DEVELOPING EVALUATION AND COMMUNICATION CAPACITY IN INFORMATION SOCIETY RESEARCH

DECI-2: Research Study

**LEARNING WITH AND USING DECI MATERIALS:
LESSONS LEARNED**

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes a review of the materials that mentors used with projects at the network and sub-project level. These included both DECI 1 and 2 print materials as well as online tools such as webinars, presentations and modules, available through a website platform (www.evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net) as well as more recent hybrid materials that synergized evaluation and communication approaches. The study related to a) understanding how effective and useful the materials were and why b) feedback on the relatively newer materials that described the hybrid approach and c) suggestions for popularizing and disseminating the approaches tested in the DECI 2 project.

Evidence was gathered from a questionnaire to all mentors (DECI 1 and 2) and one mentee, followed up by interviews for clarification. In all, 14 persons provided evidence for this paper including 11 mentors, one mentee/funder and two facilitators of communities of practice.

Key learnings were as follows:

1. **Materials were useful, diverse and adaptable to the context.** What was used depended on the mentor's role (evaluation mentors used UFE and communication persons used the ResCom materials); special mention was made of the Primer, followed by the modules, checklists, presentations, webinars (less) and case studies (less) with the more recent materials such as VeriCom and draft article less understood and used. Materials have '**title' confusion** possibly because some are subsumed in others. For example, in describing templates, posters, checklists - the poster is part of the template but is sometimes mentioned separately and the reporting template was actually the checklist to some! Navigating the DropBox to access both variety and versions of materials was time consuming.

2. **Vericom (the acronym appears artificial) materials** that emerged in DECI 2, suggesting a synergy between UFE and ResCom (especially the initial steps) are too new and require field verification. In fact, UFE and ResCom could also benefit from simpler labels or acronyms.

3. **Branding of the approach (es)** UFE, ResCom, VeriCom is important but needs to be less mystifying, self explanatory with a clear iteration of its value to learning organizations to support evaluative thinking and evidence based decision making.

4. **Mentor-materials relationship** indicated importance of mentor's role, readiness and capacity for timely provision of selected materials, relevant to organization's learning style, context and capacity**.** This is in sharp contrast to uniform materials provided at capacity building workshops.

5. **Materials were developed for the purpose of mentoring organizations in evaluation and communication.** To 'evangelize' the approach, DECI 2 will have to strategize for whom, why and what materials will need to be developed. Branding, advocating the approach and building a community of practice will likely need a review of current material, co-creation and wider sharing of materials.

A concluding thought is that although there are tried and tested ways to develop and use materials to disseminate the approach(es) and learnings (and Outcome Mapping and RAPID has lessons to learn from), further experimentation and experience may be necessary to test drive the 'integrated' approach(es) along with variations of the mentoring process with other sectors and donors.

Introduction

UFE (DECI 1 and DECI 2)[1] and ResCom (only DECI 2) developed a number of materials to mentor selected projects at the network and sub-project level. These included print materials as well as online tools such as webinars, presentations and modules, available through a website platform[2]. During the course of DECI 2, some hybrid materials were also developed. The materials grew out of the action research that called for an attempt to synergize evaluation and communication tools. For this research study, two mentors[3] were asked (See Attachment One for TORs) to engage with other mentors to understand:

1) How effective were the materials to support action-research and as reference tools? What has worked; what has not; and what are the possible explanations?
2) With reference to the integration of a hybrid approach under the VeriCom title through a draft e-Primer (for practitioners) and a draft journal article (for researchers): What are the merits and limitations of the drafts? What actions are needed to make them more relevant to each audience group?
3) What variations and opportunities are available with the website during the remainder of the DECI-2 project to popularize the approach (VeriCom, UFE and ResCom)?

For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire (see Attachment Two) was sent to all mentors (DECI 1 and 2). This was followed up by interviews for clarification. In all, 14 persons provided evidence for this paper including 11 mentors (also Dal, Ricardo, Sonal and Wendy), two thought leaders (who had facilitated communities of practice) and one mentee/funder (Sylvia).

Discussion with the mentors indicated a lot of 'learnings' related to question a) with fewer comments for b) and c).

Findings

1) Material Findings:

a) The materials have been **useful and can be adapted** to the context and needs of the mentees.

The DECI 2 mentors were asked the usefulness of the materials:

Materials Usage	DECI 1	DECI 2
High	UFE checklist	Same
High	Modules	
High	Case studies	
High	Primer	
High	Conference presentations	
High	UFE Template (Step 12 – Telling the Story)	

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[1] Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research

[2] www.evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.org

[3] Wendy Quarry and Sonal Zaveri

Mostly high		ResCom Checklist and modules
Medium to high		ResCom Template (poster)
Medium to high		UFE Template
Low to Medium		VeriCom Template
Medium		Webinar
Medium		Case studies
Low		Draft E Primer
Low		Draft Article

Mentors used the materials most relevant to them i.e. evaluators used UFE materials and communication specialists used the ResCom materials. All mentors felt that the materials were **flexible** and lent themselves to adaptation. For example, the checklists suggest a step-by-step methodology that does not necessarily adhere to real life situations – but do have value as they provide a framework against which to check progress. Similarly, those doing ResCom found it useful to ask participants to describe what they were already doing in communication and then pull out the template (poster) to help illustrate questions around purpose, audience/stakeholders and methods.

The **variety** of tools offered in DECI 2 was seen as a strength as it enabled accommodation to different learning styles and can be used in different combinations. For example:

" I use different materials – it is more a matter of combining them – for example, the checklist alone would make it seem very task oriented but the presentation helps them to see the big picture first as does the ResCom template".

"What works is the timely, focused link to a resource that responds to a person's immediate needs"

" Once I finish the presentation, people do browse through the Primer usually in between the meetings – some read it, another browsed and read whatever was interesting. The ResCom Template ....people go through it filling in the sections."

Ultimately, it was HOW the mentors used the materials that determined how effective they were. As one mentor stated, "The effectiveness of the tools depends on a set of factors rather than the tool itself". It is important to understand the mentee, his/her constraints and from there offer the right combination of materials. In other words, **different materials were used with different mentees depending on context and by and large were found useful.**

The Primer was found to be useful[4] since it offers a succinct picture of how UFE could be actively applied – it is "easy to digest" plus it can be downloaded. It serves as an excellent reference for people to either browse or dig out specific examples to guide the reader to the way ahead.

The modules, checklists, presentations, primer, webinars (to some extent), UFE and ResCom templates were used widely by mentors (mentees also used them with assistance from mentors) but the VeriCom template, e primer and article were used less.

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[4] Michael Patton's book was too big to read

However, it turned out that the case studies overall were of greater value to those who had developed them rather than to new participants as they were intended.[5]

Comparing the *use* of UFE and ResCom materials, a mentor said:

"*Have developed ResCom materials but not used it enough – to reflect what you are doing in communication which everyone is doing anyway but not doing it strategically.. also buried in the Dropbox files*"

b) There appears to be '**title' confusion** – the same tools and templates are labeled differently.

Title confusion is primarily with DECI 2 mentors. **Templates, posters, checklists** referred to different tools! For example, the poster is part of the template but is sometimes mentioned separately; the reporting template was actually the checklist that was used, the template for case study (DECI 1) now adds on ResCom (for DECI 2) and it is unclear which reporting template was being referred to. The UFE DECI 2 reporting template is from Step 3 to 8 but includes the poster! So, is the poster a matrix or a snapshot? During the data collection, we had to ask mentors to explain what material they were talking about! [6]

c) Materials are available but accessibility through the **Dropbox** is difficult to navigate.

Most mentors found the arrangement of the materials in the Dropbox difficult to understand and mostly ask Ricardo to send materials via email, which he does promptly so there is no need to explore the Dropbox further! Barring that, a search feature would be useful to find materials. DECI 1 mentors do not have access to the Drop Box.

2) The surprise of Integration:

a) Although the value of combining communication with evaluation is becoming evident, the VeriCom template needs further discussion – comments on the template varied from "artificial" to "has potential for application".

The reality is that there are very few examples where UFE and Communication have been mentored in tandem. Ricardo, Dal and Wendy had a brush with this through an experience with the World Bank. Ricardo has tried it out with two Canada based small NGOs while it is just getting started with London based Justice Forum and a project in Buenos Aires, Association de Derechos Civiles or Ciudadanos (ADC)

However, through this relatively small experience we are quickly seeing that it is the first four steps for both UFE and ResCom that form the basis for the joint approach. The same questions to be asked around UFE are similar to some for ResCom. Both need to look at context (situational analysis); both decide on audience or users while both need to consider these questions at the initiation and early start up of project initiatives.

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[5] This is similar to earlier findings that it is the writers/creators of manuals and workbooks who tend to learn the most

[6] Even at the end of several interviews Sonal and Wendy had to go over the terminology again and again to make sure they were using the same words

b) Vericom materials are too new to be understood well and have not been used much, if at all.

Most have not used the VeriCom materials and do not fully understand them. UFE and ResCom are clear and although there is a connection between the two, the term or the way both areas of work have been combined seems difficult to work with. Also, the term VeriCom was suddenly introduced so at first the meaning was unclear until the materials were studied. This label is not yet a 'brand' and so needs further explanation.

3. Looking Ahead – Popularizing the approach?

a) Labeling – first we need to get it right:

Mentors suggested that the labels or the acronym should be self-explanatory. In the case of UFE or Utilization focused evaluation, it is quite obvious and clear that it is about use of evaluation. There was one suggestion to rename it "*Use focused evaluation*" for several reasons: it is easier in translation, use of evaluations is a current concern and the acronym can remain the same. ResCom on the other hand evoked a mixed response. For some mentors, it required too much explanation especially the Research word. Similarly, mentors understand the value of ResCom and UFE but because perhaps VeriCom was 'suddenly' introduced, the title did not make sense until they had read through the explanation. In fact, one mentor questioned what, if UFE and ResCom have clarity, is the advantage of introducing a new term like VeriCom?

Overall VeriCom did not appear to be a popular label for the hybrid approach. One person mentioned that it sounded like an internet company, that it required too much explanation as the word itself did not mean anything by itself, that the brand (if it was one) was unrecognizable at this moment.

b) Making it simple – it is a framework (s)!

UFE and ResCom are *frameworks* to help a person think through how to do an evaluation that is useful and how to develop a communication strategy that reaches targeted persons for defined purposes. These frameworks (UFE and ResCom) can be easily understood because they are essentially a *way of thinking and planning*. However, we may have made it appear unnecessarily complicated as when UFE is explained through a diagram that shows intertwining steps which actually intimidates more than explains. The argument is that with so much information overload, it is best to keep it simple and straightforward.

As one mentor put it, it is particularly important not to 'sell' UFE and ResCom as a silver bullet for all contexts. There are lessons learned from other initiatives as well:

" *SAS was about tools but not the problems to be solved. So do NOT follow the SAS path to popularize. ……… SAS is about mechanics, OM is how you think. UFE is not like 1, 2, 3 steps and it is more about conceptual thinking of how to view evaluation. UFE is an approach not a method, according to Patton. My question – are we conveying the concept and the approach rather than the steps. The evaluator knows the steps – but you do not need to state them as a step to the mentee or primary users do not need to know about that. So just go through the process. I would do the same with ResCom.*"

As was already noted (para above), it is really the first four steps of both UFE and ResCom that require our immediate attention and form the basis of the two entities working in tandem. These steps are relatively simple and straightforward: what are the uses (UFE); what are the purposes (ResCom); Who are the users (UFE); Who are the audiences (ResCom); What are the key evaluation questions (UFE); what are the media and methods (ResCom)

Shown together, it is the posters/templates that illustrate the related nature of these steps or at least have proven so in the few times of actual application. In fact, this combined approach is akin to a '*silo buster'* and a valuable *framework for decision making!*

> "…. *It (UFE and ResCom) does three things – pushes projects to make clear what they are doing – what IS this that they are doing? (TOC); how do I value it and measure it/ document it (evaluation) and who is interested in this… how do I use it (communication)…."[7]*

If it is true (as we suspect) that it is the person who actually produces the material or writes the case studies that learns the most about the process through this exercise, could we revisit the role of the mentor and find a way for the mentor to learn to produce his/her own materials or adapt the existing materials to his/her own use?

c) Role of mentor – the mentor relationship to materials

Lessons learned about the role of the mentor and the mentoring process turned out to be embedded in the response to the materials. DECI revolves around the belief that workshops to promote frameworks or methodologies are not useful without 'just in time' mentoring to help individuals adapt new procedures to their unique work environment. While this approach to mentoring has proven to be a useful one, at the same time handholding should not be viewed as a bottleneck. It is important to convey that while people can do this work on their own it can be better with support. Perhaps there is a way to provide mentoring as a package – responsive to the organization's decision as to how much and when. The potential to use UFE and ResCom is huge, and several reasons support its application: it is 'internal' to the organization; both emphasize learning; have inherent flexibility (the mentors guide the process of learning); can be used any time during the project cycle and is overall, non-threatening as there are no 'outsiders', e.g. an external evaluator.

The mentor's *readiness* (or *capacity*, as one mentor preferred) is the most complex because it not only depends on the readiness of the organization and mentee but also how *adaptable* the mentor is able to be. It is both a skill as well as a personality issue since the mentor needs to 'connect' with the mentee. Time and patience are other qualities of the mentor that were found to be useful. Like the mentee, the mentor has to be open to learning – understand different contexts and perspectives. Learning through mentoring is invaluable yet a 'luxury' because only one donor (IDRC) has been willing to work with this model.

"Mentor needs to be very flexible and need to allow people to struggle a bit and those mentors who are more process oriented are a better fit rather than being task oriented and to get things done."

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[7] Discussion with Ricardo Ramírez.

d) Materials and website

The Researchgate accounts indicate that there were about 250 downloads of the Primer. It must, however be stated that except for some Pelican exchanges or requests for material, the Primer and other materials were not actively promoted. Indeed, traffic to the website is low, perhaps indicating that it is more of a project storefront and repository[8].

Links to related materials such as RAPID, use of more tools such as "story of change", blogs and e contributions where mentees could articulate their own learning would enhance the variety and sophistication of tools available. Also the available tools are best for those who are already convinced of the approach. For example, the primer is useful but somebody unfamiliar with the approach needs some simple materials that combine both theory and practice. Perhaps a short primer and shorter illustrative materials could be an option.

To get 'converts', there is a need for advocacy tools and simpler ways to explain what UFE is. One of the DECI 1 mentors mentioned that visiting the new website did not give an easy insight to ResCom or VeriCom and hence there is a need for simpler explanations. The website was described as 'flat' and needed a revamp.

Acceptance within the academic community is also important and journal articles on the UFE and ResCom frameworks would bring credibility. Decisions would have to be made as to what extent a step by step approach should be promoted and/or a principle (read 'framework') approach and/or exemplars.

e) A brief look at other initiatives

Those familiar with OM mentioned that IDRC played a major role in supporting the understanding of the approach, building a community of practice, supporting an interactive website and encouraging a wider support for it.

The Chair of the Outcome Mapping community (Heidi Schaeffer) explained that yes, it was IDRC backing that provided the original help and support to Outcome Mapping but the way they did it is what really helped. IDRC never assumed or pretended that Outcome Mapping was a new tool that they had invented but instead stressed that it was a framework for thinking, a work in progress that had not been developed but continued to be developing with all the people who participated in the experience. Heidi went on to say that more than anything it was the idea of OM being a framework or a way of thinking was the most important aspect of its continuing success.

ODI's John Young felt that it was the sustained commitment on the part of the many people coming from the outcome mapping community who also got embedded in other organizations that made the difference. He summed it up by saying that the Outcome Mapping success is due to:

- The clarity of its principles and high quality materials that people can pick up and run with at their own pace
- Sustained commitment from IDRC
- A preparedness to adapt and suit other organizations' needs and be responsive
- An active living and learning process going on through a long-term activity
- Being routed in human behavior but also remaining flexible

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[8] Interview with Ricardo Ramírez.

Young admits that his own organization (ODI) has spent a great deal of time trying to figure out how to best popularize a way of doing work. Every four years or so they step back and figure out how to maximize likely uptake – what contracts to look for and which ones would be important to take. They then write concept notes and float them around donors to try to get hired.

They call this approach **Strategically Opportunistic,** *or as he says, fantastically opportunistic:* This means that first they try to use conferences and publish materials to attract those who might show interest. Often this results in people approaching them to ask for help. They are quite selective with these prospective contracts and work with people who they feel might be 'ready' for uptake and help produce materials that might later be added to the mix.[9]

The Roma, he says is an interesting story. ODI had already done an assortment of tool kits and training courses with Research Institutes for uptake but then decided that all these disparate bits were not good enough. So they produced Roma that is essentially a compilation of just about everything they have learned.

Roma resulted in a plethora of requests for help from completely different clients such as Research Councils and UN agencies. There was a huge uptake from writing Roma. ODI had hoped to come out with a load of practical experience to build their resource base and lessons as to how their tools had been used but in the end their tools did not get used under these contracts. What came out of the work with the new clients was a set of principles identified through the Roma document. Through this process the UN, for example realized that they would first have to turn themselves into a learning organization before being able to actually use the research uptake tools.

f) Popularizing the approach – are we ready?

DECI 2 mentors reminded us that up to now DECI has been focused on test-driving the approach and not popularizing it. Some felt it might be erroneous to expect us to start "evangelizing"[10] the approach since this would require a very different set of activities.

However others felt that at the moment there is a window of opportunity for DECI to make its work known and hopefully adopted. There is a current buzz around 'use of evaluations.' We could/should capitalize on this interest because neither evaluators nor decision makers really know *how to make it happen* while UFE provides an easy framework to use.

DECI 1 mentors mentioned that UFE takes time and is geared towards organizations that are seriously looking at change and reform rather than 'pay lip service to learning, or who have a vested interest for a stamp of approval.' The approach requires a 'readiness' in the organization to learn, spend time and be willing to be part of a journey or process.[11] Many donors/organizations that commission or expect to organize evaluations are interested in using the OECD criteria, have formed the KEQ and identified the users (by the donors usually) – such organizations will not be interested

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[9] Recently they worked with some UN organizations who they found were not 'ready' but first needed to build learning mechanisms into their own organizations before being able to uptake the

[10] Interview with a DECI 2 Mentor

[11] This echoes John Young's explanation of ODI experience with the UN

in the UFE process. Besides most evaluation managers do not have the capacity to do the UFE because of time and skill constraints.

One mentor mentioned that there are so many options available, evaluators will not want to acquire a certain set of skills as required by UFE if there is no demand for it from the decision makers. The UFE is also dependent (like policy) on a window of opportunity – many of the projects that successfully completed UFE (and used it well) were forced to seize the opportunity as they were facing a crisis such as donor withdrawal. Hence 'readiness' of the organization is important for UFE.

It might, however be possible to build a community of practice – beginning with a small cohort of funded projects (DECI 2) and then systematically moving to others that would be introduced to the approach. As one mentor stated,

> "*One effective way is for the mentors to keep applying the approach in their (extra-DECI) assignments, talking about the innovative approaches AND demonstrating how different and, if possible, more effective (if that turns out to be) they are to traditional processes. In addition, if the mentors (and others adopting UFE, ResComm and Vericom) can try and identify and point out how those approaches have been appropriate to the region's culture, institutional systems and programs…(it would help to popularize)*"

Blogs, social media, mailing lists and networks for communication and evaluation are tools that could be brought in to support this work. Or, as ODI tries to do – it might be possible to take the ideas to conferences and introduce UFE (and ResCom) as part of the teaching curriculum at various universities or approach the Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluators or Evaluation networks.

Finally why not approach donors (including IDRC) to promote the framework across different sectors (besides ICT4D) such as climate change, forestry and so on and look to research institutes and international research projects such as those funded by AusAid, DFID, ACIAR (in Australia), CIFOR (has a big presence in Indonesia) using either the communication 'entry point' or the evaluation one.

4. **Conclusion**

The discussion over the two days clarified that the DECI team still felt itself to be in the testing stage but was ready to cautiously move forward to consider popularization. The suggestions to do this were varied. In the background was the hope that IDRC might be prepared to assist in further promoting the DECI approach (as in outcome mapping) while it would be the DECI team responsibility to find their own methods. These could include simplifying the materials so that each mentor could adapt according to need; testing the use of social media, blogs, update (and enliven) the website and consider the possibility of developing a community of interest (COI) with people committed to the UFE and ResCom approach. Further thoughts included approaching the academic community, writing articles for publication and searching other decision makers/donors interested in adapting their evaluation use and communication practices. In total there was agreement that the idea of combining evaluation approaches with communication steps is proving to have merit and worth popularizing beyond the few DECI partners.

Attachment One: Terms of Reference

Research Study - DECI-2 Learning & dissemination review

In preparation for our May 2016 team meeting, we will review how we can integrate learning and dissemination. This effort responds to Objectives 1 and 5 of this project (see Text Box).

> **DECI-2 objectives related to learning and dissemination**
>
> **1. Meta-level action-research:** To develop and test-drive a combined approach to UFE and ResCom mentoring.
> **5. Sharing lessons:** To communicate the DECI-2 project findings and training approach to practitioners, researchers and policy makers.

For objective #1, we have developed learning support materials (modules, checklists, reporting templates, webinars). As we have started to integrate evaluation and communication into a hybrid approach, we have begun producing additional materials that address objective #5: the VeriCom documentation (2015), a draft e-Primer, and a working draft for a journal article.

This review focuses on revisiting what we have produced, reviewing whether the materials can become effective leaning tools, reviewing our dissemination products and suggesting a strategy for the remainder of the project.

Possible guiding questions:
  c) We have been test-driving UFE and ResCom by mentoring research networks and select sub-projects. To what extent have our materials been effective tools to support action-research? What has worked; what has not; and what are the possible explanations?
  d) We have sought to produce on-line reference tools, especially webinars and modules. Under what conditions have they been useful? What have been the limitations and barriers to effective use?
  e) We have begun integrating a hybrid approach under the Vericom title through a draft e-Primer (for practitioners) and a draft journal article (for researchers). What are the merits and limitations of the drafts? What actions are needed to make them more relevant to each audience group?
  f) We have a static website with no social media or blog components: what variations and opportunities are worth integrating during the remainder of the DECI-2 project?

Next Steps
  1. Invite Sonal and Wendy to team up to cover this preparatory activity, including a review of the guiding questions.
  2. Co-PI's to provide support to the process and to comment on drafts
  3. Prepare a summary presentation before the Cape Town meeting
  4. Present the findings and suggestions at the Cape Town meeting for group discussion
  5. Consider taking an active role in revising the e-Primer and co-writing the article (after May)

Approximate level of effort:
a. Finalize the questions and distributing the work: 2 day each
b. Read, review, analyze jointly: 3 day each
d. Prepare a short presentation: 1 days each

Total of 12 days, 6 for Sonal and 6 for Wendy

Approximate timing: February and March: produce a full draft by early April.

Attachment Two: Questionnaire for Mentors

For DECI Mentors:

Why:

a) assess the DECI products with our mentors and mentees to see what works and why and what is not so good and why - plus a few ideas for improvement

b) what do we need to do to help gain more converts to the DECI Vericom approach

What:

Please review the questions below, jot down a few points and email to us **before April 7** so that we can follow up with an interview to get a more detailed or descriptive version of your experience (short 30 to 45 mins).

Here is a list of materials from DECI-1 and DECI-2 and where to find them

DECI 1

Website	Dropbox - UFE	Dropbox – Case study directory	Drop box
Case studies	Reporting template	Case studies	Conference presentations
Checklists and modules			
Primer			

DECI 2

Website	Dropbox UFE	Dropbox Rescom	Dropbox – VeriCom	Dropbox –
Modules for ResCom	Reporting template	Reporting template	Modified Vericom template	Draft e-primer
Checklists				Draft article
webinars				

The website: evaluationandcommunicationinpractice.net

1. Which materials have you used – please list.

2. What worked, what did not?

3. Could you on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being the highest) rank the materials you used?

4. Have others you may know about used these materials and what was their experience?

5. To help us move forward and to share this more widely we want to make sure we have the right combination of materials and your comments are welcome.

- What to include
- What not to include
- What to add

6. Are we labeling (UFE, Vericom, ResCom e.g.) the materials properly?

7. To popularize our approach, any lessons from other initiatives such as OM, SAS, RAPID?

8. How do we popularize in the region and what could be the role of the regional mentors?

Action Points:

1. We look forward to your response **before April 7**
2. Please indicate when it would be a good time to interview you – ideally after we have your response!
3. Please suggest mentee names and contact details so that we may send them a shorter version of this q'airre.

THANKS!
Sonal and Wendy