

Tangianu, Alessandra; Esser, Daniel E.; Janus, Heiner

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Why do bureaucrats want mandatory training? A conjoint mixed-methods analysis of individual learning preferences in German, Norwegian, and South Korean donor agencies

Alessandra Tangianu¹ | Daniel E. Esser² | Heiner Janus³ 

¹Independent researcher

²American University, Washington, DC, USA

³German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Germany

Correspondence

Heiner Janus, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Germany.

Email: Heiner.janus@idos-research.de

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Abstract

Motivation: Individual knowledge and professional learning among donor-agency bureaucrats play a decisive role in the design and implementation of development interventions. Understanding how to provide optimal training curricula for their staff is key for these bureaucracies' effectiveness as central organizational actors in the international development field.

Purpose: We analyse individual preferences for professional learning pathways in three bilateral donor-agency bureaucracies—the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad)—to understand determinants of decision-making and opportunities for improvement. We ask: how do bureaucrats in these organizations assess different options for knowledge acquisition and learning?

Approach and methods: We integrate experimental and qualitative data to provide a comparative perspective on learning practices among donor-agency bureaucrats. Drawing on 89 randomly sampled interviews across three bureaucracies and representing both headquarters and recipient-country staff, we conducted a web-administered choice-based conjoint analysis among 81 bureaucrats to capture interactions between five dimensions of professional learning. We then contextualize our experimental findings through our interview data.

Findings: We find that the bureaucrats in our sample have a statistically significant preference for mandatory as opposed to optional training. We note that among the five dimensions of professional learning, the mode of training is the only one that an organization can directly influence. Triangulation with our interview data suggests that this preferred modality of learning is complemented by a staff preference for more targeted substantive training on thematic competencies as opposed to focusing on administrative procedures.

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Policy implications: Although broad administrative knowledge and experience are indispensable for professionals working at the interface of politics and programming, they are not enough. Donor agencies must take their staff members' learning preferences seriously and not shift the burden of learning about substantive issues onto individual staff.

KEYWORDS

bureaucrats, conjoint analysis, experiments, international development, learning, mixed methods

1 | INTRODUCTION

Bilateral donor-agency bureaucrats have significant influence on the design and implementation of international development projects around the globe. Their individual knowledge and learning play a decisive role in shaping these bureaucracies' effectiveness as key actors in the field of international development (Esser & Janus, 2023; McFarlane, 2006; Serban, 2022). As professionals working at the interface of administration and politics, they also matter because they often provide an ideational foundation for normative frameworks like democratic accountability (Nadelman et al., 2023), transparency, and partnership across national boundaries. These bureaucrats' individual knowledge and learning therefore co-determine both operational effectiveness and the value basis for international development co-operation.

As part of the recent bureaucratic turn in development studies, scholars have increasingly emphasized the organizational dimension of development effectiveness (Gulrajani, 2017). This research requires unpacking the daily practices of national-level bureaucrats (Williams, 2021). Over the last decade, these professionals have witnessed significant changes in the organizational priorities that they are expected to pursue. Global foreign aid budgets have grown on average—and in many cases multiplied—over the last decade. Along with this increase, the mandate of bilateral donor bureaucracies has expanded from a traditionally narrow focus on national poverty reduction to global goals integrating economic, social, environmental, and political dimensions of development in all countries, as codified by the Sustainable Development Goals (Davies & Pickering, 2017). Managing increasing budgets amid shifting political goals requires continuous learning among those tasked with administering official development assistance.

At the individual level, donor-agency bureaucrats exert influence over their idiosyncratic learning pathways as professionals. Such individual choices on learning have begun to draw scholarly attention (de Rosa & Johnson, 2019; Mandeville et al., 2016; Zhang & Shao, 2022). For instance, these bureaucrats have agency over deciding whether and how to learn primarily from best practices—presumed or proven—or past mistakes (Catino & Patriotta, 2013; Ron et al., 2006). Similarly, they have the ability to learn from experienced colleagues as peers or from outside experts (Manuti et al., 2015). Crucially, “agency” in this context is not to be conceived as rational, unbounded decision-making. Rather, it “needs to be understood as a relational concept: actors' choices are bound—enabled and restricted—by their environments” (Hefler & Studená, 2023, p. 248) since organizational context co-determines learning preferences (Manuti et al., 2015).

Accordingly, donor-agency bureaucrats are constrained by organizational structures when choosing between alternative learning pathways. For example, they are only partially autonomous when deciding whether to develop individual expertise as a specialist or maintain a generalist profile, since bilateral donor bureaucracies are managed on the basis of human resources policies that have evolved over decades (Dietrich, 2021). Similarly, while they can influence how often they rotate between positions during their career, these rotations, too, are governed by organizational policies. In other dimensions of knowledge and learning, bureaucrats hardly determine their

professional trajectories; for instance, which training modules staff need to complete and whether these are mandatory or optional, is most commonly determined by their organizations' human resources department.

Our research aims to understand individual preferences for learning pathways in bilateral donor bureaucracies that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC). We ask how bureaucrats in these organizations assess different options for knowledge acquisition and learning. We adopt a mixed-methods approach combining in-depth interviews of randomly selected informants in three bilateral donor bureaucracies with an online experiment of a sample of the same general population. As a first step, we conducted 89 in-depth expert interviews with German, Korean, and Norwegian bureaucrats on individual learning experiences, thus superseding the limitations of single-country investigations and furthering cross-cultural perspectives on professional learning preferences (Gan et al., 2009). Based on these qualitative data, we distilled five key factors characterizing individual learning pathways across the three organizations.

In a second step, we investigated individual preferences on these five factors to approximate decision-making behaviour determining individual learning pathways. Since the links between preferences and behaviour are difficult to observe, we leverage behavioural scholarship indicating that such preferences are an appropriate proxy of actual behaviour among reflexive professionals—in this case, bilateral donor-agency bureaucrats' decision-making on workplace learning pathways. We use an experimental design that prompts research participants to choose between competing scenarios, an approach that has been shown to capture implicit processes such as decision-making based on attitudes and experiences (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Zhang & Shao, 2022). Our combination of these two approaches allows us to integrate systematic observations of actual behaviour with research on individual preferences (Batista, 2023).

2 | METHODOLOGY

Our study employs a mixed-methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative methods (Hendren et al., 2023) to explore individual preferences for learning pathways in three bilateral donor agencies in Germany, South Korea, and Norway: the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). All three are members of the OECD DAC and represent the diversity of this predominantly European and North American club of rich countries (Taylor et al., 2023). Each of these organizations occupies a pivotal position in a national development assistance system by translating political priorities and policies into programmes and projects and co-ordinating the allocation of public resources for their implementation.

Between August 2022 and March 2023, two of the three authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 89 randomly selected aid bureaucrats in these three organizations. The sample comprises staff at both the head office and in recipient countries at BMZ and KOICA; all Norad staff work at the head office. The substantive focus of these interviews consisted of hypothesized connections between knowledge management, organizational learning, and development effectiveness. Personal experiences with individual learning pathways constituted a central theme of this first research phase. Three research assistants coded all interview transcripts inductively. Reading the resulting thematically clustered accounts of how staff in the three organizations acquire and use knowledge, and in light of considerable variability in terms of the organizational context in each setting facilitating these learning processes, we then probed more systematically into key determinants of individual learning pathways in these three bilateral donor agencies by designing a conjoint experiment.

Conjoint experiments are used widely in market research and related to vignette studies (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Previous research in international development has already applied this approach to study bureaucratic decision-making on public procurement and their perceptions of the success of development programmes (Harris et al., 2020; Tukiainen et al., 2023). Research on public administration, training, and development has

also applied the method to analyse individual preferences systematically (Aleksavska et al., 2022; Batista, 2023; Egeberg & Stigen, 2021; Fontdevila et al., 2022; Jankowski et al., 2020; Mikami & Furukawa, 2018; Zhang & Shao, 2022; Zhu & Du, 2024; Zwarts et al., 2015).

Conjoint experiments enable researchers to create realistic decision-making scenarios. By mimicking real-world decisions, it is possible to gather accurate insights into respondents' preferences and choices (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Tukiainen et al., 2023). Furthermore, such experiments allow for causal inference by highlighting which attributes are most relevant for respondent choices and then isolating their relative weight for each decision (Aleksavska et al., 2022). To illustrate, a recent study using a conjoint experiment established that "merit-based criteria, especially performance evaluation by public service clients, trump political considerations or informal criteria as the most essential attribute in bureaucratic promotion" (Zhu & Du, 2024, p. 15). Moreover, conjoint designs can also decrease social desirability bias through randomization and allow researchers to study multiple justifications for a given choice (Zhang & Shao, 2022). At the same time, we are mindful that conjoint designs are perception-based, measuring bureaucrats' hypothetical rather than actual behaviour (Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). This is why we triangulate our findings from the experiment with reported behaviour documented in our 89 interviews in the three organizations.

We employ a web-administered choice-based conjoint analysis using a factorial design to study more than one independent variable and their effects (Bordens & Abbott, 2002). Compared to synchronous pen-and-paper administration, asynchronous online deployment of conjoint experiments minimizes the risk of data contamination resulting from respondents influencing each other's choices (Gan et al., 2009). We generated our sample through a non-probability purposive approach relying on a combination of snowballed and blanket invitations. Selection criteria were twofold: first, primary employment at BMZ, KOICA, or Norad; second, informed consent to participate in the study. As noted by Kertzer and Renshon (2022) and Mandeville et al. (2016), elite samples are usually smaller than general population samples, and it is more challenging to access these subjects. To reach a higher sample size and ensure heterogeneous representation, multiple elite sub-samples are therefore often aggregated. We follow this approach for our research.

Our final sample for the conjoint experiment comprises 81 respondents. Organizational representation in this sample is balanced, with 36 responses from BMZ, 24 from KOICA, and 21 from Norad. Identical to our interview sample, it includes staff at both headquarters and in recipient countries at BMZ and KOICA, whereas all Norad staff work at the head office. The distribution of respondents' years of experience varies, with BMZ and KOICA respondents having around nine years of work experience on average and Norad respondents around seven years on average. Of the respondents, 57% engage in thematic work, while 19% primarily perform administrative tasks; 25% engage in both. 19% of respondents hold supervisory roles. Almost all respondents (95%) hold unlimited contracts. Overall, our sample thus reflects a diverse range of profiles with varying work responsibilities and years of experience. Despite the relatively small size, such a sample can still generate novel and significant insights, especially when complemented with qualitative data (Distelhorst & Hou, 2017; Kertzer & Renshon, 2022).

We collected data in three waves between June 2023 and November 2023. Initial invitations were sent via email to pre-agreed staff lists provided by each organization. The two subsequent waves followed the same approach. Conducting a total of three waves was necessary to try to achieve a sample size sufficiently large to investigate such an elite population. To mitigate bias and induce participation, our conjoint instrument was translated into Korean and German for the second and third waves, allowing respondents from BMZ and KOICA to complete the survey in their native languages. Additionally, as suggested by Dietrich (2021), we expressly guaranteed data anonymity to induce a higher response rate.

The conjoint instrument developed specifically for this research asks participants to make six consecutive choices between pairs of hypothetical reform proposals related to learning in their respective organizations. These proposals are characterized by five attributes that serve as our independent variables, with each attribute having two different values (called "levels" in conjoint analyses; see Figure 1). The five attributes are "ideal career path" (generalists or specialists); "job rotation frequency" (three or five years); "learning from what" (best practices

or past mistakes); “learning from whom” (experienced colleagues or outside experts); and “participation in training” (mandatory or optional). Throughout the experiment, participants saw a legend (see Table 1) summarizing these five dimensions with their respective attributes.

We limited the experiment to two levels per attribute to reduce the cognitive complexity of the design and increase the experiment’s statistical power (Zwarts et al., 2015). Given the impact of attribute levels on expected effect size (and consequently on the required sample size), keeping attribute levels to a logically meaningful minimum ensures analytical rigour (Schuessler & Freitag, 2020). Each participant was presented with six randomly configured pairings of reform proposals. Figure 1 illustrates one of these pairings. The order in which the five

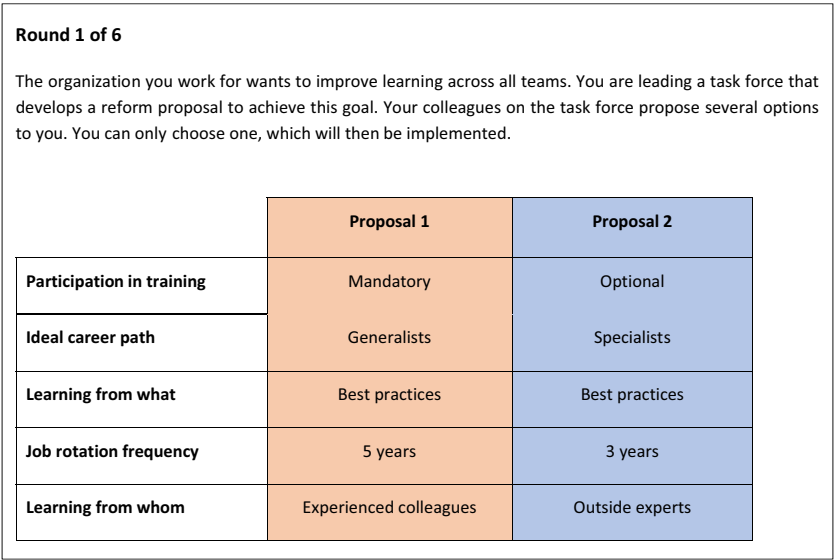


FIGURE 1 Two hypothetical reform learning proposals shown to respondents.

Note: In the online survey, hypothetical reform proposals were presented on a screen that also featured the legend and the prompt: “Which reform proposal to improve learning do you prefer?”. “Round 1 of 6” (above) indicates that this was the first of six consecutive choices that participants made during the experiment. “Attributes” are visible on the left side of the table, while the two “levels” of each attribute are presented on the right side. Attribute order and levels were randomized in each round, with the possibility of levels being identical (as shown in this figure for the attribute “Learning from what”) as long as there was variation on at least one attribute.

TABLE 1 Attribute legend shown to all participants throughout the experiment.

Participation in training	The organization provides regular training for all staff. To improve learning, should participation in such training be mandatory or optional for staff members?
Ideal career path	The organization rewards certain competencies in staff development. To improve learning, should most staff members strive to become generalists or specialists?
Learning from what	Learning can be inspired by concrete examples. To improve learning, should these examples mainly illustrate best practices or past mistakes?
Job rotation frequency	Staff in the organization change their positions regularly. To improve learning, should they change positions every 3 years or every 5 years?
Learning from whom	Learning benefits from exchanges with other people. To improve learning, should these people mostly be experienced colleagues or outside experts?

attributes were shown to the participants was also randomized in each round. Such counterbalancing techniques via randomization are essential to mitigate biases resulting from respondents either learning, habituating, adapting, or remembering the order of experimental conditions (Bordens & Abbott, 2002; Hainmueller et al., 2014). Additionally, the experiment featured an attention check to ascertain whether respondents were reading the instructions and questions thoroughly, thereby ensuring data quality. Responses from participants who did not complete the entire online survey or failed the attention check were excluded from subsequent statistical analysis. A final section of the survey asked respondents to indicate their organizational affiliation, length of tenure, and contract type.

3 | RESULTS

Our conjoint analysis tests whether the null hypothesis for each of the five attributes in our experiment can be rejected. Each of these null hypotheses posits that there is no statistically significant difference in preference among the bureaucrats sampled for the alternatives ("levels") for each of the five dimensions ("attributes") of individual learning pathways. For instance, the null hypothesis for the attribute "ideal career path" reads, "sampled bureaucrats have no statistically significant preference for either a generalist's or specialist's career path." Unlike survey research, testing hypotheses on preferences separately from one another, our conjoint analysis captures the effect of variation on one attribute on the attractiveness of an entire set of attributes. Our experiment therefore helps us understand which attribute levels drive participants' decisions on five-attribute sets of hypothetical reform proposals for learning pathways in the three organizations.

In our analysis, hypothesis testing relies on the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) for each attribute (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Any AMCE estimate that is found to be significant indicates that variation in levels for this particular attribute has an effect on respondents' choices. In other words, the AMCE estimate measures the average effect of each attribute level on the probability of a hypothetical reform proposal being chosen, compared to the other levels for that attribute. Since the levels for all five attributes are binaries, the AMCE estimates indicate whether the change from one level to the other leads to a statistically significant difference in respondents' choices. For example, for our attribute "ideal career path," the corresponding AMCE estimate demonstrates whether the randomized display of either "generalist" or "specialist" is linked to a non-random difference in respondents' preferences for hypothetical reform proposals when all other attributes and their levels in these proposals are kept constant.

Of our five attributes, only the attribute "participation in training" exhibits a significant AMCE statistic (see Table 2). This AMCE point estimate tells us that there is a positive association between the likelihood that a respondent chooses a particularly configured learning path if the hypothetical reform proposal features training provision as mandatory as opposed to optional. Table 2 shows a negative trend (below 0) for the AMCE point estimate for "participation in training," suggesting a decreased tendency towards selecting a hypothetical reform proposal when the attribute shown was "optional" rather than "mandatory." Figure 2 illustrates significance at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$) of the AMCE point estimate for "participation in training" in comparison to the other point estimates, none of which are found to be statistically significant, as indicated by horizontal lines intersecting the zero point for these four estimates.

Our findings provide a novel and seemingly clear-cut indication of training preferences among donor-agency bureaucrats. However, we are fully aware that our small sample size precludes strong interpretation. The statistical power of our analysis is constrained by the limited number of observations, rendering it difficult to detect whether any observed effect is significant or merely due to chance. Furthermore, our overall sample may not be fully "representative of an underlying population" and was "collected using different sampling methods in different periods of the year" (Aleksovska et al., 2022, p. 140). At the same time, the latter limitation has also been encountered and discussed in previous research on bureaucrats and has not been found to render findings

TABLE 2 Results – AMCEs and main effects.

Attributes and levels	AMCE	Sig.
Participation in training	-.1368 (.0284)	.000
Mandatory (baseline)		
Optional		
Learning from whom	-.0684 (.0395)	.083
Experienced colleagues (baseline)		
Outside experts		
Learning from what	.0181 (.0377)	.631
Best practices (baseline)		
Past mistakes		
Ideal career path	-.0475 (.0452)	.292
Generalists (baseline)		
Specialists		
Job rotation frequency	.0365 (.041)	.374
3 years (baseline)		
5 years		

Note: N=81; AMCE estimation; attribute levels labelled “baseline” represent attribute=0 while second level represents attribute=1. Reform proposal preference is thus measured through a change from 0 to 1 or a change from one attribute level to the other; standard errors are reported in parentheses.

irrelevant for substantive interpretation. Moreover, existing research contends that perception-based measures are still useful to study issues as diverse as policy and ideological positions held by parties and politicians (Murillo et al., 2010; Wiesehomeier & Benoit, 2009) as well as by civil servants (Jankowski et al., 2020), and we are confident that our triangulation with interview data helps us develop a meaningful and more fine-grained interpretation of our statistical finding.

4 | DISCUSSION

The analysis of our conjoint experiment has produced a statistically significant result for one of the five dimensions of individual learning pathways. Before we delve into discussing this finding, we wish to clarify that we do not rule out the possibility that the other four dimensions could be equally important. However, taking our probabilistic approach seriously requires a focus on statistically significant dimensions. Although it is possible that a larger sample would have produced significant findings also for some of the other four dimensions, we proceed by discussing the significant result and explaining it through recourse to relevant scholarship on learning pathways and our qualitative data from 89 elite interviews in the same organizations.

Our experiment demonstrates that donor-agency bureaucrats in the three organizations have a significant preference for mandatory training delivery over optional course choice. Such a uniform inclination for a particular approach to learning is interesting, as it applies to a diverse professional category. “The typical bureaucrat” is, of course, a heuristic concept; in practice, organizational incentives and constraints are interpreted differently by individuals. For instance, while some bureaucrats are strict rule followers, others prefer more entrepreneurial, relational approaches (Eyben, 2010) that require frequent code switching depending on audiences (Esser & Janus, 2023). At the same time, previous research has also shown that professionals make training decisions, to a

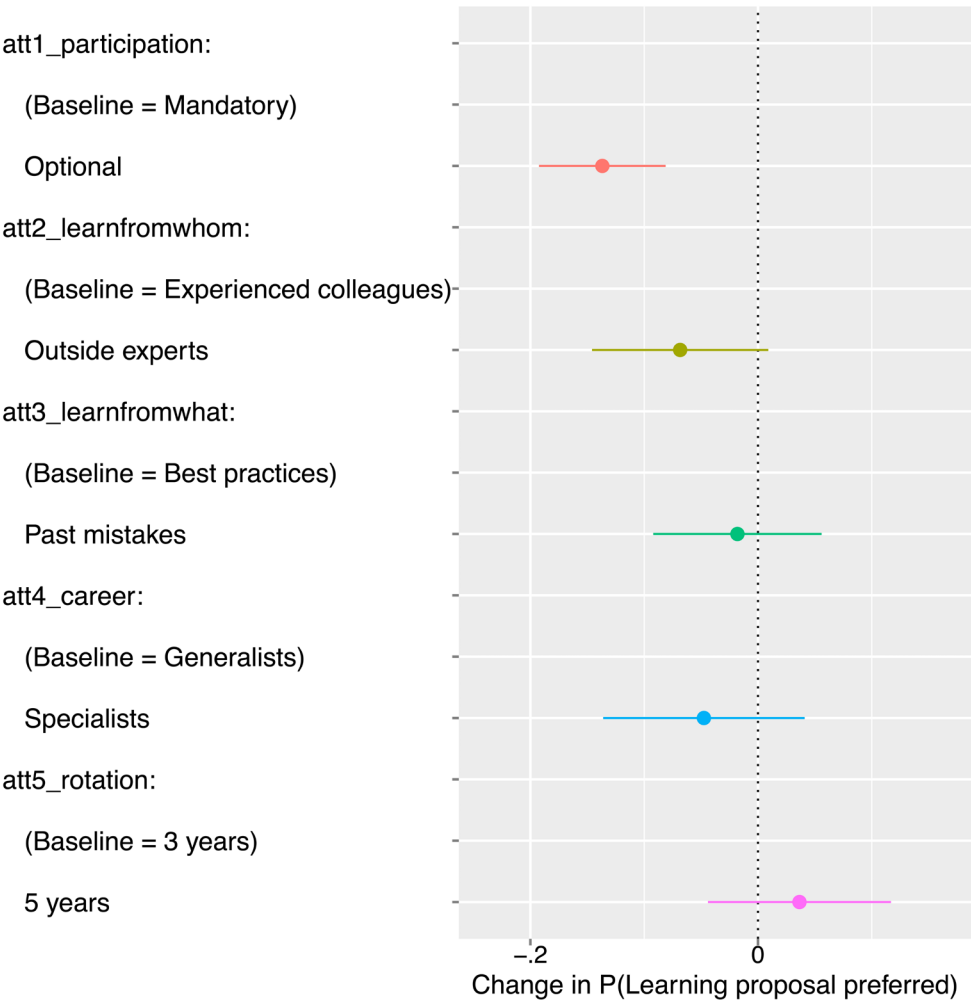


FIGURE 2 AMCE plot.
Note: N=81; AMCE estimation; horizontal lines indicate 95% cluster robust confidence intervals; baseline attributes are not presented as they correspond to 0; respective estimates are presented in Table 2. The outcome variable is the change in probability to choose reform proposal 1 or 2.

large extent, on the basis of word-of-mouth information (Gan et al., 2009), highlighting the central role of social dynamics in the formation of learning preferences (Manuti et al., 2015). As a result, preferential convergence seems plausible even within a heterogeneous professional field.

In particular, our qualitative data corroborate the preference for mandatory training that our experiment found to be significant and add nuance in explaining which specific types of mandatory training may be preferred. Trade-offs between short-term efficiency and individual learning are reported as one factor limiting the effectiveness of optional courses:

There are great opportunities to widen your [knowledge] at Norad. But people are normally so stretched thin that we do not get the chance to take advantage of these opportunities. We are just busy with other things. That is a way where it becomes a little bit of a trade-off with being effective.

You have opportunities to learn, but then you also need to be effective, but you can't achieve that because every day is just busy.

This rationale is echoed by an interviewee at BMZ who criticizes that voluntary optional training is hampered by organizational hierarchies and priorities:

The reasons why trainings are not really effective at knowledge transfer has to do with the fact that BMZ has very few mandatory trainings. Whenever you want to attend a training, you have to ask for permission from the hierarchy.

These statements suggest that mandatory training is preferred because the organization is expected to set aside time for employees to attend them, rather than expecting staff to take the initiative and prioritize learning over other—often more urgent—responsibilities.

Yet, the finding that development bureaucrats at BMZ, KOICA, and Norad prefer mandatory training may equally be driven by substance. Commenting on training content, a BMZ staff member laments that there are currently no mandatory trainings relating to substantive challenges relevant to international development assistance, as opposed to training on rules and regulations: “We now have mandatory onboarding workshops, but no courses that help me develop substantive knowledge. That is the question: how do you deliver training on substance?” A Norad staff member's assessment echoes this diagnosis:

There was [...] a one-week training course where you learn all the essentials about how to use our system. But I wish there was more of that—more of the fundamentals of how... what is learning? What is good? How to improve, how to become better practitioners?

Interviewees at KOICA similarly report that effective content delivery poses a challenge:

In KOICA, some courses are on the internet. All sorts of companies designed them, and completing them is mandatory for promotion. So some staff open the course during working hours; they let the course run, but they are not listening. These courses are, for example, on work ethics or organizational law at KOICA.

Highlighting a need to refocus mandatory training, there is evidence throughout the data of donor-agency bureaucrats recognizing that effective completion of their daily tasks requires substantive and not only administrative knowledge, which calls for a set canon of training courses on thematic development topics. An interviewee at Norad explains this preference as follows:

There were two years without any training; the people lack the basics. We need to start with the basics and need to build up the people to a good level. We do this with consultants who teach us how to train grown-ups, and do this digitally. We do this in some modules, but before [the global pandemic] we had to do a whole week in training. This worries me a bit—with bits and pieces, you get bits and pieces only. The complexity, that everything goes together—you need an overview.

The mode of delivery of substantive curricula thus emerges as a critical dimension of donor-agency bureaucrats' learning pathways. Our data demonstrate a widely shared concern among these professionals that the development of their thematic capabilities lags behind, as most bilateral donor bureaucracies still foresee career progression towards universal administrative competence as generalists without providing their staff with sufficient substantive in-house training. This reliance on what one BMZ interviewee cheekily labels “universalist dilettantes with broad general

knowledge” may explain why “being thrown in at the deep end of the pool” is the most frequently used metaphor appearing in the BMZ data set. A similar sentiment exists at Norad:

I work on food security-related issues, but I do not have a formal background in this; my background is [in] finance. [...] Although I am spread thin across the organization, I would like to focus more on this subject matter. [...] That is tricky to do with the intranet training as we do not have subject-type courses. There are opportunities to do that at the university and we can apply for grants and take courses. [...] That would strengthen my skillset and make me way more relevant. The problem is that it is a big barrier to first go for a grant and then take courses. It is a big commitment. I have been thinking about doing that, but the barrier is a bit too high.

How could such barriers be lowered? Research on the effectiveness of knowledge transfer in international development practice has established that individual trainee characteristics are not a statistically significant variable (Mikami & Furukawa, 2018). Rather, organizational management holds greater explanatory power for determining how professionals acquire substantive knowledge specifically in and on international development co-operation (Hefler & Studená, 2023). Our respondents' preferences for mandatory and primarily substantive training therefore needs to inform management decisions. Their identification of limited time as a major bottleneck for learning suggests that it is the organizations that have primary responsibility for ensuring that training modalities become effective. Indeed, revisiting the five dimensions of individual learning pathways that emerged from our interview data, the only one that the organization can immediately influence is the mode and content of training delivery.

Donor bureaucracies face a tangible incentive to take staff preference seriously. Without targeted research measuring the effectiveness of different training modes specifically within bilateral donor agencies, we do not know whether bureaucrats' learning preferences are, in fact, aligned with verifiably more effective modes of learning. However, we posit that it does not matter how bureaucrats' preference for mandatory training reflects optimal learning modalities; rather, their self-assessments constitute important information for organizational leadership. We know that bureaucratic decision-making on individual learning pathways matters for a range of organizational effectiveness dimensions, including but not limited to retention (Mandeville et al., 2016). Organizations that intend their trainings to contribute to organizational objectives should have a fundamental interest in taking learners' preferences seriously (Mikami & Furukawa, 2018). We therefore read our main finding also as an opportunity for bilateral donor agencies to (re)engage their staff members in frank conversations about *how* to learn *what*.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our research has investigated individual preferences for learning pathways in three bilateral donor bureaucracies in order to understand how these organizations can provide optimal training curricula for their staff. We have integrated experimental and qualitative data to arrive at a statistically validated, yet also multifaceted, answer to this question. By studying individual learning pathways in three OECD member states, we have heeded the call for comparative perspectives on learning among international development professionals. We have found that the bureaucrats in our sample have a significant preference for mandatory training. Triangulation with our interview data suggests that this preferred mode of learning is complemented by a preference for more targeted substantive training as opposed to administrative training. These findings hold across the three organizations despite contextual differences and individual idiosyncrasies. They thus validate existing scholarship on knowledge transfer in international development co-operation outside donor bureaucracies. Moreover, they have important implications for these bureaucracies themselves.

Donor bureaucracies should take their staff members' learning preferences to heart. While broad administrative knowledge and experience is indispensable for professionals at the interface of politics and programming, it is not enough. At the same time, our research demonstrates that donor bureaucracies cannot shift the burden of learning onto individual staff. Although the latter are usually not implementers of development projects, they clearly recognize the need for expertise in one or more sectors or regions and articulate their demand to treat skill development in these areas not as a voluntary option, but as their employers' strategic responsibility.

Beyond this call to action for donor bureaucracies, our research contributes to emerging scholarship on individual-level bureaucratic decision-making in international development organizations based on experimental designs and their integration into existing methodologies. Specifically, we propose that our sequencing—interviews that precede and inform a conjoint analysis—holds methodological promise. Rather than working with qualitative data only to contextualize quantitative findings, we have opted for a more comprehensive approach. Our sequencing does not preclude letting our qualitative data speak to our statistical results; on the contrary, our interviews shape the conceptualization of our quantitative instrument as much as they help us interpret its findings. Without doubt, our sample size must caution us against overconfident conclusions, and future research should take our experience as a caveat. Ultimately, however, we believe that mixed-methods research can and should be judged on a continuum and not on statistical power alone. Therefore, we encourage our peers to use the present study as an innovative methodological, albeit imperfect, building block.

Further research in this area should explore the formation of “development expertise” from an empirical and comparative angle. Different from, but complementary to, normative accounts of development expertise as the combination of substantive and communicative knowledge, we envision such research to focus on longitudinal analyses of knowledge sets vested in development professionals. Running the gamut from macro- to micro-level factors, we suggest that the political economy embedding these professionals, their specific organizational contexts and their individual professional identities all hold explanatory power. Our data indicate an almost uniform aspiration among donor-agency bureaucrats to continuously deepen and broaden their substantive expertise. Nonetheless, the link—if any—between individual capacity development and organizational effectiveness remains poorly understood in development studies (Yanguas, 2021). This cross-scalar nexus merits greater attention as we strive to appreciate the role of donor bureaucrats in the 21st century.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally and share responsibility for any remaining errors.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper reports analysis of primary data. Persons from whom data were collected gave their free, prior, and informed consent. Their data have been kept confidential and used anonymously.

ORCID

Heiner Janus  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1726-083X>

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