Enhancing learning in the IS Academies

Patricia van Delft and Dorothea Hilhorst

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This research brief describes current mechanisms for learning in so-called 'IS Academies', collaborative projects of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), academic institutes, and development agencies. Included are important factors affecting learning, guidelines for policy-relevant research, and the main communication methods of the IS Academy on Human Security in Fragile States (HSFS). The IS Academies were established by MFA, initially forming collaborations between MFA and academic institutes, and later also involving development agencies. They stem from the wish for more connection between MFA and the 'outside world', and involve a mixture of various kinds of research. Nevertheless, the midterm review of the IS Academy HSFS revealed that learning processes between academics, policymakers and practitioners could be improved. This led to a short research, of which this research brief aims to share the main findings, to contribute to improved collaboration between research institutes, NGOs, and the government.

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The IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States kick-off week (Zeist, 2009).

Introduction

The IS Academies were established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 2005. They initially formed collaborations between MFA and academic institutes. New generation Academies have become tripartite and also involve development agencies. The initial reason for the MFA to start the IS Academy was the wish for more connection between MFA and knowledge institutes. This would allow MFA to stay in touch with the 'outside world', comprising both academic institutes and MFOs [1], and benefit from academic input on policy issues in international development cooperation.

The IS Academies initially opted for PhD research in order to enhance the education of 'a new breed' of academic professionals with a keen interest in interaction with policy and practice. The newer Academies usually have a mixture of PhD research and other types of research. The IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States started in 2008. The IS Academy HSFS combines PhD research with MSc research, consultancies, and two learning trajectories with local partners.

The midterm review of the IS Academy HSFS in April 2011 revealed that learning processes between academics, policymakers and practitioners could be improved. In order to enrich insights from the review with lessons from other IS Academies and learning processes between academic and development institutions, a brief research was commissioned to Patricia van Delft. Her interviews with IS Academy participants and experts formed the basis of this research brief that reflects lessons about learning in the IS Academies and outlines the communication policy of the IS Academy HSFS. [2]

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1   'Medefinancieringsorganisaties': NGOs within the co-financing system funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2   More information on this IS Academy can be found at: www.ISAcademyHSFS.org. The authors can be contacted through the coordinator of the IS Academy: bart.weijs@wur.nl.

IS Academy mechanisms for interaction

From the start, the IS Academies built in several mechanisms for learning. An important aspect is the internship PhD candidates are required to do within MFA or with one of the Embassies. In addition, there is a guiding committee and students are invited to present their research and findings at MFA.

With the NGOs that participate in the new generation of IS Academies, this kind of learning is structured in different ways. In the IS Academy HSFS, two NGOs have own staff doing a PhD, two NGOs have engaged in research trajectories with local partners, and one NGO has embarked on a PhD project where the candidate is linked to a local office and often involved in the NGO's activities. See the next page for more examples of different types of interactions within the IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States.

An important question is how to ensure that learning actually takes place. Having the mechanisms in place may not be enough. It was anticipated when the Academies were established that bringing together people from different backgrounds (academic and practical) would automatically lead to valuable exchanges and mutual contributions in various forms.

The MFA divisions and NGOs involved in the Academies are supposed to formulate their own learning objectives at the start of the collaboration with the student, as well as strategies to ensure learning. The level at which this is done and the extent to which these objectives play a role beyond their formulation differs considerably. Most agencies do not have a specific mechanism to facilitate internal learning, let alone learning in interaction.

The basis for the IS Academy continues to be that researchers and practitioners actively work together for several years. Learning then becomes overwhelmingly non-structured and non-institutionalised. The question is whether interaction automatically leads to learning, or put differently, the question is how learning can be enhanced.
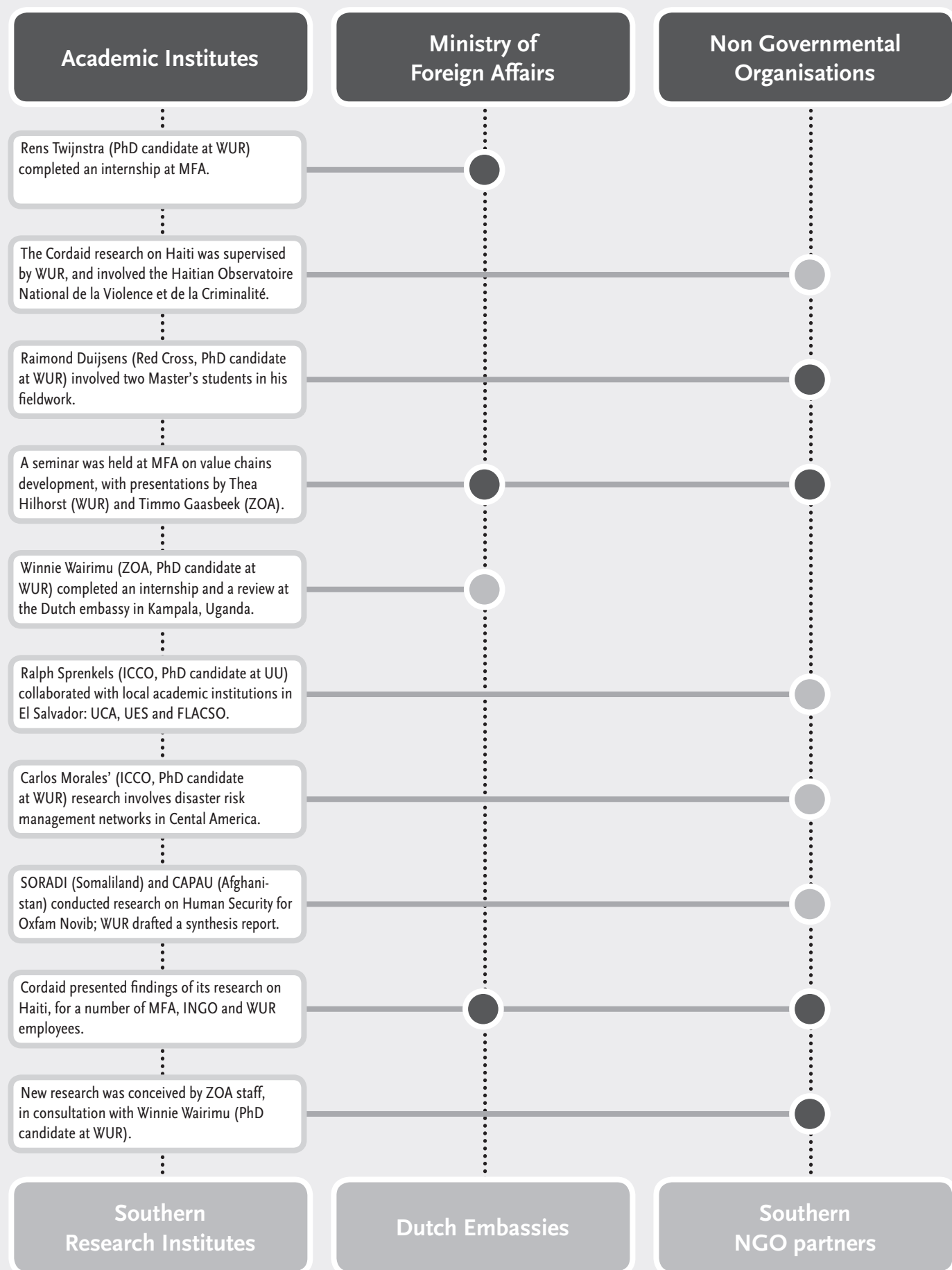
Factors affecting learning in the IS Academies

The interviews brought out a number of factors that are important in enhancing learning in the IS academies.

Time allocation
Learning takes time. Staff at NGOs and MFA should make time available for reflection and to enable academy researchers to share their findings. Staff interviewed stated that it can be difficult to live up to this expectation, given their daily activities and the deadlines inherent to their work.

Unless learning and exchanging is integrated into the daily work of organisations, or sharing with relevant staff is properly planned, there will be few opportunities for researchers to share their findings in a sustainable way with staff. Time would be less of an issue if learning would come with the job. Highly valued and probably under-utilized are therefore 'learning on the job' mechanisms through joint field visits, e.g. partner visits or evaluations. These will allow NGO staff and researchers to learn together from practice and from each other.

Different Types of Interactions within the IS Academy Human Security in Fragile States

Academic Institutes	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Non Governmental Organisations

Rens Twijnstra (PhD candidate at WUR) completed an internship at MFA.

The Cordaid research on Haiti was supervised by WUR, and involved the Haitian Observatoire National de la Violence et de la Criminalité.

Raimond Duijsens (Red Cross, PhD candidate at WUR) involved two Master's students in his fieldwork.

A seminar was held at MFA on value chains development, with presentations by Thea Hilhorst (WUR) and Timmo Gaasbeek (ZOA).

Winnie Wairimu (ZOA, PhD candidate at WUR) completed an internship and a review at the Dutch embassy in Kampala, Uganda.

Ralph Sprenkels (ICCO, PhD candidate at UU) collaborated with local academic institutions in El Salvador: UCA, UES and FLACSO.

Carlos Morales' (ICCO, PhD candidate at WUR) research involves disaster risk management networks in Cental America.

SORADI (Somaliland) and CAPAU (Afghanistan) conducted research on Human Security for Oxfam Novib; WUR drafted a synthesis report.

Cordaid presented findings of its research on Haiti, for a number of MFA, INGO and WUR employees.

New research was conceived by ZOA staff, in consultation with Winnie Wairimu (PhD candidate at WUR).

Southern Research Institutes	Dutch Embassies	Southern NGO partners

Compiled by Bart Weijs

The benefits of a joint evaluation

"The programme evaluation was done together with the PhD student. This proved very useful, since the student was able to look at the local situation from a non-NGO perspective. Traditionally, NGOs focus on solutions and prefer to intervene focusing on a specific issue. The student provided us with the more holistic beneficiary perspective, which showed us the situation needed a more integrated approach and not just an intervention on only one issue. This approach was new to our NGO."

(NGO staff member)

Learning policy

Not all organisations explicitly encourage learning or using research for their own benefit. This is especially the case for academic research, which – compared with evaluations – is less immediately relevant and less embedded in procedures of feedback and response. In some cases, the specific learning department or learning officer has disappeared for budget reasons or priority changes. A learning policy is considered valuable for IS Academies to allow a better articulation of objectives, targeting and means of learning.

The role of IS Academy staff

IS Academy staff is set for academic supervision, yet should also have a role in enhancing the interaction and learning in the IS Academies. These are some of the roles interviewed people expect from the staff of the IS Academies:

- Plan sessions for sharing and learning, both between agencies and within agencies with specific researchers. Even though PhD candidates feel responsible for planning interaction, staff could have an active role in facilitating and reminding researchers to interact frequently with their stakeholders.
- Ensure that communication skills and an interest in interactive research are an important criterion in selecting researchers in the IS Academy.
- Ensure the formation of guiding committees around the different research projects and plan and monitor the regular interaction with these committees.
- Actively supervise and guide research products for interaction and learning. Drawing out lessons for policy and practice from research and presenting these effectively requires supervision from senior researchers.

The role of contact persons within the agencies

IS Academies usually have a specific contact person in the agency that has a keen and active attitude towards learning, in some cases with a background in academic research. Enthusiastic and committed staff will be willing to push the results forwards and use information for further policy or programme development, as well as encourage others to reflect on the issue and learn from findings.

These are some roles that interviewees expected from contact persons in the agencies:

- One of the key challenges is to ensure that learning spreads through the organization. This can be facilitated by forming networks within the organization around research, with regular exchange.
- Organizing workshops or lunch meetings as effective means to present and discuss research findings.
- Signal where research findings can be linked to an issue relevant to the organisation.
- Signal the appropriate timing to present findings, for example just before the start of the planning cycle.
- Be alert to other ways of sharing with the wider organization by features in newsletters, intranet, and other means.
- Be pro-active in a more strategic sharing with specific staff, e.g. management or directors. A manager convinced in a short briefing of the relevance of certain information can make a big difference for the impact of the research.
- Guide learning products and train the researcher in using the proper language. This not only refers to using non-academic language but also the use of language that is easily understood in the lifeworld of the agency.
- Discuss with researchers how products can be made for the end-users of the agencies: local audiences (see quote on the next page).

One problem encountered within the IS Academies is staff turnover within agencies, with consequently a loss of time on creating ownership again with the new staff.

Practical use

"One of the students working with our organisation – although not a PhD student in the IS Academy – has been highly successful in translating her findings into practical information for the local target group. She used her research findings to produce films for the local public and also wrote articles on the topic for local newspapers. This approach was already mentioned in her research plan; it is very practical and provides a good link to the local level."

(NGO staff member)

Ensuring the relevance of long-term research.
The core of the IS Academy consists of long-term learning trajectories, often organized around PhDs. Long-term research is not always considered of direct policy relevance, as it may lose its momentum over time. Below are some ideas of the interviewees on how the relevance of long-term research can be enhanced.
- Combining long-term research with short term research (e.g. MSc research, short assignments for PhD candidates, consultancy-based research) that draws on the conceptual

work of the long-term researchers yet addresses an immediate need.
- Make long-term research consist of a series of shorter researches and share interim results and findings. One way to accommodate this is by organizing PhD research on the basis of articles rather than monographs.
- Use research to verify long-term policy choices and theories of change. Make this part of learning objectives.
- Choose a topic for long-term research which is likely to be of enduring relevance.
- Use the long-term nature of the research to provide insight in trends.

New perspectives on our work

"The PhD research that is being done in collaboration with our organisation has given us interesting information about the individual motivation of people in the local research context. Not only is this useful input to change the academic discourse on this topic, it also provides NGO workers with new perspectives. These offer possibilities to refine existing project activities and focus on the things that really move people.

These findings came up during the research, showing that there is no need to wait for the final results of a PhD in order to obtain useful practical information. The research phase already offers a lot of relevant knowledge, ready to be used by practitioners."

(NGO staff member)

Importantly, expectations of the impact of research – short or long-term - should be kept realistic. Research findings are only one of many factors that contribute to policy changes.

Maximize added values of IS academies
Besides the direct impact of substantive research on policy and practice, IS Academies have other added value according to the interviewees.
- IS Academies as a 'temple'. Interaction with academic work and participation in research meetings helps policy makers and practitioners to reflect on their roles and issues other than and beyond the topics of research.
- IS Academies as a 'network'. Through the IS Academies, organisations become part of a larger network of knowledge institutes and agencies. These may prove useful beyond the IS Academy collaboration.
- IS Academies as 'exchange platforms'. For the researchers and other participants alike, IS Academies can be platforms to find information and test ideas. Such exchange is

highly valued and needs to be carefully facilitated and encouraged by IS Academy staff, researchers and contact persons.

Working community

"Whether through the IS Academy or otherwise, I would like to continue this joint experience, but in a more dynamic structure, through a sort of working community."

(NGO staff member)

Guidelines for policy-relevant research

First of all, it should be clear that there is no 'magic formula' that will make all academic research relevant for organisations, if one only follows the guidelines. Too much depends on coincidence and factors that are difficult to influence or alter, such as character of the people involved and the internal mechanisms at the organisation. However, there are some guidelines that can be considered by all relevant stakeholders in the IS Academies in order to create the optimal conditions for research results to be used. Start with these, add a proper dose of luck….and there is a good chance that the connection between academic research and NGO policy will be made.

- Choose a research topic that is not prone to trends – this will keep the issue relevant for the organisation, despite changing reality.
- Ensure commitment of all parties in crucial stages of the trajectory, such as development of the research plan, communication strategy and planning, and learning objectives.
- Ensure a structure that integrates the research into the daily work at the organisation and encourages mutual learning
  - assign a committed focal person within the organisation with sufficient time to work on the collaboration – this person will facilitate the organisation of below activities as well as communication issues
  - plan joint field visits where relevant
  - plan regular meetings with involved staff and management
  - plan realistic events for sharing and exchanging, not too time-consuming but frequent enough to keep relevant people involved in the research
  - ensure that students experience the practice of NGO work, in order to create the dynamics of practice feeding into the research

- Facilitate dialogue and communication between student and organisation
  - facilitate the translation of findings and results into understandable communication for NGO workers or government staff
  - a communication strategy that indicates who is to be informed when and in which way
  - try to match presentation of results or interim findings with relevant moments for decision-making in the organisation – good timing cannot always be planned but is crucial enough to make the effort
  - IS Academy coordination needs to be felt by stakeholders, especially in facilitation of exchanges and in planning of communication and presentation of results

- aim for a wide range of results of the research and the collaboration, both direct and indirect. If findings are not used for policy development, the research may have e.g. benefitted network opportunities or verification of choices made

Communication policy of the IS Academy HSFS

In order to share (interim) findings and facilitate learning from research, the IS Academy HSFS has developed a range of exchange mechanisms. Taking into account the lessons from the mid-term review and the above mentioned findings and guidelines for policy-relevant research, we have defined our communication policy using the following methods:

- Research briefs
  These short briefs (5-10 pages) allow (interim) findings from research to be communicated and shared in a concise manner. The size of the briefs make them an accessible tool for knowledge sharing for policymakers and practitioners.

- Occasional papers
  These more extensive working papers (25-40 pages) allow for an in-depth overview and analysis of important and often overarching themes and new insights that are drawn from research in the context of the IS Academy HSFS.

- New literature alert
  New literature is occasionally made available to the stakeholders in the IS Academy when deemed interesting and relevant for organisational policy and practice.

- Meetings and seminars
  Meetings and seminars are organized to keep stakeholders updated on activities and findings from the IS Academy HSFS, as well as to discuss specific themes that are of interest to the stakeholders. PhD researchers are actively encouraged to share their findings with organizations and at MFA during in-house meetings specifically organized for that purpose. Also, exchange of findings between PhD researchers is facilitated through the organization of meetings and seminars.

The Special Chair Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction focuses on the everyday politics and practices of service delivery, livelihoods and disaster risk reduction in the institutional landscapes of conflict- or disaster-affected areas. It engages in multi-sited qualitative and quantitative research. Research of Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction is collaborative, interacting with policy and practice throughout the process to enhance research uptake.