, open workspace and electronic calendars are a few of least favourite things: Learning and the way we work', Centre for Evaluation Innovation; Long, M. and Nolan, C. (2017) 'The keys to true social sector impact? Evaluation and continuous learning', The Center for Effective Philanthropy; Nolan, C., Long, M. and Perex, D. J. (2019) 'Evaluators as conduits and supports for foundation learning', in *Foundation Review*, vol 11 (1), pp. 95-106.

we get from our beneficiaries and from the field really means what it is telling us and that we invest in existing country systems to improve data quality.
Key informant, funder

Where learning 'sits' in an organisation is also crucial. This review found that responsibility for learning should not fall to a single individual or team:

It is essential that learning is not seen solely as the responsibility of the M&E staff, as it is the application of learning to improve project implementation that is at the heart of adaption. This requires interaction between a range of staff: M&E, programme managers and officers, finance etc., not to mention participants in the projects.²⁷

[The team] are there to facilitate the learning ... but, in a way, it's everyone's responsibility ... it is not the evidence and learning team doing something on its own and then just presenting stuff.
Key informant, funder

Not only can it be an overwhelming and seemingly impossible task for one team, it is also counter-productive because 'staff may begin to see it as a departmental function and not a shared responsibility'.²⁸ Many of the funders in this review were working to disperse these skills across their organisation, e.g. by creating multi-disciplinary teams and/or finding ways for conversations to take place across teams. One example from the literature is the Kauffman Foundation's Learning Champions Initiative, which introduced a learning champion in each team. They created a community of practice among these champions, training them in facilitation techniques. The champions then developed learning plans for each team.²⁹ But even with this dedicated resource, it was noted that the organisation needed to be realistic about how fast change occurs.

In addition to building an organisational structure that supports learning, funders are also using their financial resource to commission external research and evaluation, develop new knowledge management tools and systems, and invest more in the simple allocation of staff time in support of learning activities.

²⁷ BOND (2016) *Adaptive management: What it means for CSOs*, London: Bond, p. 13.

²⁸ Carr et al. (2019), op. cit. 22.

²⁹ Ibid.

Case study 7

Grant-making

- Total grants awarded (2018): \$5.6million
- Funding priorities: multiple, across five divisions
- Accountable to: co-founders

Purpose of learning

- To achieve accelerated outcomes and deliver on the Foundation's core mission and values

NB. It is noted that organisational practice differs across divisions, therefore the practice listed below cannot be generalised across the entire foundation.

Organisational leadership and management

- Internal expectation that teams evaluate their progress against goals on a bi-annual basis.
- Committed to sharing knowledge and information through an accessible collection of research studies.
- Accountability mechanisms are intensely resourced at the outset of grants, particularly when the potential reputational risk associated with the funding is high.
- Accountability routes are felt to impact on the extent to which learning is invested in, and incentivised, internally: *'We don't have anyone really holding us to account ... aside from our co-chairs and that can create some problems for learning because it means that a lot of our incentive structure is top down, not bottom up, and as a result it becomes almost necessarily less outcome-focused and more kind of interest focused'*.

Organisational culture

- The Foundation's ability to be 'nimble' is part of its power and contribution. Therefore, there is a feeling that tying everything down to rigid processes could compromise this: *'[everybody talks about] how we contribute to the sector by being nimble, so there are many ways in which it would almost work against us if we had more deliberate systems in place around these kinds of things ...'*
- The level of investment in research, evaluation and learning on different programmes is often driven by the interests and ideology of individual programme officers: *'What is striking to me is that it is almost entirely down to the ideology or perspective of the programme officer making the grant ... if [they] believe that evaluation and research is super important and is crucial to the way this thing is going to work ... then it will happen'*.
- There is an acknowledgement that an appetite for 'risk' brings a responsibility and accountability to learn: *'We have the luxury of being able to take mitigated risks with respect to how we can achieve better outcomes ... so we take that very seriously in how we approach our work and our learning initiatives'*.
- Annual strategic reviews across each of their portfolios.
- Varied use of 'Portfolio Overview Dashboards' or 'Strategy Scorecards' to visually display a portfolio of grants (e.g. different sized grants are displayed as different sized bubbles). It was noted that: *'it is not like they are standard practice. Some portfolio owners really rely on them ... for others, it just seems like a lot of effort to produce comparable data for things that aren't really comparable'*.

Knowledge management and acquisition

- Summative evaluations are being used to inform the design of the new programmes.
- Staff turnover can impact on the relationships that are made with grantees, as well as the retention and use of internal knowledge.
- Commission of external research and independent evaluations (often prioritised for high-value funding programmes).

Organisational resources

- MEL capacity is resourced differently within individual divisions: *'There are lots of different versions of our team through different parts of the organisation. Some of them have it embedded within programme officers who are doing the grant-making, some of them have it centralised and some of them have it entirely contracted out'.*
- Greater focus and resource is put into helping grantees to learn, rather than internal knowledge management. This is based on a decision to balance spending on organisational infrastructure with *'getting money out the door'.*

Case study 8

Grant-making

- Total grants awarded (2018): approved 186 new grants and disbursed \$232 million across its global offices
- Funding priorities: three main funding priorities
- Accountable to: Board of Trustees

Purpose of learning

- To support strategic design and decision-making, and help programmes improve, course correct and succeed. Learning helps validate and advance the organisation's knowledge about how its investments fit into the broader context.

Organisational leadership and management

- Is strongly committed to, and values, the role of data and evidence in measuring impact: *'The [MEL] team has been part of the foundation's vision since the inception ... measuring the impact of our investments is part of the organisation's DNA ... it cuts across the life cycle of our investment making'.*
- Has an appetite for evidence and learning across the organisation, including at Board level: *'We found that in our quarterly Board meetings, we didn't have enough time to focus on learning as much as we wanted to, but there was a real appetite from our Board members to learn more about the work. So, we have set up additional quarterly review meetings ... on top of the normal Board meetings that allow for specific thematic engagement with the Board and more learning'.*
- Is committed to sharing as much information as possible about what it, and its partners, are learning. This public commitment to sharing learning externally is underpinned by its transparency policy and is part of a global effort to improve openness and transparency in the development sectors and make information widely accessible to inform strategies, plan interventions and manage resources effectively.

Organisational culture

- The role of the MEL team is integral to all aspects of the organisation's grant-making process.
- Annual, multi-stakeholder (partners, staff and government representatives) programme review meetings review progress and draw out key learnings: *'On an annual basis, we formally review what progress has been achieved throughout the course of the year ... what are some of the lessons learned, what have been the challenges, what are really good and effective practices ... what we might change going forward'.*
- The MEL team develops dissemination and learning plans with its partners for all grants at the inception phase, which feed into learning plans for the grant. Specific opportunities are carved out during the grant lifecycle to share findings with key stakeholders to ensure findings are used.

Knowledge management and acquisition practices

- Careful thought goes into evaluation design, ensuring that there is a clear link between the data being collected and how it will be used internally and externally: *'We have a fit for purpose approach to monitoring and evaluation ... such that the objectives or the purpose of the programme defines the types of design and types of methods that we use to collect data and to support that learning process'.*
- Developmental evaluation approaches and evaluations include multiple data collection points where possible: *'We are not satisfied with only having a baseline and then final analysis ... we really want to be able to generate data throughout ... to understand what is happening along the way'.*
- Conduct 'deep dives' into thematic areas or programmes when there are new findings to share. These are conducted quarterly with trustees (in addition to usual board meetings).
- Adopt a strategic approach to commissioning external evaluations: *'We don't fund evaluations that are duplicative or redundant. We really want them to add value and contribute to the overall knowledge base; be complimentary to what is being monitored ... With some of our grants, we have taken decisions where we don't need an external evaluation, and instead have emphasised stronger monitoring data'.*
- Adopt mixed method approaches to ensure they have quantitative information about impact, as well as qualitative data that provides an insight into the 'how and why'. This enables them to *'... really dig deeper into context and implementation, so that we can really learn'.*

Resources

- The MEL team (8–10 staff) is geographically spread across the organisation's global offices. They work with local partners and programmes to help structure M&E frameworks, conduct evidence reviews, as well as commission and oversee external evaluations. The MEL team also focuses a lot on data quality, ensuring that decision-making is based on solid evidence: *'Data quality is a central concern of the foundation ... something our leadership have really stressed our team focus on and we have prioritised as a team... we have got to make sure that the data and feedback that we get from our beneficiaries and from the field really means what it is telling us and that we invest in existing country systems to improve data quality'.*
- They invest time and financial resource into evaluation, with the majority of programmes having some sort of externally funded evaluation in addition to monitoring data.

- The MEL team has a role in all aspects of the investment portfolio and lifecycle – Before investing; during implementation; at the end of investment; and in strategy development and rollout.
- They are currently exploring ways to capture live monitoring data through the use of technological solutions that are part and parcel of delivery. For example, they are looking at technological solutions to public health engagement that will, at the same time, collect live, good quality monitoring data. Efforts are being made to enhance existing data systems and improve their quality as opposed to generating parallel systems to meet short-term data requirements (for example through government health monitoring information systems).
- Bring external knowledge and expertise into the Foundation: *‘We hire Fellows to infuse the foundation with specific expertise that we might not have or we want to improve upon’*. For example, the organisation currently has as Fellow who is an expert in artificial intelligence.
- Increasingly prioritising the provision of M&E capacity building to partners: *‘Instead of going straight into an evaluation, one of the things we have decided to fund is strengthening the M&E capacity of our grantees so they can have the data that they need to support their work as a first priority’*.

2.5 Ensuring quality in organisational learning

It can be challenging to ensure the quality of organisational learning. For example, the impact that biases and group processes can impact on the inferences that may be made, based on (at times limited or inconclusive) data and evidence.

Biases

- **Linearity and certainty bias:** i.e. framing strategies as a set of linear, causal and certain actions
- **Confirmation bias:** i.e. a tendency to seek information that confirms our existing beliefs and opinions about how the world works, and to overlook or ignore data that refutes them
- **Availability bias:** i.e. making vivid events or examples that come easily to mind seem more likely to occur
- **Bounded awareness:** i.e. failing to see, seek, use or share highly relevant and readily available information

Group processes

- **The autopilot effect:** i.e. distancing oneself from strategy even if it is failing
- **Escalation commitment:** i.e. remaining committed to ideas and investments when data clearly demonstrates that the future cost of continuing support outweighs the expected benefits
- **Groupthink:** i.e. the desire for harmony in a decision-making group overrides a realistic appraisal of alternative ideas or viewpoints³⁰

³⁰ See Patrizi, P., Thompson, E. H., Coffman, J. and Beer, T. (2013) ‘Eyes Wide open: Learning as strategy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty, in *The Foundation Review*, vol 5(3), pp. 50-65, p. 52; Beer, T. and Coffman, J. (2014) ‘How shortcuts cut us short: Cognitive traps in philanthropic decision making’, pp. 4-9; Sterman cited in Gates, E. F. (2016) ‘Making sense of emerging conversation in evaluation about systems thinking and complexity science’, in *Evaluation and Program Planning*, vol 59, pp. 62-73, p. 71.

Two things can help overcome these barriers and traps. The first is acknowledging that knowledge is incremental.³¹ The second is employing deliberate techniques that directly address some of these risks, such as:

- Using devil's advocacy
- Looking for disconfirming evidence and asking for the 'bad' news
- Focusing on trends rather than individual experiences
- Reminding yourself of what you do not know
- Playing out alternative perspectives and solutions
- Reducing upfront strategy planning time in favour of ongoing strategy development³²

Several funders in this review were working to prioritise time for regular, iterative reflection as the main way to overcome these risks. They are also ensuring that, on a day-to-day basis, staff are being encouraged to ask themselves questions that will elicit the type of knowledge and information that is most valuable for their learning.³³

2.6 Advice and reflections from the field

In this section, we share some of the advice and reflections that we have come across in this review that complement the common themes discussed so far.

1. Be clear about the purpose of learning within the organisation. This will help prioritise learning questions and understand the kind of knowledge and information required.
2. There is no one-size-fits all approach. Funders should try to review different approaches to see what is best for their organisation, based on its history, culture, strategic aims and accountability routes.
3. It takes time to embed the conditions required to support organisational learning. As one key informant (funder) said: *'This is an evolving thing. I don't think we have got it all right and in place by any means'*.
4. Learning takes time and is an iterative process. In the words of one funder key informant: *'... to learn, you need time to see what happens, time to gather your raw materials, analyse it, consolidate your knowledge to work out how you'd do something different in the future'*.
5. Don't try to do too much, too quickly and be aware of people's capacity to take on 'new information' at any one time: *'Framing our task as mastering daily learning habits gives us the attainable guidance we need ... get small wins, achieving more wins that ultimately add up to big change becomes possible'*.³⁴
6. Effective learning is about being responsive to need – at times it may be messier, and more unstructured, than at others. One key informant (funder) explained: *'I wouldn't say we're structured and methodical about our learning in our programme. We do it differently and in different ways, and sometimes we don't do it at all ... it can be quite accidental and spontaneous'*.

³¹ See Patrizi et al. (2013), *ibid*.

³² For more detail see Beer and Coffman (2014), *op. cit.* 32, pp. 11-14.

³³ See Examples 3 and 4.

³⁴ Coffman (2018), *op. cit.* 18.

7. Review data coding and data storage systems regularly to minimise bias; balance the need for structure with allowing themes to emerge from the data. One key informant (funder) explained how: *'... we've recently recalibrated [the rating system for indicators] as it was too positive. The ratings we were getting back were super positive.'*

2.7 Summary

In summary, in answering the question *'What and how do funders learn from their work and how do funders use it to improve?'*, this review has found that a variety of practice exists. The funders we talked to are seeking to learn for a range of reasons, broadly summarised as learning to:

- Understand/gather evidence about existing or emerging problems in society that they may want to respond to
- Ensure that financial assets are directed in the most useful way
- Work with grantees, and structure financial support, in ways that best support them to achieve their outcomes/benefits in line with their objectives

The reason(s) why a funding organisation is seeking to learn will influence:

- The questions being asked
- The type of knowledge and data that is required and valued
- The methods being employed to collect and gather data
- The balance funders strike between prioritising their own learning needs with supporting grantees to learn
- Where in the decision-making process data and evidence are being used
- The degree to which data is collated and shared, and with whom

As well as the overall purpose of learning influencing practice, the way funders are learning from their work also appears to depend on a range of other factors, including:

1. **The size and geographical spread of the organisation:** This can affect how learning is resourced in terms of staffing and where responsibility for learning sits.
2. **To whom the funder is primarily accountable:** Is the funder mainly accountable to the interests and concerns of its founders (Case study 7), the place in which it focuses its efforts (Case study 6) or to the field within which it works (Case study 8)?
3. **The organisation's history and culture:** To what extent is strategy perceived to be an emergent or evolving process? How is 'failure' dealt with and talked about? What value is placed on different forms of data and evidence? What levels of risk and experimentation are seen to be appropriate? What is the primary role of the grants officer (e.g. contractor/auditor or partner)? What are the norms and behaviours that allow space for reflection and learning to emerge?
4. **The commitment of the Board, senior leadership and management to learning:** This can affect the extent to which learning is resourced; whether staff are encouraged to be honest about, and accountable to, what is being

learnt; and how learning is fed into, and accounted for, in decision-making processes.

Although there is variation among the funders, each one finds ways to address factors relating to organisational leadership and management, organisational culture, knowledge management practices and the use of organisational resources. In particular, this review shows that funders are findings ways to:

- Ensure that responsibility for learning is shared throughout the organisation
- Bring knowledge and learning to the attention of organisational decision-makers
- Create working environments and practices that facilitate learning
- Recognise, nurture and invest in the skills required to support and enable learning across their organisations (e.g. data analysis skills; facilitation skills; encouraging curiosity and a commitment to continual improvement; and helping people to ask the 'right' questions)
- Ensure that organisational learning is acted upon
- Obtain, capture and make use of a range of different forms of data, evidence and knowledge
- Code/store data in ways that are 'analysis friendly' and take into account the strategic questions they are trying to answer

3. Encouraging and supporting grantees to learn

This review set out to look at what it takes for foundations to learn and how they can encourage and support ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees. In this section, we turn our attention to what the findings tell us about:

- The role of funders in supporting grantee organisations to learn
- Areas that require attention when supporting grantees to learn
- How funders can encourage and support ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees

3.1 The role of funders in supporting grantee organisations to learn

One of the key findings of this review is that funders can – and arguably should – have a role in encouraging and supporting ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees.

I would emphasise ... that the grant maker has such a central role in how that is all shaped. The grant maker sets the tone for how grantees collect and analyse information to an extent that I'm not sure they have reflected on enough.
Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

There is also support for this within the literature, particularly given the value that learning plays in enabling organisations to achieve the best outcomes for their beneficiaries and/or wider social change.³⁵ Recent work by Collaborate notes an increasing recognition among some funders and commissioners that 'they are "purchasing" the capacity for people and organisations to learn and adapt to deliver relevant support, rather than buying services'.³⁶

Throughout our review, informants talked about the fact that there may well be barriers that exist within grantee organisations that may prevent them from being willing to adopt a more learning-focused approach.

I often worry because I hear quite a lot of implementers saying 'if only the funders behaved differently, we would be able to do this' ... I don't think they're very good at acknowledging that, even if they had a completely different set of funding parameters, they wouldn't necessarily behave any differently as there are a lot of inbuilt incentives and processes that they now have within their own organisation to work in a certain way.

³⁵ Murray, A. (2017) 'Six things that help grant-makers learn and adapt', Itad blog; IVAR, 2017, op. cit. 5, p. 5.

³⁶ Lowe, T. and Plimmer, D. (2019) *Exploring the new world: Practical insights for funding, commissioning and managing in complexity*, London: Collaborate, p. 15.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

It is important, therefore, to explore the behaviour and practice of both funders and grantee organisations.

3.2 Areas that require attention when supporting grantees to learn

I am yet to find an organisation that says ‘do you know what, learning isn’t really important to us’ ... But what does it take to actually convert that desire, or that latent acknowledgement that this is important, into something that an organisation actually does something about?

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

While the act of learning may be accepted as a beneficial thing to do, four overarching issues emerged from the review that require careful attention for funders wishing to support grantees to learn. They are:

- Organisational leadership and culture
- Internal capacity and capability
- Systems and processes to support learning
- Funding power dynamics

3.2.1 Organisational leadership and culture

Key informants acknowledged the role that a grantee’s own organisational leadership and culture plays in developing and acting on their organisational learning. As with the findings for funders (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2), the review found that leadership and culture have an effect on:

- The extent to which organisations prioritise learning
- Organisations’ attitude to, and measures of, performance and success
- The degree of self-critical and reflective practice within an organisation
- How the organisation chooses to respond and adapt to what its learning

I think that’s one of those things that, if it is not set as an organisational priority, it is going to go nowhere ... If you don’t have an organisational leadership that models and demonstrates why these things are important ... Organisational leadership that demonstrates that it’s okay when, despite our best efforts, we don’t get it right ...

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

3.2.2 Internal capacity and skills

For busy, overstretched voluntary and community organisations, it can be challenging to prioritise and make space for learning.

Learning, changing and improving feels like a luxury ... they’re constantly fighting a battle to maintain the status quo ...

Key informant, funder

They may not have time to learn, or the learning is done on the job but they don’t have time to record it.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

Activities related explicitly to learning often fall to individuals within organisations who are either over-stretched or who struggle to embed learning within the culture of the organisation.

If you don't have an in-house evaluator or a team of evaluation folk, this becomes a nice-to-have, an add on role for the front-line worker who is up to their eye balls in delivery.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

[You may have] a lone wolf in an organisation who is trying to champion it but that lone wolf will only ever get so far.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

Having access to the skills required to collect, store, analyse and translate data into actionable knowledge also plays a role in terms of the quality and extent to which funded organisations can learn.

The answer to these challenges is not solely to increase M&E capacity within grantee organisations. The evidence suggests that, as for funders themselves, it is about supporting organisations to use data and information to learn and inform strategy and practice.

Does it just need a person with a hat on that says MEL? Our finding is that that's not the case. We work with organisations where that can actually be a hindrance. MEL is seen to be done by a team in a dark room. Or we've found the opposite, where there's just a culture where, in a small organisation that doesn't have a lot of resource and doesn't call it MEL either, it just is a reflective organisation ...

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

It also requires acknowledging where useful knowledge and learning might be found within an organisation and valuing this. As one of the informants reflected, it is often held by people who are dealing with the issues on a daily basis, such as delivery staff or project workers. As such, the extent to which organisations value and collate the knowledge and expertise these individuals hold may also impact on wider organisational learning.

3.2.3 Systems and processes to support learning

Creating the conditions for organisations to learn is as much about processes and systems as it is about culture. As a key informant from one of the infrastructure support organisations put it: '*... have they built in sufficient time and resources into a programme that can take account of the fact that learning doesn't happen by chance, it happens by design?*' Some of these systems and processes relate to how an organisation uses learning, as well as the type of data and evidence that gets collected, stored and valued.

The problem in the organisation [may be] that the culture is still one of accountability first, and we'll do the learning when we have the time ... It's almost a Maslow's hierarchy – if we can't tick the financial and legal compliance box, we can't do anything else ... From a systems perspective, we just don't have good enough outcome-tracking packages ... people will still say 'but that's just three people's stories'. That's another cultural issue, therefore – the fact that we do not value qualitative data as much as quantitative.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

It is also about the extent to which organisations have ways to retain and capture institutional memory, document learning and make use of tools and techniques that can support staff to learn from their work.

3.2.4 Funding power dynamics

For many years, there has been recognition of the power dynamics that exist between funders and funded organisations. Within the context of learning, funding power dynamics often play out in relation to grantees' willingness to share learning, particularly learning around challenges or perceived failure.³⁷

There are a lot of behavioural insights that tell us it's really hard for individuals to admit when they've got things wrong ... It's very hard for organisations to do that, particularly to those who are giving them money, as there's fear about what the consequences of that will be, both formal and informal.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

One informant also noted that, given these power dynamics, placing greater emphasis on learning in a funding relationship may create an additional or replacement burden to that of accountability reporting and undermine genuine attempts to support learning.

... If the funder says you have to learn, you'll say 'ok, I'll do learning' ... there will still be a desire to show positive results, and to really show well-thought through and frequent learning. So, now the pressure is to show that they have time to do the learning, they've got the people doing it, they're actually implementing it ... there is this worry that they have to say what the funder wants to hear, because if they don't, there will be some repercussions.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

Funding power dynamics can also affect what grantees think – or assume – funders expect from them, often based on their experience of other funders. A shift from transactional to collaborative relationships that are focused on learning therefore requires careful setting of expectations on the part of the funder.

When organisations are hearing lots of different messages from lots of different funders, and what they are hearing from us may not seem compatible with what they are hearing from others ... particularly from commissioners ... then it's quite difficult to develop.

Key informant, funder

Some of our key informants also pointed out that voluntary organisations often have, or feel a need to have, a degree of faith in a model or approach in order to convincingly 'sell' it to funders. This faith in a model may also, at times, be strongly tied to an organisation's history, brand and identity. All of these factors can affect the willingness, acceptance or incentive for organisations to learn and adapt.

Often, particularly if you're in a sector with a lot of competitors, you've got a fixed model that you're selling essentially, and that's the thing that makes you different ... So many funders are asking 'what makes you unique?' and 'what makes you special?' ... So, are they willing and able to change?

Key informant, funder

³⁷ IVAR (2019), op. cit. 19, p. 4; Britton, in Taylor, A. and Liadsky, B. (2018) Achieving greater impact by starting with learning: How grantmakers can enable learning relationships at the grant application stage', Taylor Newberry Consulting, p. 13.

I guess you may find yourself working with an organisation that does what it's always done because that's what it does. And I think that presents a challenge in terms of learning because, if there's a strong sense of belief within the organisation that they are working as effectively as they can, then what does learning bring to them?

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

There is also arguably something about the importance of trust within funding relationships, mainly around funders trusting that they have chosen to fund organisations that understand, and are continually adapting to, what their beneficiaries need. This raises a question as to whether organisations even need a funder to support their learning and, in some cases, whether this is desired. IVAR's work in the field of 'Funding Plus' and funding practices has shown that grantees value having a relationship with their funders but what this needs to look like in practice varies hugely. Some organisations want an engaged approach, with regular contact and support – others value a hands-off approach where they are simply trusted to 'get on with the job'.³⁸

Finally, throughout this review, we have noticed that a funder's own internal learning needs – whether focused on reviewing and refining internal grant-making practices or aggregating impact across a diverse funding portfolio – are likely to affect the type of learning possible within a funding relationship, and indeed the priority given to this. Different starting points will lead to different kinds of relationships. For example, those looking to understand or gather evidence about existing or emerging problems in society may be less interested in learning about the outcomes and impact of current funding programmes, compared to funders whose main motive for learning is to ensure that their financial assets are being directed in the most useful way. As such, the information demands placed on grantees are likely to be different. In cases where there is an alignment between a funder's and a grantee's learning questions, this may well support learning within both those organisations, as it creates an alignment between the information demands placed on grantees with their own internal learning needs and questions. However, there can also be a mismatch and, in such cases, the information demands made of grantees does not necessarily support them to learn.

How much is it serving your strategy as a funder, and how much is it really enabling those organisations to learn about the things that mean most to them? If you're committed to learning [as a funder] you've got to recognise that it's not always going to be the stuff that you care about that people will want to learn about.

Key informant, funder

3.2.5 Summary

In summary, funders seeking to support ongoing learning in their relationships with funded organisations need to think carefully about:

- The degree of flexibility that may exist within organisations to adapt
- The extent to which funded organisations' internal culture, leadership, capacity, capabilities and systems support learning

³⁸ See Buckley E., Cairns, B., Harker, A. and Hutchinson, R. (2012) *Duty of care: The role of trusts and foundations in supporting voluntary organisations through difficult times*, London: IVAR; Buckley, E., Cairns, B., Jenkins, R. and Hopgood, R. (2019) *Duty to care?: How to ensure grant-making helps and doesn't hinder*, London: IVAR.

- The implications of power dynamics in an organisation's willingness or ability to engage in a different type of relationship with their funder

However, funders can play a role in supporting organisations to overcome some of these barriers. For many years, funders have been thinking critically about their ability to add value in their relationships with grantees. Much of this has been seen in the 'Funding Plus' field, where funders go beyond the grant to support grantees' general organisational health and development. When looked at through a 'learning lens', it provides the opportunity to support learning in organisations, e.g. by investing in an organisation's data systems or its ability to critically reflect on its strategic direction. During this review, we have come across very few resources or examples that look specifically at how funders support learning in grantee organisations. Rather, the focus of the field to date has been on organisations' strategic health or supporting them to monitor and/or evaluate their work, with 'learning' seen as implicit in this activity.

Classically, what you see is quite a lot of emphasis on evaluation ... and monitoring ... The learning is almost seen to be implicit. The idea that, if you do all those things, then somehow you are learning.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

Based on our key informant interviews, as well as the few sources we found on funders' role in supporting ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees, there is a clear link between a grantee's ability and incentive to learn and the way in which funders interact with them through a range of grant-making and grant management practices.³⁹

An evocative grant maker looks for ways to cultivate critical thinking, learning, and organisational development among the group it funds. This requires a foundation to re-examine how it holds its grantees accountable, how it structures and sequences its grants, and how it deploys its program officers.⁴⁰

Based on my experiences, if the organisation feels they have a good relationship with their donor, and they have basic M&E skills, capacity and systems, and they have a leadership that supports learning as well, then they are way more open to learning at the start.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

To strengthen learning ... grant makers and grantees must develop a shared commitment to and understanding of learning, build relationships of trust and openness, invest in resources and skills to support learning and ensure that their systems and practices promote learning as well as accountability.⁴¹

In light of this, in Section 3.3, we explore how grant-making and grant management practices – including monitoring, evaluation and reporting – can support organisational learning within grantee organisations.

³⁹ See, e.g. Ross, J. (2015) 'Supporting learning? Exploring the relationship between grantee learning and grantmaking practice in the transparency and accountability sector', INTRAC; Taylor and Liadsky (2018), op. cit. 39; Easterling, D. (2016) 'How grantmaking can create adaptive organisations', *Standard Social Innovation Review*.

⁴⁰ Easterling (2016), ibid p. 48.

⁴¹ Ross, 2015, op. cit. 41, p. 39.

3.3 Encouraging and supporting ongoing learning in relationships with grantees

This section explores:

- **Grant-making practice:** the types of funding offered, who and what gets funded
- **Grant management practices:** funding relationships, the design and delivery of 'Funding Plus' and sharing and facilitating learning.
- **Monitoring, evaluation and reporting:** the balance between accountability and learning. M&E design. building on mutual interests, reporting processes and the principle of proportionality.

3.3.1 Grant-making practice

Types of funding

Both core and longer-term (at least three years) funding have been identified as enabling organisations to free up time and capacity for strategic thought and reflection, thus supporting organisational learning and development.

Core funding also plays a role in helping voluntary organisations to develop and improve, by allowing funds to be invested in performance improvement, research and development. This creates the possibility of providing space to adapt, innovate and develop imaginative solutions for meeting the needs of beneficiaries.⁴²

Short-term project funding usually does not allow the time or the resources for learning, and grantees are often focused on implementation, reporting and securing further funding ... Project funding can also constrain organisational learning by creating siloes within organisations and undermining the coherence of organisational strategy.⁴³

⁴² Cairns B., Mills, C. and Ridley, S. (2013) *Thinking about... Core Funding*, London: IVAR, p. 19.

⁴³ Ross (2015), op. cit. 41, p. 22.

These types of funding may not be the only way to achieve this, however. Rather, it is about adopting funding models that:

- **Appropriately resource organisations' learning capacity:** e.g. one of our informants noted that 5–10% has been the rule of thumb for resourcing M&E within a grant
- **Recognise the value of working with organisations over a period of time:** even if this is in different grant cycles
- **Acknowledge and enable grantees to adapt or change course over the course of a grant**

What and who gets funded?

What gets funded is an important factor when it comes to thinking about ongoing learning in funding relationships and, as one key informant explained, the nature and type of learning possible (or appropriate) depends on whether a grant or programme is perceived to be a safer bet or a more experimental approach:⁴⁴

Does the foundation want to make safe bets and see the changes that it's trying to support more as a linear process? ... Or does the funder have a more experimental approach with their funding, [in which case the funder may think:] 'we don't really know how change is going to happen, so let's fund this organisation to try something out'. [In these cases,] the learning will be the most important outcome of the funding.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

This is also echoed in the literature. Recent work by Shift Design explored some of the barriers that exist in support of innovation and development.⁴⁵ One of its recommendations was to 'move towards an ecosystem of funding and investment', whereby some grants support services or programmes that are proven and consistent, while others support organisations or programmes at a particular stage of development. For each, the value and intensity of learning, both for the funder and the funded party, will be different. However, this raises a question about power dynamics, as it could be argued that the funder's motivation and 'need' to learn – rather than grantees' own assessment of learning needs – determines the value of learning in these cases. This approach may risk ignoring the learning needs of organisations that are providing well-proven or consistent services.

It is also important to consider who gets funded and how this is assessed. As one key informant noted:

The challenge is, how do you identify those who are generally self-motivated in that way [i.e. to learn and adapt] compared to those that are motivated to deliver a good project and make the funder happy ... You have to look at the track records of organisations and understand whether they're really self-motivated to achieve a goal.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

In other words, funders need to consider grantees' willingness and ability to adapt according to the learning needs to be taken into account. Jenny Ross's work on grantee learning highlighted this, noting that 'commitment to learning' needs to be assessed or demonstrated within proposals and the grant selection process.⁴⁶ Taylor and Liadsky's work also highlights how funders can use grant application processes

⁴⁴ Hopkins, L. and Lloyd, R. (2019) 'Why funders need to practice adaptive portfolio management to support systems change' is a useful read on this topic.

⁴⁵ Shift Design (2017) 'Driving continuous improvement: Insights from funding social tech'.

⁴⁶ Ross (2015), op. cit. 41, p. 6.

as an opportunity to emphasise the importance of learning at the start of a funding relationships, by asking questions such as:

- Why do you see us as a good partner?
- How can we help each other learn?
- What do you hope to learn?
- How will you make use of evidence when making decisions?⁴⁷

Some of the key informants in this review have tried to take organisational learning capacity into account in their selection processes. Case study 6 said that they: *'...look for the strength of their [partners'] organisational appetite around evaluation and learning ... We also look at how they would continuously reflect and learn on what is and isn't working and feed that into continuous development ...'* Case study 4 also actively seeks partners who are comfortable with their expectations around learning: *'We work best with organisations that are continually reflective – and with people whose instinct is to communicate, share and explore these reflections'*.

3.3.2 Grant management practices

'Funding Plus'

Several interviewees said they provide capacity building support to grantees specifically around M&E, seeking to strengthen organisations' ability to collect, store and analyse the data and evidence they need in order to learn. Case study 5 offers their partners programme evaluation support via a university department as and when this is required or requested by grantees. Case study 8 is also starting to use its MEL team to build their partners' capacity.

One of the things that we have decided on is to fund strengthening M&E capacity of our grantees and helping them to put that system in place so they can have the data that they need to support their work as a first priority.

Key informant, funder

The evidence, however, suggests that supporting organisational learning needs to go beyond technical skills and advice to focus on the grantee organisation as a whole, including its leadership and strategic decision-making. It also needs to be delivered to a range of individuals within the organisation.

... Look for ways to build capacity at the organisational (rather than individual) level ... this strategy involves developing new ... or upgrading existing data systems, or trying to institutionalise the strategic use of data and evaluation in management and programmatic decision-making.⁴⁸

There are examples of support organisations responding to this. For example, Itad asks broad questions such as: *'What made you decide to work in that way?'* and *'When you say this was successful, how do you know that?'* A key informant from an infrastructure support organisations also noted that *'funders can play this role by asking those kinds of questions or supporting people like Itad to provide capacity support in those areas'*. The Innovations for Poverty Action's (IPA) Right-Fit Evidence Unit also recognises the need to focus not only on technical skills, but also on issues related to organisational culture.

⁴⁷ Taylor, A. and Liadsky, B. (2018) *Achieving greater impact by starting with learning*, Taylor Newberry Consulting, p. 4.

⁴⁸ GEO (2019), op. cit. 7, p. 56.

*Right-Fit Evidence is not only about ask[ing] the right questions, designing the right data collection approaches ... and analysing the data appropriately. It is also about creating the space for these insights to translate into program decisions and improvements ... IPA offers: Support to set up structured routines such as regular learning workshops ... advice on management and organisational structures that can embed learning.*⁴⁹

As well as offering learning focused support, offering 'Funding Plus' can help a funder demonstrate to grantees that they are interested – and willing to invest – in their organisation's broader development and sustainability. By signalling that funders believe in the organisation, this opens up the possibility of a more trusting, honest relationship.⁵⁰ One of the funders we spoke with asks grantees what they want to learn about and sees their 'Funding Plus' offer as a way to respond to these learning needs.

The importance of organisations being 'ready, willing and able' to receive, engage with and respond to organisational support is widely acknowledged in the literature on both 'Funding Plus' and capacity building support.⁵¹ IVAR's work both researching and providing strategic support within the voluntary sector suggests that:

- Readiness to learn is linked to organisations having a clear vision of their change agenda or mission
- Support that is aligned to an organisation's perceived or actual needs is more likely to 'stick'
- There are clear benefits in providing organisations with bespoke support (rather than off-the-shelf toolkits) that is geared towards accomplishing their own mission, rather than conforming to someone else's agenda.⁵²

IVAR has seen how the independence of trusts and foundations can give them licence to take a critical stance on capacity building and actively encourage space for alternative, less prescriptive types of learning and reflection.

The message is that delivering 'Funding Plus' in a way that is flexible and responds to the needs of individual grantees is going to be more effective and welcomed. A key component is the role of a 'critical friend' – someone with an independent perspective who can provide a facilitated space to explore and learn. This kind of support can help build the strategic capabilities of an organisation to reflect, review and adapt. Jenny Ross's work reflects this, suggesting that funders could provide support for 'critical friends' to work alongside grantees to help them understand how their learning can be strengthened and to develop their critical and adaptive capacities.⁵³

⁴⁹ www.poverty-action.org/right-fit-evidence/advisory-services#learning-organizations

⁵⁰ See Buckley, E., Burkeman, S., Cairns, B. and Harker, A. (2011) *Beyond money: A study of funding plus in the UK*, London: IVAR.

⁵¹ Cairns, B. and Chambers, R. (2008) 'ATM or development Agency: The challenges of moving beyond grantmaking', Paper presented to the ARNOVA Annual Conference, Philadelphia, USA, November 2008; Moran, R. Cairns, B. Howard, J. Macmillan, R. and Taylor, M. (2010) *BIG and small: Capacity building, small organisations and the Big Lottery Fund*, London: IVAR; Buckley et al. (2011), *ibid.*

⁵² See, e.g. Cairns and Chambers (2008), *ibid.*; Moran et al. (2010); Buckley et al. (2011) *ibid.*; Jenkins R. Buckley, E. and Cairns, B. (2013) *Turning a corner: Transition in the voluntary sector 2012-2013*, London: IVAR.

⁵³ Ross (2015), *op. cit.* 41, p. 7.

Opportunities to share and facilitate learning

Beyond funding, grant makers can add value by collating knowledge and expertise in order to share it with their grantees.⁵⁴ A number of the funders we spoke to believe they have a responsibility to share knowledge and insights with grantees and provide opportunities for networking and peer learning.⁵⁵ This happens in a range of ways, including conferences, blogs, briefing notes, action learning sets or by convening clusters of grantees who share common features or concerns.

We recognise that our partners are not operating in a static environment and that some of the most valuable support we can provide is by sharing our access to knowledge and policy developments that will impact on them and their work. We do this through convening one-off 'lunch and learns' or 'tea and talks' ... or ... present[ing] new research and ideas from the field.

Key informant, funder

Arguably, these activities help to support learning within organisations by providing access to knowledge and helping set the tone for funding relationships in which learning is an integral part. It was noted that this would be even more beneficial if funders could find ways to do it collectively. As a key informant from one of the infrastructure support organisations put it: '... they could create learning events, cross-funder, on themes. I think that would be stunning'.

A key informant from infrastructure support also noted the value of peer learning and shared problem solving: 'stepping outside of the work the organisation does immediately gets grantees into a self-reflective space'. But doing this well requires careful thought about who needs to be in the room, the timing of convenings and the mechanisms needed to help put learning into action.

... making sure that the programme officers making the grants are there [at the grantee convenings] I found to be really, really helpful because then it becomes a conversation about strategy and not just a conversation about research ... and the most successful ones without a doubt have been when we have tied the dissemination of the research and evaluations ... into a project or grant renewal cycle.

Key informant, funder

If meetings can be structured in a way where everybody has an opportunity to participate and truly reflect on data and key findings from research, monitoring and evaluation work ... and agree to expected outputs or actions coming out of the meeting, such as by asking 'how are we going to take this information or key findings and apply it to our programme or embed it within the next year's plans ... this will help move meetings towards more constructive and actionable learning rather than a checkbox dissemination event.

Key informant, funder

⁵⁴ See GEO (2015) *Learning together: Actionable approaches for grantmakers*, Washington: GEO

⁵⁵ GEO (2012) *Learn and let learn: Supporting learning communities for innovation and impact*, Washington: GEO provides some useful lessons for funders who are considering setting up 'communities of practice', drawing attention to nine success factors, including: making it relevant; inspiring a collective and bold vision; embracing a fluid structure; critically thinking about whether the grant maker themselves should always be in the room; and providing support to organisations to help them embed the learning in their day-to-day practice.

Creating spaces where grantees can share openly with one another takes time, resource⁵⁶ and careful facilitation. It is also important to consider the role and power that funders may play or hold in these spaces, in terms of influencing the learning agenda, inhibiting openness in convened spaces and supporting organisations to act on the basis of any learning.

We can facilitate learning between them, but we're the people in the room with the most money and most power to do something ... so there's a challenge that if learning becomes super powerful, and there's a feeling that change could happen, and you are the person doing least about it, then that's going to be an interesting challenge ... Also, how much is it serving your strategy as a funder, and how much is it really enabling those organisations to learn about the things that mean most to them? If you're committed to learning [as a funder] you've got to recognise that it's not always going to be the stuff that you care about that people will want to learn about.

Key informant, funder

Relational approaches

Trust is a critical ingredient for supporting learning in funding relationships.

Part of our belief is that if we develop really trusting relationships ... we will get so much more from that relationship in terms of openness and honesty about the data that is coming through from them, as well as the kind of reflections and learning about what is and isn't working. Our sense is that they will feel much more confident in picking up the phone and having a conversation about something that isn't working very well, or something that's bothering them or a challenge they're facing.

Key informant, funder

If there is a relationship that is based on trust and that trust is earned and built over time then ... it is a much more flexible and adaptive relationship, one that recognises that the nature of the business that we are in is one that is complex and complicated at times.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

Creating spaces where organisations feel safe to have open and honest conversations with their funder is likely to impact on their willingness to share organisational learning and thus affect the ability for either party to identify opportunities for adaptation or course correction, which in turn may contribute to more successful outcomes. This finding is also reflected in earlier IVAR research: '... when there is space to foster openness and develop trust, we have observed a virtuous circle in which both organisations are better able to realise their goals'.⁵⁷

The transformative power of relationships is well-documented in literature on social work: '... this relational model responds to the authentic in-depth needs of the whole person, thereby creating increased agency, empowerment and the possibility of enduring change'.⁵⁸ In a recent report, Collaborate also discussed the importance of relational working in terms of its ability to create authentic, impactful interventions when dealing with complex social issues.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ See GEO (2019), op. cit. 7, p. 52.

⁵⁷ Buckley, E., Cairns, B. and Jenkins, R. (2013) *Turning a corner: Transition in the voluntary sector 2012–2013*, London: IVAR, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Ornstein, E. D. and Ganzer, C. (2005) 'Relational Social Work: A model for the Future', in *Families in Society*, Oct-Dec, vol 86 (4), pp. 565-572, p. 572.

⁵⁹ Lowe and Plimmer (2019), op. cit. 38, pp. 11-12.

Explaining what a relational approach looks like in practice, key informants talked about the importance of having conversations outside of formal reporting structures in order to step away from transactional relationships that may otherwise be formed. Case study 2 deliberately holds end-of-grant learning conversations after any decisions about future or succession funding have been made. The importance of conversations as opposed to transactions – and the need to understand the goals and strategies of organisations outside of particular funding arrangements – have also been identified as important factors in relational funding.⁶⁰ A number of our case study funders saw conversations as an opportunity to ‘*discuss and explore*’, as well as a chance to get to know, and show a deep interest in, funded organisations. Case study 6 also talked about the value of investing in ‘*close working relationships*’ between portfolio managers and partners, ensuring that portfolio managers have the chance to encourage and support funded partners to put learning into practice.

We have a close working relationship between our portfolio managers and our projects so the portfolio managers can have conversations about ‘What are the insights?’ ‘What are the learnings coming out of your project?’ and ‘How are you going to use them to feed into improvement or developments?’

Key informant, funder

Relational funding can also be supported by the type of funding given and by taking time to build relationships around mutual interests:

One of the key ways [trust-based philanthropy] manifests in the practice of funders is that they offer multi-year, core funding to organisations. They do this because they have learnt to trust that the organisations they support have a mission and values which are aligned with their own.⁶¹

Finally, modelling a set of behaviours that demonstrate humility, respect and empathy is also important, whereby the contribution that each partner brings is valued and understood as complementary.⁶² To support this, funders can: share and act on their organisational learning; develop their own theories of change; and show that they are holding themselves to account for the things they said they would do in response to learning. These activities can help demonstrate that the funder places the same expectations on itself as it does on grantees.

The thing that convinces grantees in my opinion is when they see the funder walking their talk and actually having the things in place that they’re asking grantees to have in place.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

I think role modelling that [self-critical] behaviour is important. It helps to create a sense of ‘we’re in this together’ between the foundation and the grantee.

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

All of these actions help to ‘signal’ to grantees that a funder seeks an open, honest and trusting relationship, focused on learning together. However, this can be challenging for programme or grant officers who may face competing time pressures⁶³ or whose individual practice may not align with a relational approach.

⁶⁰ See Buckley et al., 2019; Buteau, E., Buchanan, P. and Chu, T. (2010) ‘Working with grantees: The keys to success and five program officers who exemplify them’, The Center for Effective Philanthropy, p. 8.

⁶¹ Lowe and Plimmer (2019) op. cit. 38, p. 14.

⁶² See Buckley et al. (2013), op. cit. 590; David, T. and Enright, K. (2015) *The Source Codes of Foundation Culture*, Washington: GEO, p. 17.

⁶³ See Easterling (2016), op. cit. 41.

When faced with a time constraint and a trade-off between accountability (internally, to managers and directors) and learning, [grant officers] focus on the 'need to know' for their internal reporting, crowding out space for learning.⁶⁴

I think really good programme officers here will ask their partners what is working, what's not working. They'll say things like 'let's take a step back from the actual day to day of the grant' ... I don't think many do that as standard practice, but it's just kind of best practice that I've witnessed and observed over time.

Key informant, funder

Also, due to the power dynamics of funding relationships, there can be a misalignment between the signals that a funder thinks it is sending out and how these are perceived and interpreted in practice.

Donors have to recognise that, in so far as they may want to have this approach, there will always be some reluctance or hesitation on the part of grantees to be totally honest ... you can't get away from the power that a donor has ...

Key informant, infrastructure organisation

If we are doing our jobs right, all of our grantees should feel empowered to ... share things like 'this is a piece that we are challenged with. Or this is a piece that I think we need to review ... but it is really hard to have those conversations if you are a grantee who feels they may lose funding if they are honest.

Key informant, funder

Finally, not every organisations will want such an involved relationship with their funder. Therefore, it is also important to be mindful of the type of relationship desired and beneficial for different organisations.

3.3.3 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

Careful examination of monitoring, evaluation and reporting practices is an essential part of supporting ongoing learning with grantees.

... if we think progress reporting is helping organisations to learn, it is not.

Key informant, funder

If you started with the learning and had everything flow from that, it would look different to most of the current M&E practices.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

Reframing accountability for learning

One of the main messages from this review is that accountability and learning are not mutually exclusive; the two can and should be aligned as 'complementary objectives'.⁶⁵

... Accountability serves as an engine that helps power the learning process. At the same time, by actively learning and making changes to an approach ... the same program officer can improve the effectiveness of [their] work

⁶⁴ Hopkins and Lloyd (2018), op. cit. 46.

⁶⁵ USAID (2019) 'How-To Note: Strategy-Level Portfolio Review'

and, in doing so, become more accountable to the foundation and the field.⁶⁶

For this to happen, M&E practices need to serve two purposes. They must demonstrate to funders and stakeholders that funds are being invested wisely while also providing useable data and information to support practice-based learning.⁶⁷ To do this, funders need to be open to rethinking the meaning and measures of success and the flexibility of accountability mechanisms.

Trustees will need to accept that a grantee's accountability is defined in terms of organisational learning and improved programming, rather than hitting predefined targets.⁶⁸

There should be an initial assumption that measurement indicators and methods may need to change as the intervention is delivered ... this should be factored into the evaluation design, thus more embedded models such as developmental evaluation are likely to be appropriate.⁶⁹

In other words, for learning to be encouraged and supported in grant-making relationships, funders need to find ways of holding organisations to account for it. Putting that into practice is not easy: it goes beyond the implementation of M&E tools and frameworks and is subject to the power dynamics previously discussed.

Attempts are being made to identify new ways of understanding and documenting accountability that responds to this complexity. For example, strategy testing takes a different approach to what gets documented and recorded as 'evidence' of programme activity.⁷⁰ Learning from adaptive management also suggests:

- Focusing on measuring high level outcomes
- Not tying programmes down to narrow or predefined outputs
- Regularly amending milestones and log-frames, based on a rigorous evidence trail of the decision-making process⁷¹

This means shifting reporting processes to focus on what is being learned about *how* outcomes are being achieved, rather than reporting against a static set of expected deliverables.⁷² However, this requires a more resource-intensive relationship with grantees, which may not always be possible or appropriate. In addition, a grantee's capacity to constantly refine and adapt programme delivery must also be considered.

Overall, the practice of bringing together learning and accountability mechanisms is still in development. For example, the Global Learning and Adaptive Management initiative is working to 'generate quality evidence and learning about MEL for

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*; Ramalingam, B. and Wild, L. (2019) 'Adaptive Rigour: bridging the art and science of adaptive management'; Taylor and Liadsky (2018), *op. cit.* 39, p. 20.

⁶⁸ Easterling (2016), *op. cit.* 41, p. 52.

⁶⁹ Ramalingam and Wild (2019), *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

⁷⁰ See Ladner, D. (2015) *Strategy Testing: An innovative approach to monitoring highly flexible aid programs*, San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, p. 5.

⁷¹ See Donovan, E. (2017) What 'putting learning at the centre' looks like in practice; Wild, L. and Cummings, C. (2016) *A set of mini case studies: What can we learn from DFID's experience with adaptive programming?*, ODI.

⁷² Ramalingam B., Wild, L. and Buffardi, A. L. (2019) 'Making adaptive rigour work: Principles and practices for strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management'. ODI briefing paper, p. 11.

Adaptive Management'.⁷³ Some of these mechanisms may be too far removed from standard monitoring practices for some funders and are not appropriate in all instances. But M&E frameworks can be used to incentivise and reward organisations for learning, rather than for whether they have met a set of indicators and outcomes that were developed on the basis of 'certainty'.⁷⁴ Thus amending or revising these accountability mechanisms can change the nature of the conversations with grantees and the type of information demands placed on them, as well as influence the nature of learning relationship possible.

If your conversations are solely based on targets, financial accountability, etc., then you are essentially signalling to the grantee that these are the things that are most important ... If you are asking broader questions about 'what are you really trying to achieve', 'how do you plan to do that', 'who do you plan to work with', 'how do you see that unfolding' ... then you have pretty much framed the conversation ...

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

Some of our examples are exploring this. Case study 1, for example, has removed targets from grants because they found them to be 'counter-productive' and 'it encouraged a mindset among grantees that evaluation was all about accountability to the funder rather than improving and learning for their own service'. Instead, there is a sense that aspiring to, and being driven by, shared outcomes is enough of an accountability mechanism itself. Case study 2, on the other hand, gives organisations the opportunity to review and amend outcomes during the course of the grant, thus signalling to organisations that there is an understanding that change and adaptation will occur and that this is okay, as opposed to something punishable.

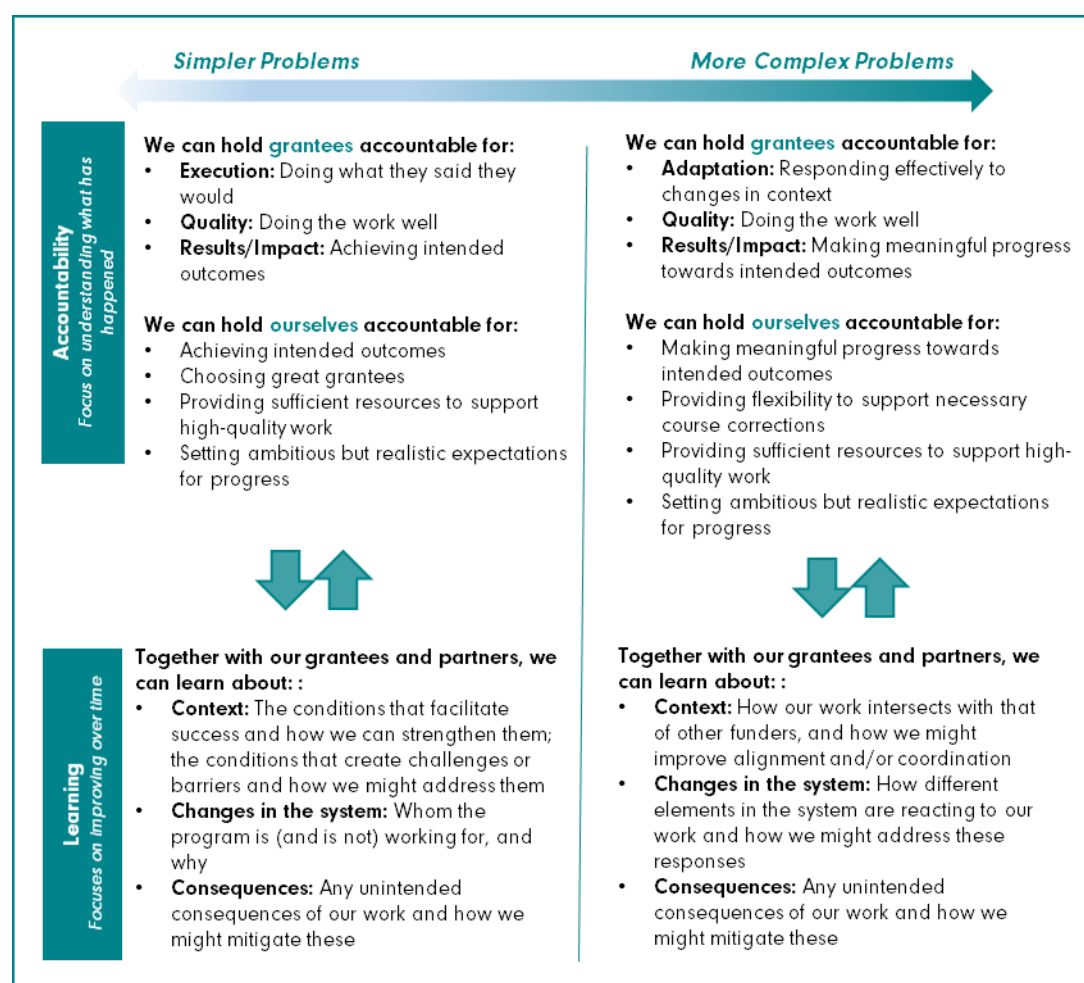
Holley and Parkhurst reflected on their experience of managing the tension between learning and accountability. In particular, they found it useful to think through the different accountability and learning mechanisms for simpler vs more complex problems, thus offering a practical way to start thinking about when and how to adjust M&E frameworks.⁷⁵

⁷³ Wild and Ramalingham (2018), op. cit. 69.

⁷⁴ See Beer, T. (2019) *Realigning foundation trustees to incentivise learning*, Washington: Center for Evaluation Innovation.

⁷⁵ Holley, M. J. and Parkhurst, M. (2019) 'Shifting mindsets: How meaningful accountability systems can strengthen foundation learning and improve impact', in *Foundation Review*, vol 11(1), pp. 81-93.

Figure 1. A framework for understanding the complementary roles of learning and accountability⁷⁶



Monitoring and evaluation design

Being clear about the balance required between accountability and learning – and indeed, rethinking the meaning of accountability in certain circumstances – also means making decisions about evaluation design and prioritisation. For example, IVAR maps the type of evaluative approaches – accountability, demonstrating impact, strategic learning, etc. – that may be best suited to evaluation purpose.⁷⁷ Scherer also explored the integration of accountability and learning by focusing on the type of evaluative approach (and metrics) that may be appropriate for different types of grant/programme.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 84.

⁷⁷ IVAR (2016) *Improving Evaluation Design*, London: IVAR.

⁷⁸ Scherer, S. (2016) 'Developing a framework for grant evaluation: integrating accountability and learning', in *The Foundation Review*, vol 8 (2), pp. 50-63.

Figure 2. Evaluative approaches, by grant type⁷⁹

Grant type	Dimensions and Elements of Evaluation			
	Scope	Method	Metric (with examples)	Intensity
Project/program	Program	Quantitative	Outputs (numbers served)	Low
Strategic initiatives	Program/ community	Qualitative/ experiential	Outcomes (percentage improvement in key indicator(s))	High
Capacity building (strategic planning, professional development)	Organization	Qualitative/ experiential	Learning (demonstrated shift in organizational behaviour)	Low
Capacity building (infrastructure, systems)	Organization	Qualitative/ experiential	Outputs (system implemented) Outcomes (demonstrated improvement in organizational mission achievement)	Low
Capital	Varies widely; organization or community	Varies widely, quantitative or experiential	Varies widely; outputs (building completed)/ outcomes (impact on community)	Varies widely, from low to high
Advocacy	Community	Qualitative/ experiential	Varies widely; inputs (doing the right things)/ outputs (providing education) Outcomes (policy change)	Medium
General operating support	Organization	Experiential	Inputs, Outcomes	Varies, from low to high

When there is a focus on learning, the methods and timing of evaluative activity and data collection may be different. This review draws attention to the importance of undertaking evaluative activity that confirms or tests assumptions within a theory of change (drawing from methods such as developmental evaluation. M&E activity that tracks changes in context may also be important when working in complex environments.⁸⁰ Tanya Beer's recent work highlights the value of prioritising evaluative activity where less is known about an issue and where most can be learnt, as opposed to prioritising activity around the stuff that may already be known.⁸¹ There is also an emerging discussion about the need to be mindful of equity and learning, ensuring that different types of knowledge, data and perspectives are included in, and inform, evaluation findings.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁸⁰ See USAID (2017) *Establishing a learning agenda*, Washington: USAID.

⁸¹ Beer (2019), op. cit. 76.

⁸² See GEO (2019), op. cit. 7, pp. 33-34; USAID (2018) 'Discussion Note: Adaptive management', pp. 5-7.

Overall, the message is that funders need to be open to the range and diversity of evaluation methods that may be appropriate, depending on:

- The type of learning and accountability requirements in place
- What needs to be learnt
- The complexity of the environment in which one is working⁸³

This is explicit within Case study 7's evaluation policy, which lays out the type of evaluative approaches best suited to different scenarios and when evaluation should be a priority (e.g. to fill knowledge gaps, reflect at critical junctures, or assess a new operational model or approach). As Tanya Beer stated, foundations need to 'make tougher choices about evaluation and learning activities'.⁸⁴ This includes funders seeking to understand what grantees would find most useful by asking: Why do they want to learn, and about what? What support do they need to ensure they prioritise and act on their learning? What role can funders most usefully play? What tools are helpful?

Recognise and build on mutual interests

The potential tension between accountability and learning discussed earlier also exists for grantee organisations, as they try to manage accountability to funders and stakeholders while being responsive to the needs of their community(ies).

This suggests that there are likely to be benefits for both funders and grantees if accountability mechanisms are revised in a way that aligns accountability and learning. Focusing on the mutual interests of both parties when designing M&E frameworks may help here.

Several key informants noted that grantees' and funders' learning questions are often the same: What works for whom and in what contexts? How can we ensure we're reaching the people who need the support most? Are they doing the right things for their issues? What are other organisations doing in our sector?

Finding ways to tap in to these mutual learning questions, and present M&E as a way to help collectively explore them, is more likely to result in useful learning for all parties and build collective ownership.

[It's about asking] what are the three things, as you go about this project, that you want to learn about ... that you're going to keep an eye out for.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

Making sure that non-profits can learn what they need to know for their own programs and at their own stage of development – rather than simply responding to grant maker reporting requirements – is essential.⁸⁵

Reporting processes

Reporting is one of the main ways that organisations communicate with their funders and there is much debate within the sector about how to make these processes less burdensome for grantees, while ensuring they remain useful. IVAR's work around aligned reporting⁸⁶ is supporting funders to experiment with different ways of using reporting mechanisms to encourage organisations to reflect and learn, such as

⁸³ Op cit 80

⁸⁴ Beer, T. (2016) 'How can we help evaluation and learning deliver on its promise?', The Center for Effective Philanthropy.

⁸⁵ GEO (2019), op. cit. 7, p. 55.

⁸⁶ <https://www.ivar.org.uk/aligning-grant-reporting/>

undertaking midway and end-of-grant conversations, with a focus on reflection and lessons learnt. Some funders are also seeking feedback on, or reflecting themselves about, what more they could do to help organisations achieve their desired outcomes as part of the reporting process. This arguably goes some way to altering the power dynamic in the relationship by reframing reporting as a way for both parties to learn. Finally, some are looking to align reporting with more meaningful learning cycles (rather than standardised 6 or 12-monthly ones) to help encourage more useful opportunities to pause and reflect.

There are key moments in the life of our projects that will allow you to be able to make little changes. But whether that is just at the six-monthly review or your annual review ... if those donors are already not recognising the fact that the world doesn't work in the box of those six months and twelve months ...

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

One of our examples is attempting to address this by enabling funded partners to upload data and information at times that suit them. As one of our funder key informants said: 'We are not imposing reporting cycles ... we are having a conversation about when they are likely to report. When would be a good time for them to pause and reflect on what they are learning?'

The principle of proportionality

The principle of proportionality is often discussed in relation to M&E and reporting, ensuring that the expectations are fair and reasonable according to the amount of funding or organisation size, so as 'not to place an undue burden on the recipient'.⁸⁷ This principle also arises in discussions around learning:

The word that pops into my mind is proportionality ... if we start to shift from accountability more to learning, but then learning becomes a burden and it stifles us in our doing, then I think we'd be doing everyone a disservice.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

... There's something about the size of the investment and about the level of complexity involved ... There might be a bunch of things [the funder] funds at quite a high level that are fairly straightforward and don't need to do a whole lot of testing and learning ... But there will some areas that they work in that are about very difficult and complex areas that need behaviour change and that's one area to start with prioritising.

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

One way to manage this might be to think about the different levels of complexity and risk within a funding portfolio and what that means for the type of learning that is appropriate or required. This means thinking about the 'intensity' of learning required as well as what may be learnt.

Thinking about it in the way an investment manager thinks about their portfolio, one of them may be a really safe bet – it has been going on for a long time and the organisation has a really good reputation in that space. There may be something a bit riskier ... What kind of relationship do we want to foster with these particular grantees? Where are they now? Where do we want to be with them in five years' time? What role can we play in helping them to reach the end point that they want?

Key informant, infrastructure support organisation

⁸⁷ Charities Evaluation Services (2010), op. cit. 4, p. 12.

A grant maker providing one-year funding may not care so much about learning and therefore the expected relationship with the grant recipient requires less investment.⁸⁸

3.4 Summary

This section of the report has drawn together, and touched upon, several ongoing debates on the role and behaviour of funders in order to reflect on what funders can do to support and encourage ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees. The findings demonstrate that this cannot be done overnight; nor should responsibility for it lie with a few members of staff within an organisation. Rather, it requires learning within grantees to be incentivised and valued by funders. Key elements of this relate to:

- How accountability is thought about and how that impacts on what gets measured and recorded within funding cycles
- What role and function funding plus is seen to play, how this is delivered in a way that places 'learning' at the centre and the extent to which it is driven by an organisation's own learning needs
- How funders' internal knowledge and information is utilised and shared with grantees.
- The signals that are given out to grantees based on the different systems, processes and conversations that take place, and thus the platform that this provides for learning to flourish.

Some of the things funders have found helpful in encouraging learning in their relationships with grantees include:

- **Developing relational approaches** to establish relationships that are based on trust and mutual interest to encourage open and honest dialogue; model behaviours and practices that demonstrate to grantees how the funder is making use of, and valuing, learning; and making time for conversations with grantees outside of formal reporting structures.
- **Reframing accountability for learning in M&E frameworks** by recognising that accountability and learning can be complementary objectives; identifying mutual learning questions; being mindful that both are important but that any one of these may be more important at different times (depending on the risk and complexity of the funding problem in hand); carefully selecting evaluation methods that offer timely data and evidence so that lessons can be identified and applied to ongoing programme design or service intervention; valuing different perspectives and types of data; and valuing learning as an outcome in its own right (in certain circumstances).
- **Giving funding** that creates space for strategic reflection and development; provides appropriate resource for MEL activity; and is flexible enough to enable organisations to respond to the things they learn.
- **Developing a nuanced approach to learning relationships across a varied grants portfolio** by combining a mixture of 'safer bets' with more experimental approaches; being clear about the extent to which learning may be the main/justifiable outcome; and actively gauging organisations' learning and adaptive capacity.
- **Using 'Funding Plus' mechanisms** to invest in organisations as a whole, recognising the value of grantees having strong, supportive leadership and cultures whereby data and evidence, and thus learning, can be collected

⁸⁸ Taylor and Liadsky (2018), op. cit. 39, p. 23.

and used; signalling to grantees that you are interested in the organisation's overall health and mission, thus providing a platform from which open and honest conversations may flourish; providing M&E support that is holistic both in terms of content and audience, and also goes beyond technical expertise.

- **Reframing reporting processes** as an opportunity to encourage reflection and learning on both sides.
- **Creating opportunities to share and facilitate learning** by making use of funders' knowledge and information to share and contribute learning to a field; and using funders' convening power to bring grantees, as well as other stakeholders, together to encourage peer learning and to push agendas forward.

4. Summary learning

In this section of the report, we draw together the key messages from our review of over 100 sources and 11 key informant interviews and reflect on what these mean for funders seeking to drive continuous learning in both their own, and funded, organisations.

The review set out to explore two questions:

- 1. What and how do funders learn from their work, and how do they use that to improve?**
- 2. How do funders encourage and support a focus on ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees?**

We have found that there are three overarching reasons why funders focus on learning:

1. To understand/gather evidence about existing or emerging problems in society that they may want to respond to
2. To ensure that financial assets are directed in the most useful way
3. To work with grantees, and structure financial support, in ways that best support them to achieve/deliver their outcomes/benefits in line with their objectives

The extent to which each of these reasons is the priority or focus will influence decisions about:

- The questions being asked
- The type of knowledge and data that are required and valued to answer those questions
- The methods used to collect and gather that knowledge and data
- The balance funders strike between prioritising their own learning needs with their role in supporting grantees to learn
- Where in the decision-making process data and evidence are used
- The degree to which data is collated and shared, and with whom

In terms of how funders are learning, practice varies in accordance with different contexts and constraints such as organisational size, history and routes of internal accountability. However, across this variation, our review suggests that funders are attending to a range of factors that can enable or inhibit organisational learning, including issues related to: organisational leadership and management; organisational culture; knowledge management practices; and investment and use of organisational resources. The findings suggest that effective learning organisations are those that:

- Have leadership that consciously values, models and incentivises learning
- Are clear about the purpose for learning
- Create opportunities for learning at all levels of the organisation
- Accept a degree of risk and experimentation in order to encourage honest reflection

- View strategy as an emergent and evolving process
- Actively work to embed norms, behaviours and learning habits into day-to-day practice
- Invest in skills across the organisation, such as facilitation, data analysis, asking good questions and systems thinking (in addition to technical learning skills)
- Reframe internal accountability mechanisms with a focus on learning
- Value a range of different types of knowledge and evidence
- Code and collate data with intended analysis in mind
- Share knowledge and information that is co-produced internally and is accessible to different audiences

Turning to how funders encourage and support ongoing learning in their relationship with grantees, this review has found that funders can make use of a range of tools that span both their grant-making and grant management practices, as well as their monitoring, evaluation and reporting frameworks, to incentivise and encourage organisations to prioritise and act upon their organisational learning. In particular, this review has drawn attention to:

- **Funding:** provision of core, long-term and/or flexible funding can encourage and support learning by creating space and capacity for organisations to engage in strategic reflection and development, respond to the things they are learning, and ensure that they can appropriately resource their MEL activity.
- **Relational approaches:** reframing the grant relationship to one that is increasingly collaborative rather than transactional, and based on mutual interests and trust, can create an environment whereby grantees may be more willing to share their learning and provide funders with the opportunity to encourage organisations to reflect and act on that learning.
- **Reflecting critically on your added value as a funder:** providing capacity building support in a way that takes account of the range of organisational factors that can impact on organisational learning (i.e. not just technical M&E capacity and skills), as well as creating opportunities to share and facilitate learning with, and for, grantees.
- **Reframing accountability for learning in M&E frameworks and reporting processes:** finding ways to incentivise learning and ensure that organisations' own learning needs are taken into account when designing monitoring, evaluation and reporting frameworks and processes.
- **Proportionality:** accepting that learning may be more or less intense across a varied grants portfolio.
- **Power dynamics:** being mindful of the pressures and internal barriers facing many voluntary organisations, as well as how the inherent power dynamics in funding relationships can impact on the incentives that exist for grantees to be honest about, and adapt in response to, their learning.

However, this review found very few resources or examples that look specifically at how funders support grantees to learn. Rather, the focus of the field to date has been on the funder's role in providing support that strengthens the strategic health and sustainability of organisations, or in providing M&E support, with 'learning' seen as implicit in this activity. This review has also shown that supporting grantees to learn will often fall to, and take place during the interactions with, Grant Managers/Officers and grantees. Therefore, there would be value in exploring the role and practices of individual Grant Managers/Officers in supporting grantees to learn, as well as taking account of grantees' demand for funders to support them in this way,

Our findings suggest that funders' own internal learning and their role in supporting others to learn often go hand-in-hand and can be mutually reinforcing.

A foundation's ability to achieve desired results depends on the learning of grantees, as well as its internal operations and its own capacity to learn.⁸⁹

Foundation leaders ... cannot merely adopt theories of change, metrics, etc. and expect that effectiveness will follow ... They need to make changes to their organisational structure to enable them to work on the front lines of strategy. They need to engage with grantees as full partners in developing and implementing strategy.⁹⁰

In other words, there can be a reciprocal relationship between a funders' internal learning needs and the extent to which they choose to support and encourage ongoing learning in their relationships with grantees. The purpose of learning within a funding organisation frames the type of data and information requests made of grantees, as well as the types of conversation that take place within those funding relationships. As such, the extent to which a funder's own internal learning questions align with those of their grantees may impact on funders' ability to really support grantees to learn. This dynamic is an important reminder of the power that funders have in shaping the types of learning opportunity provided for grantees and the degree to which they are involved in setting learning agendas. For example, is it okay for a grantee to say that their main learning need is staff recruitment rather than establishing whether a particular intervention is more/less successful in different contexts?

Overall, the review suggests that it can take time to create the conditions to learn within organisations and there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. In light of this, funders would be better placed to focus on:

- Prioritising their learning questions
- Finding ways to pilot or experiment with different learning practice (internally and with grantees) in order to reflect on what works in different contexts
- Developing differentiated approaches to learning across their work, thinking critically about the range of tools available (i.e. grant-making and grant management practices, as well as monitoring, evaluation and reporting frameworks/approaches) and what may be most useful to apply in different contexts

⁸⁹ IVAR (2017), op. cit. 5, p. 5.

⁹⁰ Patrizi, P. and Thompson, E. H. (2011) 'Beyond the veneer of strategic philanthropy,' in *Foundation Review*, vol 2(3), pp. 52-60.

Appendix 1:

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