



# Learning Brief

# Policy Labs and Evidence

# Use in Education

Produced by OTT Consulting  
for the Jacobs Foundation

**2023**



# About this review

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The Jacobs Foundation is collaborating with EdLabs (education policy labs) in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Switzerland, and Colombia. Its mission: to strengthen evidence use in education policy and practice.

Policy labs are a popular approach across diverse sectors. Despite their prevalence, however, there is little systematic evidence of their effectiveness. The Jacobs Foundation seeks to address this gap, as part of a broader collective effort to maximise the effectiveness of EdLab models in supporting the use of evidence in education. In October 2023, the foundation convened partner EdLabs and other interested stakeholders, with the aim of catalysing alignment and collaboration and identifying next steps and key questions to explore.

To move forward in their endeavour, the Jacobs Foundation and its partners first need to understand the existing evidence base on policy labs as a means of institutionalising evidence use in education. To this end, OTT Consulting have carried out a review consisting of a literature survey, key-informant interviews, and a close analysis of existing EdLabs. The results are presented in a detailed report, which can be accessed [here](#).

## Credits

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# About this learning brief

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This learning brief presents key findings from *Review: Policy labs and evidence use in education*; hereafter 'the review', in a shortened and easily digestible format.

It starts with a short introduction and summary of the review's methodology; however, readers can navigate the brief's content to suit their interests and the time available to them. Those interested to understand the existing body of knowledge about the evidence-informed policy field, evidence use in education, and policy labs, can see a synthesis of the review's findings presented in table form in Sections 3.1 (the evidence-informed policy field and evidence use in education) and 3.2. (policy labs). The latter section also showcases a proposed typology for EdLabs, illustrating their fluidity and adaptability at the intersections of theory and real-world application.

Alternatively, readers can go straight to Sections 4 and 5, to understand the implications of this existing knowledge, and to see the review's recommendations for stakeholders taking the next steps. Section 4 parses what the review's findings mean for the Jacobs Foundation and its partners in their work with EdLabs, and draws out a number of opportunities for driving this space forward. It also presents a set of five priority learning questions to guide further exploration or a future research agenda. Section 5 then sets out clear, practical recommendations for practitioners and donors to maximise progress and effectiveness within the EdLab universe.

For the most time-pressed of readers, we recommend the Key messages section on page 5. This spotlights what we most want stakeholders to take away from the review: a sense of the opportunities that are available to them in the EdLab space, and the critical importance – and value – of accessing and building on the wealth of existing knowledge across the interconnected realms of policy labs, evidence use, and education.

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# Key messages

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## The opportunity

Within the education sector, there is a pressing need to institutionalise and strengthen the way evidence is used in policy and practice – and donors and practitioners are increasingly interested in addressing this through the use of policy labs.

In fact, policy labs have become a popular approach across multiple sectors. They are ideally positioned to help practitioners understand some of the most pressing questions around evidence use – and to strengthen it.

We believe that the education sector has a real opportunity, not only to strengthen evidence use in education and to further the global body of knowledge about policy labs, but also to make an important contribution to the wider evidence-informed policy field – which historically has been dominated by the health sector.

At the EdLabs Global Convening Event hosted by the Jacobs Foundation, we saw a great appetite among donors and other stakeholders to move forward in maximising the effectiveness of EdLab models.

And now is a great time to start. Most of the EdLabs represented at the convening event are in their early stages – making this the ideal time to influence their design and set their trajectory, towards putting evidence use at the heart of education policy and practice.

## Spotlight

Perhaps the most important overarching finding of the OTT review is that – while there is a surprising lack of evidence for the efficacy of policy labs – there is a wealth of existing evidence from the evidence-use field, across multiple sectors, that can be applied to the EdLab space.

The influencing factors, challenges and dilemmas faced by policy labs overlap significantly with those of the evidence-informed policy field – both in the education sector and beyond. Stakeholders, such as the Jacobs Foundation and its partners, whose interests lie at the intersection of these realms – policy labs/evidence use/education – can benefit tremendously from joining up these silos of knowledge and learning, and thereby drive progress in all three simultaneously.



# 1 Introduction

The Jacobs Foundation is working with a group of partners to support the establishment and systemic institutionalisation of Education Lab (EdLab) mechanisms in four countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Colombia and Switzerland. The EdLabs are at varying stages of establishment and are taking different approaches in their design and activities.

This review was produced through a learning partnership between the Jacobs Foundation and OTT Consulting, which aimed to investigate the role of policy labs in strengthening evidence use in education. It also complements an event that the Jacobs Foundation hosted in October 2023, at which donors and other stakeholders convened to explore a collaborative way forward for this agenda.

## 2 Methodology

The review's research questions were expressed within two clusters:

- an exploration of evidence use, particularly with the education sector; and
- an understanding of policy labs.

In order to answer the research questions, the review looked to three interconnected areas of literature and practice:

- the evidence-informed policy field;
- evidence use in education; and
- policy labs.

The review comprised a literature survey; semi-structured interviews with 16 key informants; and a detailed analysis of 27 existing EdLabs with an online presence.

For full details of the review's methodology, including its limitations, please see the full report [here](#).

## 3 Findings

The review was premised on the fact that, before we move forward with efforts to maximise the efficiency of EdLabs in strengthening evidence use with education, it is important to take stock of the existing body of knowledge.

The core of the review was therefore focused on exploring what is already known about evidence use – particularly in education policy – and policy labs.

This section presents summaries of the review's key findings on these topics, synthesised from the literature review, key-informant interviews, and online review of existing EdLabs.



## 3.1. The evidence-informed policy field and evidence use in education

Table 1. Summary of existing knowledge on the evidence-informed policy field and evidence use in education policy and practice

Topic	Summary of findings
<p><b>How has the evidence-use-in-policymaking field evolved?</b></p>	<p>There is a <b>dynamic field of research and practice focused on evidence use</b>, including in education policy and practice – although the field has been dominated by the health sector.</p> <p>The focus has expanded from ‘supply side’ to include the ‘demand side’, starting with an <b>understanding of the users of evidence and responding to their priorities, needs and behaviours</b> in relation to evidence.</p> <p>The policy lab approach reflects the current consensus that <b>‘supply side’ and ‘demand side’ approaches should be addressed together</b>.</p>
<p><b>What is ‘evidence’ in the education policy context?</b></p>	<p><b>The review found a mixed picture in terms of how ‘evidence’ is defined in the education sector.</b></p> <p>The literature points to the importance of a wide definition of evidence for use in policy, and broadly suggests three interlinked categories of evidence:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Research evidence</b> (professional trade books, resources and articles).</li> <li><b>2. Sector-generated data</b> (student assessment data, feedback surveys).</li> <li><b>3. Practice-informed advice</b> from individuals and organisations (consultants, universities, professional associations, non-profits).</li> </ol> <p><b>The evidence landscape in education is contested.</b> There are tensions on the importance of quantitative versus qualitative evidence; the merits and drawbacks of randomised control trials; and definitions of ‘rigour’.</p>



### What is evidence use?

Different ways of categorising and understanding evidence use are employed in the sector.

At the **individual level**, concrete knowledge, skills and awareness of evidence are key elements of '**conceptual use**' (or 'transparent use').

At the **organisational and systemic levels**, there is a distinction between one piece of evidence directly informing one decision ('**instrumental use**'), and multiple pieces of evidence being systematically considered on an ongoing basis ('process use', or '**embedded use**').

In literature from the education sector, the review found a nuanced picture of instrumental and conceptual evidence use, but less focus on embedded use.

### What is 'institutionalisation of evidence use' and what factors affect it?

**Institutionalisation can be understood as the combination of different uses of evidence on a sustained and systematic basis.**

Contextual factors affecting institutional evidence use broadly consist of:

- **Political economy** (party political system; executive–legislative relations; corruption; crises and transitions; role of the media).
- The **evidence ecosystem** (relationships between producers and users of knowledge; the landscape of local evidence producers).
- **Organisational factors** within 'user' agencies (processes; budgets; working cultures and incentives; infrastructural resources).
- **Individual characteristics** of policymakers (skills; knowledge; attitudes; motivation; behaviours).

Factors with particular salience in education include:

- **Political narratives typically focus more on access** or physical infrastructure rather than educational outcomes.
- **Policy and practice go hand in hand** – but knowledge is developing in silos.
- **A complex, decentralised stakeholder landscape.**
- **Lack of consensus on outcomes and measurement.**
- **Tensions between global and local priorities.**
- **Evidence production landscape affects evidence use.**





### What has been learned about how to strengthen evidence use?

**There is more learning on how to strengthen evidence use than is** sometimes assumed in the education sector.

Approaches to strengthening capacity **at individual levels target the skills, knowledge and behaviour of evidence users.**

Approaches to strengthening organisational-level capacities usually **focus on the development and operationalisation of tools, practices, approaches, or structures.**

**A less common, but nevertheless important,** approach is the explicit targeting of organisational **cultures** of evidence use.

Increasing interaction between evidence producers and users appears to be the most common approach to strengthening evidence use in education.

### Strengthening evidence use: Cross-cutting principles

Some clear common principles emerged from the review:

- Interventions to strengthen evidence use need to be **combined across all three levels (individual/organisational/systemic).**
- The capabilities required to strengthen evidence use are **political, social and cultural as much as they are technical.**
- The sector has moved towards **the co-design and -delivery of interventions.**
- There is room for **greater collaboration and learning between initiatives.**
- There have been calls across the evidence-informed policy sector to itself be **more evidence-informed in the design and delivery of evidence use interventions.**

### Doing funding differently

The most common learning points for funders include:

- **Short funding timelines** are a common critique, due to the much longer-term nature of the evidence use outcomes being sought.
- **Inflexibility and lack of adaptability** among funders has affected the evidence-informed policy sector for some years.
- There are opportunities for **greater coordination** between funders.

Source: Adapted from: Hayter, E. and Morales, M. (2023) 'Review: Policy labs and evidence use in education'. OTT Consulting



## 3.2. Policy labs

Table 2. Summary of existing knowledge on policy labs

Topic	Summary of findings
<b>The 'labification' of the policy field</b>	<p><b>A marked rise in policy labs</b> since 2011 has led to a phenomenon that is often termed the <b>'labification' of the policy field</b>.</p> <p>However, despite the field's growth, a clear consensus on what, precisely, constitutes a 'policy lab' remains elusive.</p>
<b>What is a policy lab?</b>	<p>An expanding and increasingly fluid understanding of what these entities actually are, or should be, makes it extremely challenging to pin down a singular definition.</p> <p><b>Policy labs represent a distinctive approach to respond to development challenges, through the</b> central objective of <b>informing policy</b>.</p> <p>The review identified three common elements in policy labs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1.</b> The <b>centrality of evidence</b> in their work, mission, and practices</li> <li><b>2.</b> A focus on knowledge brokering; and</li> <li><b>3.</b> A proximity to government while maintaining a degree of independence.</li> </ol>
<b>What do we know about policy labs in the education sector?</b>	<p>Over the past two decades, <b>governments have increasingly used policy units and labs to push for educational reforms</b>.</p> <p>One prevalent model is the <b>embedding of specialised units within ministries of education</b> to drive reforms and enhance policy efficacy.</p> <p>However, <b>academic research on EdLabs is scarce</b> - less than 40% of the 76 policy labs assessed in one review pertained to education.</p>



### Organisational set-up of policy labs

One way to understand policy labs' organisational structures is by examining their **level of embeddedness**, or closeness to government.

Policy labs generally fall into four categories: **government-owned** units, **government-led** units, **government-enabled** units, and **independent** units.

EdLabs may be either funded by government or rely on independent financing; and either physically located within a government ministry, or not. But EdLabs can (and frequently do) also exhibit a blend of these attributes, providing a level of **flexibility that enables them to adapt and evolve**.

### Key activities and functions

A defining feature of policy labs is their **capacity for testing and experimentation** to validate the effectiveness of policy innovations.

**Policy labs undertake an** array of interlinked activities, in **particular:**

- **Evidence prioritisation** (pinpointing evidence requirements).
- **Evidence assessment and synthesis (evaluating existing** evidence for quality and rigour).
- **Evidence translation and dissemination (translating complex** research findings into accessible and actionable insights).
- **Brokering (mediating between diverse stakeholders, fostering stronger connections and building trust).**
- **Evidence production (generating new knowledge).**
- **Testing solutions** (testing and implementing innovative initiatives).
- **Capacity development for evidence use** (encompassing any or all capacity development approaches).

### Funding models

The review highlighted five main financing models for policy labs:

- 1. Sponsorship model:** Funding comes directly from government.
- 2. Contribution model:** Sponsorship from government alongside cost recovery from clients or donors.
- 3. Cost recovery model:** All costs recovered from project clients or donors, often on a not-for-profit basis.
- 4. Hybrid model:** Leveraging multiple sources of funding.
- 5. Consulting model:** Charging for projects with a commercial margin.

The review found particular risks for donor-funded labs in southern contexts, where the political economy of development aid is a strong factor.



### Capacity development vs 'capacity substitution'

The learning on capacity development for evidence use is clear on the need to **accompany existing structures and systems**, and to amplify – rather than replace – their effectiveness

Embedded policy labs aim to **seamlessly integrate into existing units** or departments. However, in doing so, they run the risk of delivering 'capacity substitution', rather than enhancing the capacity of extant systems.

### Navigating politics

Policy labs do not operate in a vacuum; they exist within a political space. The review found a **complex relationship between policy labs and the surrounding political context**.

**Labs that engage closely with political decision-makers may strengthen instrumental use of evidence and high-level policy impact.** However, there is competition for attention, resources, and partnerships, and labs must vie for the limited time and interest of busy policymakers.

Moreover, close relationships with these decision-makers can be fickle – policy labs must contend with challenges arising from political shifts.

The review revealed that maintaining the delicate balance between proximity and impartiality is a pivotal challenge for policy labs.

### Effectiveness of policy labs

The evidence surrounding the 'impacts' of policy labs is notably limited, often relying on anecdotal accounts that are highly context specific.

There is also a lack of consensus on standardised methodologies for assessing the effectiveness of policy labs.

However, general factors in the effectiveness of policy labs, identified within the review, include:

- **Government priority alignment.**
- **Evidence-lab value-proposition.**
- **Operational formalisation and consistency.**

Source: Adapted from: Hayter, E. and Morales, M. (2023) 'Review: Policy labs and evidence use in education'. OTT Consulting

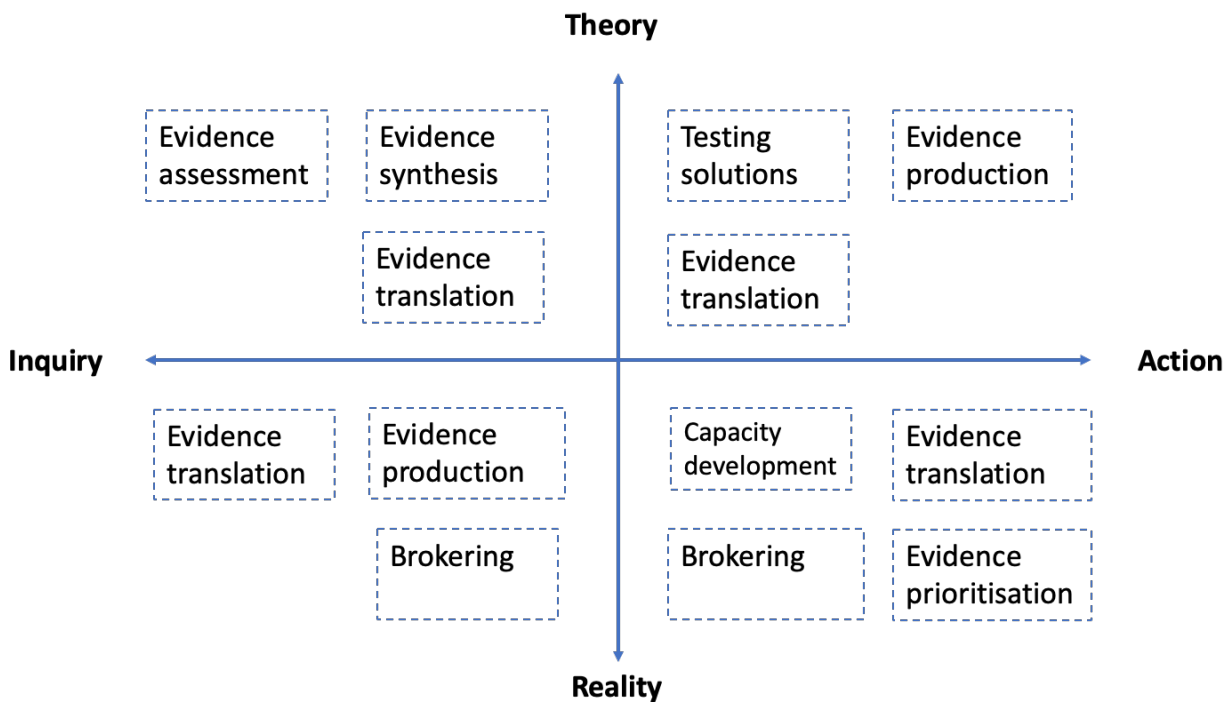


## A proposed typology of EdLabs

Following a detailed analysis of existing EdLabs, the review presented a proposed typology that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of their functions and activities. The typology (shown here in Figure 1) is designed to map the dynamic interface at which EdLabs operate – connecting theoretical inquiry with policy formulation and real-world applications.

A key aspect of this typology is its recognition that EdLabs do not operate exclusively within a single domain or intersection. The typology therefore highlights their versatility, demonstrating how they fluidly navigate the intersections of theory and practice, as well as inquiry and action. This framework is not intended to rigidly classify EdLabs into distinct categories, but to illustrate their *adaptable* nature and the diverse mix of activities they engage in to achieve their goals.

Figure 1. Dynamic framework: Bridging theory, policy and impact



Source: Hayter, E. and Morales, M. (2023) 'Review: Policy labs and evidence use in education'. OTT Consulting



## 4 Implications

This section outlines the main implications of these findings for EdLabs and other stakeholders, and the opportunities they present to respond to, build on, and drive forward the effectiveness of policy labs in the education sector.

### Could education be the 'new' health in evidence-informed policy-making?

By far the most influential sector to date in shaping thinking and practice in evidence-informed policy has been the health sector. However, interest in the topic is increasingly growing beyond this sector. This was illustrated by the presence of the more than 30 EdLabs from around the world at the Jacobs Foundation-supported convening in October 2023.

The review shows that **the education sector is well placed to act as a similar future arena for learning and testing approaches that can advance the evidence-informed policy field as a whole.**

### Popularity versus proof: The dichotomy of widespread adoption and limited evaluation

**The proliferation of policy labs across sectors and geographies speaks volumes about their appeal.** Yet there is a significant shortage of evaluations that measure their success.

This points to a pressing need for systematic reviews and assessments to validate the increasing prominence of policy labs. Such **evaluations would have co-benefits for both policy labs themselves and the evidence-informed policy sector.**

### Innovation in theory, convention in practice?

Many policy labs share notable similarities with established organisations, such as think tanks and evidence brokers. This raises questions about the true nature of policy labs: Are they introducing a genuinely innovative model, or are they simply repackaging familiar strategies under a new label?

For the future trajectory of policy labs, **it is imperative to harmoniously blend innovative methodologies with the accumulated wisdom of the broader policy sector.**

### Getting better at understanding and navigating politics

There is a lack of unified understanding about what it means to engage in the politics of evidence-informed policy. And as a sector that is usually subject to detailed public and political discussion, education is an ideal vehicle through which to address this gap.

**EdLabs are therefore well placed to contribute to the body of knowledge by developing more nuanced analyses of the politics of evidence use in education.**



### Understanding evidence use in organisations

Policy labs have an **opportunity to contribute to understandings of ‘process use’ of evidence in policy-making, including both structural and cultural approaches.**

Although the education sector offers the possibility of particularly revealing insights in this area, there are no current examples in the literature. EdLabs would be well placed to fill this gap, by **developing detailed pictures of the organisational factors shaping evidence use in education.**

### Joining the dots between different methodologies and evidence types

Policy labs in the education sector are well placed to take an **interdisciplinary approach to expanding the research on evidence use in education.**

First, **policy labs have the mandate and expertise to take a broad view of evidence for policy.**

Second, EdLabs are well placed to navigate – and perhaps transcend – methodological debates by finding ways to **combine multiple types and methodologies of evidence for use in education.**

#### Box 1: Five big learning questions for further exploration

Based on all the various opportunities offered by the pursuit of learning within the EdLab space, the review suggests five key questions for further exploration:

1. How does politics affect evidence use in education – for instance, in specific policy debates or contexts? And (relatedly but separate) what are the practical ways that EdLabs and other evidence use efforts can navigate this politics in the design and delivery of initiatives?
2. What is the impact of different policy lab models on evidence use by a) policymakers and b) practitioners/teachers? Does closeness to government translate into ‘better’ uptake?
3. How do specific approaches and activities contribute to organisational-level changes in evidence use (‘process use’ of evidence) in structures, systems and cultures of working within government departments?
4. Is there a role for philanthropic donors in supporting direct work with governments to support evidence use? And if so: What factors need to be considered around incentives and power dynamics, and what implications do these have for results/outcomes?
5. What is the impact of policy lab models over time? How does their role evolve? Can they act as catalysts for institutionalisation of evidence use on their own or do they require system-wide investment?



## 5 Recommendations

This section summarises two sets of recommendations presented within the review for practitioners and funders respectively.

These three critical actions will help EdLabs be more evidence-informed in their approach:

- 1. Clearly define the purpose and envisaged outcomes of each EdLab using a theory of change** with a) explicit links to existing evidence and/or evidence gaps for interventions and b) an articulation of what types of evidence use the lab is targeting (e.g., process use/instrumental use/transparent use).
- 2. Use evidence diagnostics to analyse the contexts in which EdLabs operate**, identifying windows of opportunity for change and developing a deep understanding of existing government structures and ways of working.
- 3. Join existing EIPM networks and communities of practice at global and regional levels** to ensure that EdLabs contribute to and draw on existing efforts.

### For funders of EdLabs: Supporting learning

- 4. Address the evidence gap around policy labs' effectiveness** by funding rigorous evaluations of their objectives and impacts on the policy-making process, at a sector and/or landscape level.
- 5. Ensure that appropriate resources are dedicated to documenting and sharing learning** from the implementation of EdLabs, with the support of a systematic MEL approach.
- 6. Package and share learning that responds to existing evidence gaps**, both on an operational level (about how to design and implement labs) and on a wider 'field-building' level (about the systems and contexts labs operate in, and their longer-term impacts within these systems).
  - As a starting point, we recommend the five key learning topics presented in Box 1.
  - Learning should be published in a variety of audience-appropriate formats and should aim to include both project reports and academic publications.
  - Learning should also be packaged and shared in languages beyond English, in order to contribute to the growing regional evidence-informed policy communities in Latin America and West Africa.
- 7. Be adaptive and flexible in approaches to funding**, so that EdLabs can change their approaches over time in response to emerging learning.
- 8. Make a commitment to drawing on existing evidence** in the design of programming and project work.
- 9. Actively participate in learning about funders' own roles in evidence ecosystems**, including reflection on the implications of power dynamics and incentives.
- 10. Develop and invest appropriately in a strong and comprehensive communication and engagement strategy at both global and country levels.** This will ensure that learning from EdLabs is informed by – and contributes to – that from the evidence use sector and from other policy labs outside the education sector.





## 6 Conclusion

This learning brief – based on the comprehensive report of the review – has outlined multiple opportunities for EdLabs, to both draw from and contribute to the use of evidence in education policy and practice.

**Despite their popularity, the evidence base around policy labs is strikingly scant.** Particularly striking is the gap in evidence on the *effectiveness* of policy labs – a question that goes right to the heart of the entire endeavour, and one that rigorous evaluations of EdLabs could start to address.

But opportunities for learning go beyond the lab field itself. The review also identified key topics that the ‘evidence use’ sector is grappling with, to which learning from EdLabs can offer valuable insights.

And, of course, investment in the effectiveness of EdLabs has the potential to contribute significantly to **increasing the use of evidence in education – and ultimately supporting improvements in education policy and practice** to the benefit of children and other learners across the world.

The review also illustrated that the factors affecting evidence use in education echo those in other sectors. This suggests that **other lessons from the broader evidence-informed policy field may be transferable to or adaptable for the education sector** to help maximise EdLabs’ effectiveness.

The OTT Consulting review, in partnership with the Jacobs Foundation, took in three streams of inquiry: evidence-informed policy, evidence use in education, and policy labs. All three areas share the characteristic of rapid expansion juxtaposed with gaps in the existing evidence, and/or perennial challenges for which additional research is needed. Yet, between them, they represent **a rich body of existing learning that is ripe to be both drawn from and built on.**

We see **a unique and fertile opportunity to drive all three spaces forward.** And the Jacobs Foundation is well positioned to contribute to this effort through the generation and sharing of learning alongside its partner EdLabs.

**We believe that, if the foundation seizes this opportunity, it has significant potential to inform progress at the nexus of evidence-use, education, and policy labs – and contribute to transformational change on a global scale.**

