

The Development Research Group's Response to the Research Evaluation

World Bank, April 2007

This note represents the Development Research Group's (DECRG) action response to the recent Evaluation of World Bank Research (1998-2005) (<http://econ.worldbank.org/research/evaluations>). The Group welcomed the thoroughness of the Panel's and the Evaluators' efforts, and their overall endorsement of the high quality and relevance of Bank research. Like the Chief Economist, DECRG does not agree with all of the Panel's conclusions or recommendations, and it notes that, because the Panel reviewed all Bank research, its conclusions apply to DECRG with different degrees of focus. Nevertheless, the Group welcomes the Panel's reflections as useful inputs into its own management decisions and processes and has reflected deeply on them.

DECRG managers were involved in helping to frame the Chief Economist's Response and have discussed the Evaluation's findings at some length. In addition, a staff working group considered the Evaluation in depth, including a wide consultation process within the Group, and the results have been considered by all research teams within the Group. The staff report to DECRG management is available at <http://econ.worldbank.org/research/evaluation-response> and in a few cases individual responses on technical issues where we believe the Report is seriously unbalanced are available at <http://econ.worldbank.org/programs/poverty> (see the "debates" box on the lower right side). Overall, however, DECRG management and staff have not entered into public debate on the Report even though they believe that many detailed statements that it contains would benefit from clarification or additional context. The current note sets out briefly the areas in which DECRG will take action as a result of the Group's reflection on the Evaluation, given the tight budgetary situation.

Recruitment

With a view to maintaining the Group's intellectual vigor and its access to frontier research techniques and also to allow the Group to evolve into new areas, we will place a very high priority on recruiting at least one new Young Economist every year.

Staff Turnover

Regular recruitment requires regular departures. The DECRG Management Team has always devoted time to identifying weaker performers both collectively and in meetings between individual research managers, the Director and HR; and it has always worked hard with any staff who are struggling to improve their performance. It now commits itself to be more rigorous in this process, to ensure greater uniformity across the Group via more collective review, and to be more explicit and transparent with the staff

involved. Relatedly, management will be more explicit and public in identifying the components of good performance.

Publication “Requirements”

The Evaluation devoted some space to the supposed requirement that staff publish at least two pieces of research per year and, despite most of their comment being adverse, ultimately suggested maintaining it. The staff working group reported considerable variation in staff’s understanding of policy in this area. For the sake of both groups we reiterate it here.

Publication, especially in peer-reviewed journals, is essential to the credibility of Bank research and advice: it forces us to be clear and explicit about our research, it provides one form of quality check, it offers dissemination and a chance to influence the important audience comprised of other researchers, and it increases the credibility of policy advice if the underlying research has passed through this channel and its author known to have met the standards of his/her peers. Publication is not sufficient to guarantee quality and relevance of a given piece of research, but for a body of research over the long run it is almost certainly necessary. For this reason, there is a presumption that all researchers should publish and DECRG managers estimate that two pieces a year represents a reasonable lower bound. It is not a “rule” or “requirement,” however. There have always been exceptions – for example, where researchers embark on new areas, extensive operational or internally driven work, where their research is exceptionally demanding or just for bad luck with journals. No one has ever been penalized for one year’s shortfall, but persistent inability or unwillingness to publish in reasonable outlets would indicate unsuitability for DECRG. There are also exceptions on the other side: prolific publishers have been asked to focus on quality rather than quantity and some staff have been instructed to ensure that their publications better reflect the Bank objective of furthering policy formulation for the elimination of poverty. Thus researchers are required to consult their managers fully about their publishing plans and managers will, as currently, discuss potential difficulties with the DECRG Management Team as a whole.

As an aside, if one reviews the research outputs ranked by the Evaluators as “average” or below, most come from prolific and high-quality publishers who are way beyond the threshold of two, rather than from weak publishers. As noted in the Chief Economist’s Response, DEC does not agree that the Bank has a disproportionate tail of “undistinguished” publications but, to the extent that the Evaluators’ views identify one, it appears to bear no correlation with the “count of two.”

Statistical Standards

The Evaluation is critical of Bank statistical standards in several dimensions. DECRG already has a policy for making data available to other researchers and, in some areas likely to generate high demand, expends considerable resources on the necessary interfaces. We accept, however, that more could be done in terms of dissemination, documentation and, on occasion, basic methods. Recognizing the indissoluble connection between research and data, DECRG is part of a DEC bid for resources to address the

criticisms of the Evaluation. DECRG will stress the substantive engagement of data and statistical specialists in the design and management of research data collection and its dissemination. DECDG will handle the Bank's development of standards internally and externally. Collectively, the two teams will represent a significant body of expertise that will lift statistical activity to a new level Bank-wide. DECRG management is committed to trying to ensure that this process remains enabling, substantive and constructive, rather than bureaucratic and disabling, but we recognize that adhering to enhanced standards will at times require more staff time and resources; hence the need for the funds sought.

The Evaluation called for an Ethics Board, notably for human subjects protection. As part of our engagement with the Chief Economist's response, DECRG will establish a small working group to explore practices elsewhere and make suggestions to the Management Team that might then go forward to the Chief Economist.

The Research Support Budget/Research Committee

Discussion of the Evaluation has frequently led back to the nature and duties of the Research Committee and the Research Support Budget (RSB). These are matters for the Chief Economist, but, to the maximum extent possible DECRG management will support his intentions to reduce the burden of application to RSB for established researchers operating in a context of sound research management; to make *ex post* and interim evaluation substantive, constructive and as light as is consistent with agreed objectives; to extend the visitors' program and adapt it to enhance its relevance to the research program; and to relax some of the constraints on the activities that RSB will fund.

Links with academia

The Evaluation Report makes the case that the Bank should strengthen its links with academia – especially the stronger parts of it. DECRG shares this goal but does not see “outsourcing research” as a viable way of improving the quality, relevance and impact of Bank research. Rather we will seek ways of binding academics more strongly into the DECRG program and of calling on them to help us selectively extend our research – for example, via focused conferences.

We will keep separate – and urge others in the Bank to keep separate – the objectives of drawing on the best of academia and the building of research capacity in developing countries. Regrettably, these rarely come together; capacity building entails a different set of skills from research per se and, if it is to be broad and effective, requires major expenditure of resources that are currently not available. Some of the Evaluators' comments on research quality and the lack of capacity building effort reflect the failure to keep these tasks separate and the fact that they did not seek or receive information on capacity-building activities.

Research quality

The Development Research Group believes that delivering a strong flow of quality research is its overwhelming objective, where quality includes rigor, originality and relevance to development as perceived both inside and outside the Bank. The Evaluation

offers strong endorsement of our efforts over 1998-2005. Nonetheless, the whole staff and Management Team have taken the opportunity of the Evaluation to reaffirm our belief in this objective and to reassess and rebalance our policies and practices to achieve it even better in the future.