

INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL TRAINING - HOW BOTH LARGE AND SMALL ORGANISATIONS CAN BENEFIT FROM INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Todd Evans

Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia
todd.evans@abs.gov.au

Teaching statistics raises many challenges. In the international context this can mean crossing cultural, language and socio-economic boundaries. With economic globalisation and the desire for statistical agencies to produce comparable, internationally consistent statistics, the need for international cooperation in statistical training in the workplace has never been greater. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) currently undertakes a range of international statistical training activities, encompassing providing technical assistance to other countries by ABS staff, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region; hosting overseas statistical staff for visits at the ABS offices; placing overseas staff in positions at the ABS from a few months to two years; supplying training materials to statistical organisations around the world; and visiting other statistical agencies to learn best practices. The benefits and costs of these activities, with particular emphasis on the cultural and language experiences that have been learnt, will be covered.

INTRODUCTION

International cooperation in statistical training in the workplace, and the sharing of information and practices through international engagement is of fundamental importance to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Under the Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975, one of the functions of the ABS is to “provide liaison between Australia, on the one hand, and other countries and international organisations, on the other hand, in relation to statistical matters.”

THE ABS AND INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL TRAINING

The ABS is committed to international statistical training and has recently restated in an updated corporate plan that we wish to be “A key contributor to international statistical activities that are important to Australia or our region.” There are a number of strategies the ABS will follow to achieve this and one of the critical ones will be to “build statistical capacity in the Asia-Pacific region, and other selected countries, in line with Australia’s identified priorities for assistance.” This takes the form of:

- technical assistance to developing countries in our region to assist capacity building; and
- bilateral exchange and cooperation with statistical agencies of developed countries.

EXTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objectives of the ABS are consistent with guidelines provided by the United Nations. Principle 10 of the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics states: *Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.*

The sharing of information and practices, as well as cooperation in the joint development of statistical standards, international statistical activities etc is an essential ingredient for continuous improvement of the quality and range of official statistics in all countries and the efficiency of their production. A lot of this cooperation is facilitated by various international activities supported by international statistical and other agencies and professional associations. Technical cooperation, either organised bilaterally amongst agencies or organised through international organisations and activities, is important for the development of the range and quality of official statistics in the developing countries.

Australian Government policy also has a significant influence on the international work of the ABS. Both the Australian Prime Minister and the Australian Foreign Affairs Minister have talked about the strategic importance of East Asia. In addition, the Pacific is also seen as important particularly from a regional security perspective. A strong priority is given to improved governance. Statistics are seen as an important component of this.

ASSISTING CAPACITY BUILDING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The United Nations Statistical Commission has repeatedly emphasised technical cooperation efforts need to be nationally owned by the recipient, demand driven and tailored to the local needs.

Statistics capacity building is mostly viewed part of a 'governance' theme. More specifically, statistical aid aims to provide statistics which will improve the planning and decision making in the recipient country, by governments and others, and thus in the longer term work to encourage development and alleviate poverty.

HOW DO WE ASSIST

The aim of the ABS in providing assistance is to encourage developing countries to establish good statistical policies and methodologies through the transfer of ABS knowledge and practical skills. The ABS does not normally undertake statistical work for other countries. Rather, the aim is to help them to help themselves. Statistical training forms a key component of this strategy and is done in a way to encourage countries to establish good statistical policies and methodologies through the transfer of ABS knowledge and practical skills.

ABS training and technical assistance comprises four main categories:

- ABS staff conducting training courses or statistical consultancies in another country;
- Staff from other countries visiting the ABS for training or study tours;
- Providing documentation on ABS practices; and
- ABS staff contributing to workshops or seminars arranged by international organisations.

In the first two categories it is critically important that the receiving country has the capacity to absorb the technical assistance and maintain the expertise developed as a result of assistance.

ESTABLISHING REQUIREMENTS

Clarification may be needed on the difference between what the a country may request and what the ABS can offer. The two may not necessarily directly align. Objectives for the training mission need to be set, the context for the visit needs to be established and a strategy for evaluating the effectiveness of the training needs to be in place. For example, does a country need to learn about small area estimation? Will they be able to sustainably implement what has been learnt in Australia? Are the confidentialising techniques that the ABS uses appropriate to teach to others? If there is sophisticated technology involved is it appropriate to cover certain techniques? Countries may also want to learn more than the ABS can teach.

There are a number of factors the ABS considers in determining where effort is placed with statistical training for the purposes of capacity building. Relevant factors that are considered when specific requests for training are received are:

- The ability of the trainee to absorb the training. Are the nominees from the visiting country best placed to learn and then implement the training they have received?
- A commitment to sharing the learning from the training, either through written papers, providing training notes on a local intranet, or some other knowledge sharing strategy.
- Any relevant Australian Government policy that has to be considered, in terms of the requirements from Australia's aid agency AusAID. This may cover issues such as gender equity and access to training.
- Funding – has agreement been reached on who is funding the work. If a third party is involved what are their requirements?
- Level of English proficiency. The issue of finding interpreters in Australia can be problematic and as such a level of written and spoken English is required by the trainee.
- Ability to adapt to Australian conditions. Will the heat or cold be a factor, can they navigate our immigration and transportation systems?
- Behavioural issues - will the standards of behaviour be acceptable in Australia and can they adapt to any Australian ways that are important, even in a short term visit. Do the trainees have an understanding of Australian (or Western) culture, will they understand our customs and our approach to the workplace?

By way of example, for a program between the ABS and the Thai government it took two years to prepare a 3 year program. The program consisted elements of ABS staff going to Thailand to train staff, Thai government staff coming to Australia with work to be reviewed, return visits by Australian staff. Careful consideration had to be given to what were the objectives of the training and what could realistically be achieved. The approach focused on developing activities that support good governance. Emphasis was placed on capacity building activities with public sector organisations and institutions geared to improving the delivery of public policy and services, with increased accountability and responsiveness to the public. Technical assistance activities to improve the supervision and monitoring capacity of the government were also given priority.

SELECTING TRAINEES

In terms of who provides the training from within the ABS the overriding consideration is cultural sensitivity and the ability of the trainer to consider the needs of the trainee. This encompasses a number of factors:

- How well can the presenter avoid jargon, not speak too quickly and not have too strong an accent?
- Is the written English provided by the trainer for the training focussed solely on the ABS (ie too ABS centric)?
- How conscious is the presenter of the hierarchy of the trainees, and is this a factor in their learning?
- Is the presenter good at including all the trainees in the training activity?
- Style of the presenter - how appropriate is direct eye contact or asking them specific questions?
- How does the presenter deal with the trainee's question asking ability - are the trainees likely to be confident in asking questions? Does the presenter say "you are wrong!" or "that's interesting, but we now have a new way of doing it"; and
- How well does the presenter pick up on the non-verbal signs as to whether the participants are learning (do they look bored or are they actually bored)? This can be quite difficult as the trainees may feel good about the presenter, but will not necessarily be in a position to ensure the knowledge is transferred back in the office.

In addition, physical factors are considered such as how is the training to be delivered, is the training environment going to be conducive to learning, is there enough room, is the room too hot or too cold.

Finally, the technical aspects of training are thought through. Often ABS internal training is run for 25-30 people. Consideration needs to be given on whether adjustments need to be made to scale the training down to a smaller group. Some of the trainees may find sitting in a training room for six to eight hours problematic. For more complex methodology training less time is available in the classroom to ensure trainees have time to absorb the information. In addition, the availability of data can be an overriding factor. The most beneficial training is on data from their own country, but that may raise issues of confidentiality (i.e., can they bring the data with them). Alternatively, use of ABS data can raise a separate range of issues around access to data and confidentiality.

BENEFITS/COSTS FOR PROVIDER AGENCY

The benefits to the ABS are significant. Key benefits are as follows.

- Staff can reaffirm their knowledge of a particular area. Full understanding of a topic can sometimes only be gained by having to explain it to others.
- Review of internal work processes can result from having to justify a particular approach. Work is sometimes undertaken in a repetitive, historical fashion, and having someone ask "why do you do it that way?" can trigger a better way of thinking about an issue.
- Junior staff can be involved in the process. This enables them to gain insights into both the ABS approach and work done overseas.

- The ABS considers it important that the global statistical community work together, and this is one way of furthering that objective.

There are a range of costs in undertaking this work. The main cost is the impact on the work program of the ABS. Often more experienced staff are involved in capacity building activities. These staff are taken away from working on other ABS specific work. Also, there are direct financial costs, particularly for in-country assistance. Finally, if all the factors listed above are not taken into consideration there is the risk the assistance will be a failure, and hence the cost associated with this. While these costs can be substantial, the benefits are seen to far outweigh the costs.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Evaluation of the training activities is a final critical part of the process. The ABS seeks a written report from the organisations involved (rather than the participants) to get their view on whether the objectives of the visit were met. At times feedback from participants is not useful and it is better to get a considered report from the organisation after the event. Real knowledge transfer is not about measuring if those being trained feel good and like the trainer. Experience tells us it is whether some change is initiated when the trainee gets back to their country.

A number of key success factors have been identified in the evaluation phase to ensure optimum outcomes in either training or technical assistance. These are: the level of English proficiency, staff resources, data quality, the ability of the ABS to deliver services, and objective setting by the visiting party.

The English speaking skills of staff participating in training are generally good, but it must be recognised that ABS staff often provide quite complex training and advisory services in what amounts to a second (or third) language for government staff. Language difficulties could jeopardise the success of a project, especially considering that discussions generally centre on quite complex, technical subjects. All participants need to work together to patiently understand each other, to explain issues and to provide advice. Recognition of possible language constraints should be factored into the design of training and advisory services.

Statistical agencies involved with training, like all agencies around the world, are subject to quite significant restrictions on their ability to recruit and retain skilled personnel. There is always a risk that an organisation may not be able to employ and retain sufficient staff to maintain its established statistical program, as well as developing new initiatives. There is a need to ensure that future projects are within the actual and expected capacity of partner agencies to manage, and that staff levels and expertise are appropriate for the task. Strategies may include ensuring key senior staff are included in training and discussion, and for in-country training ensuring that as many local staff as possible are involved in activities.

The United Nations Statistical Commission recently agreed that improved data quality is required under any conceptual standard for statistics. Often, there is not enough good quality statistics data available to properly support internal government statistical programs. It is clear that significant data quality improvements must continue to be made to underpin improved statistical reporting. Data quality problems need to be addressed but in many developing countries these may remain a concern for some time.

The number and frequency of requests for ABS to provide training and advisory services to other statistical agencies continues to increase, especially in respect of national accounts. ABS' ability to service these requests is constrained by its own work programs and the number and availability of suitable, experienced staff to participate in projects. ABS manages its participation through careful planning of activities to minimise conflict with its own and the visiting government agencies statistical production cycles. The core strength of a large project is the ability to secure ABS experts across the broad range of statistics disciplines to provide training and technical assistance both in Australia and overseas. The ABS experts need to be able to effectively transfer knowledge and skills to enable the implementation of improvements to statistical collection, compilation and reporting systems. This also requires a real sense of project ownership by the visiting agencies involved. Agencies need to show a high level of commitment to the project objectives, ensuring that training and advisory services were accorded a high

priority in their internal work programs. Agencies need to ensure that key staff, often senior managers, participate in activities.

Finally before participating in assistance projects, agencies should define future aims or development paths. The agency should define the objective of the assistance to support work procedures and to fulfil future aims, and communicate with assistance providers to align with the objective.

OTHER BILATERAL EXCHANGE AND COOPERATION WITH STATISTICAL AGENCIES IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

The ABS participates in a number of international groups for the development and improvement in specific aspects of statistics. This includes such groups such as the United Nations Statistical Commission, the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, the International Statistical Institute and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group.

Staff at the ABS also participates in a number of international groups working on the development of international statistical standards. This includes working with expert groups on the System of National Accounts, the International Monetary Fund's Balance of Payments Manual and the International Standard Industrial Classification.

ABS staff also participate in other international statistical meetings, conferences, seminars and working groups to gain an understanding of statistical best practice.

Participation in international fora enables ABS staff to:

- remain abreast of international developments;
- learn from the global community;
- develop an understanding of different approaches to similar problems;
- advocate the Australian perspective of statistical matters; and
- engage with internationally recognised subject leaders.

COORDINATING INTERNAL ORGANISATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The ABS has two areas focussing on the issue of international cooperation in statistical training in the workplace.

A newly established unit called the National Statistical Training Institute has as its vision to:

- provide a cohesive, accredited statistical development program for ABS staff;
- provide ABS staff with a statistical learning pathway to map development needs against business needs;
- provide high quality statistical training for external agencies as part of the National Statistical Service; and
- have capacity to provide statistical training in the Asia-Pacific region.

While development of the NSTI is still at an embryonic stage progress has been made on producing an internal integrated coordinated training environment. Progress in the next few years will focus on the broader objectives listed above.

In addition, the ABS has a small unit specifically dedicated to furthering international relations. Some of the key functions of the International Relations Unit include:

- Plan, manage and/or coordinate ABS relations with international organisations and other statistical agencies;
- Oversee arrangements for assistance by the ABS to other countries and international organisations, including consultancy assignments;
- Identify opportunities for international statistical aid and consultancies;
- Negotiate with aid agencies and other organisations for funding of training and development or other activities provided by the ABS to other countries;
- Assist subject areas to keep abreast of international statistical developments and identify opportunities for ABS to contribute to such developments; and
- Arrange study visits programmes for international visitors to the ABS.

Key priorities for 2006-07 include to project manage the delivery of technical assistance, provide support and develop training programs for visits to the ABS, and build and expand relations with key aid agencies.

CONCLUSION

The sharing of information and practices, as well as cooperation in the joint development of statistical standards, on production and dissemination of statistics, and the provision of statistical training and capacity building, is an important and essential ingredient for continuous improvement of the quality and range of official statistics in all countries.

Australia benefits from its international involvement in many ways. At a global level Australian foreign policy objectives of strengthening democracy and promoting economic development and stability are supported when statistics in developing countries are improved. For an individual the opportunity to learn and grow from international statistical training are immense.

For the ABS there is a lot of benefit from these activities. Amongst the international statistical community Australia is considered an “excellent international citizen.” ABS input is valued for its methodological rigour, non-partisan approach and willingness to provide energy and leadership to a wide range of international activities. There are clearly benefits to all parties involved.

REFERENCES

- Commonwealth of Australia. (2005). *Annual Report 2004-05 Australian Bureau of Statistics*, www.abs.gov.au.
- United Nations. (2005). *Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics*, www.unstats.un.org/unsd/methods.