



Australian Government

Australian Centre for
International Agricultural Research



Evaluation of ACIAR Learn



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Disclaimer

This Evaluation Report has been prepared by the Evaluation team and reflects their views. As such it does not necessarily represent the views of ACIAR or bind them to any action.

Acknowledgements

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Summary

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) forms part of Australia's international development portfolio. ACIAR's mandate is to amplify the impact of Australia's capabilities in agricultural science by brokering and funding agricultural research for development partnerships in developing countries.

The ACIAR Learn online learning platform strengthens the capabilities of ACIAR partner organisations to undertake applied agricultural research for development.

Since its inception in May 2021, there have been three distinct phases.

- The first phase began in May 2021 and validated a mobile-first, blended learning approach designed to suit participants working in low-resourced locations.
- The second phase began in June 2023 with a switch to a new learning platform, creating efficiencies and realising significant cost savings compared with Phase 1.
- A third scaled down Phase 3 began in January 2025, offering self-paced learning but without the facilitated live sessions, which were a feature of Phases 1 and 2.

The University of Queensland has been the ACIAR Learn Managing Contractor through each phase, providing oversight for program quality, course design and delivery, monitoring and evaluation and adaptive learning. A Technical Advisory Group has provided input on strategic direction and priority setting.

This Evaluation of ACIAR Learn provides an independent verification of the performance of ACIAR Learn and articulates how ACIAR Learn complements and reinforces ACIAR's capacity development objectives.

Features of the ACIAR Learn platform

The platform incorporates **three components**:

- tailored courses blending self-paced learning with facilitated interactive sessions.
- a collaboration hub supporting collective learning and networking.
- additional learning resources and guidelines.

Learning is focused on ACIAR's core business: strengthening applied research capabilities, enhancing research partnerships and networks and creating additional touch points for Australia's public diplomacy objectives.

Consistently high participant feedback indicates the ACIAR Learn courses are: **current, accurate, comprehensive, engaging and relevant**.

97% of users reported overall satisfaction with the ACIAR Learn courses.

91% reported the course content had direct application to their research.

81% reported online forums and discussion groups benefited their research.

72% completion rates (73% F; 70% M)

ACIAR Learn is creating a ripple effect. Users are actively promoting the platform with their project teams and research partners. Some are drawing on ACIAR course materials in their university or tertiary institution classes.

ACIAR Learn is democratising capacity development. Courses are available to all levels of project staff, regardless of position or prior experience and including project staff who might otherwise be unable to access face-to-face training or scholarship programs.

Learner-centred instructional design and **Inclusive Accessibility Standards** support flexibility, accommodate diverse learning abilities and consider the different needs of women and men.

A rigorous Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework ensures **quality assurance, adaptive learning and continuous performance improvement.**

Value for Money (VFM)

The Value for Money Assessment provides evidence that ACIAR Learn delivers Very Good VFM and is commensurate with market.

- ACIAR and the UQ have appropriately applied **sound financial management and accountability mechanisms**, meeting Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines, considering cost consciousness and proportionality and creating efficiency dividends through at all stages of implementation.
- The **targeted focus on capabilities required for applied agriculture-for-development research** means that ACIAR Learn is **delivering outcomes for users and their organisations**. Emerging evidence suggests these outcomes are having a material impact on ACIAR supported research partnerships.
- There are **opportunities to extend reach**, e.g., to agricultural researchers during their study and/or pre-arrival, UK and Australia-based ACIAR researchers, non-ACIAR Australia Award recipients and non-ACIAR funded research institutes. **This would increase value for money.**
- These results indicate that ongoing investment in ACIAR Learn would add significant value to ACIAR's capacity development for agriculture research investments, as well as contribute more widely to Australia's scientific and public diplomacy efforts.
- The Evaluation highlights early evidence that VFM may be negatively impacted by the shift to self-directed learning.

ACIAR Learn's unique value proposition

The delivery of **mission critical applied research and project management capabilities** via ACIAR Learn supports the creation of regional linkages that are strengthening research outcomes and research partnerships.

The platform's twin track-approach to affirmatively reach out to women and to create flexible arrangements to accommodate the differing needs of women and men allows for **gender parity in participation.**

Facilitated **live sessions deepen understanding on how concepts can be adapted and contextualised.** These person-to-person connections contribute to **strengthening existing relations between Australian and non-Australian agricultural researchers** and to **creating and sustaining horizontal South-South connections** within and across regions.

In this way ACIAR Learn is **contributing to locally led development** in line with development effectiveness principles and Australia's commitments to these.

Conclusions

The Evaluation finds, first, that ACIAR Learn is in alignment with and contributing to ACIAR's mandate for the delivery of applied international agricultural research and the wider priorities of Australia's international development policy. Second, that there is an opportunity for ACIAR to build on what has been achieved to expand online blended learning across ACIAR's suite of research investments.

Should ACIAR decide to continue with online learning:

- Greater clarity is needed on how ACIAR Learn is positioned within and complements ACIAR's portfolio of applied research investments. This would sharpen focus, identify opportunities to further expand reach and scale and allow ACIAR to achieve a more coherent, systems-wide approach to strengthening applied research capacity.
- The platform must build on ACIAR Learn's unique value proposition: namely, delivering mission critical applied research and project management capabilities to strengthen and sustain agricultural research partnerships and regional connections.

With these understandings at the fore, **the Evaluation proposes that ongoing investment in ACIAR Learn is justified, as a complement to existing capacity development for research partnerships.**

The report discusses two design options to inform ACIAR as it considers future potential investments in ACIAR Learn. The first is to build on the Phase 2 investments, while also exploring opportunities to expand reach and enhance value for money. The second is to close out ACIAR Learn, while ensuring the existing online content remains available on demand.

Recommendations

1. Should ACIAR **decide to continue investments in ACIAR Learn**, based on the value proposition established by the evaluative evidence, the Evaluation recommends that:

- 1.1. ACIAR **invests in the ACIAR Learn approach developed in Phase 2**, blending self-paced online courses and facilitated live session, while also expanding reach and ensuring greater integration and engagement across the ACIAR suite of capacity development investments.
- 1.2. In order to build on the success of ACIAR Learn, ACIAR adopts an **externally facilitated design process** that builds on the evidence collected through the Evaluation to:
 - Clarify alignment and integration within the ACIAR capacity development framework.
 - Update the ACIAR Learn theory of change to align it more strongly to its role in supporting applied agricultural research partnerships.
 - Focus course design on mission critical skills and knowledge and needs articulated by research partners.
 - Identify opportunities to expand reach and maximise value for money.
 - Further address barriers to accessibility and strengthen measurement of access issues for women and people living with disability.
 - Explores greater opportunity for South-South engagement including in course delivery.
 - Carefully explores comparative costs and strengths and capabilities of different operational modalities **before going to market**.

2. Should ACIAR **decide to discontinue investments** in the platform, the Evaluation recommends:

- 2.1. ACIAR **initiates a planned close out** and explores alternative internal and/or external arrangements and associated resource requirements to 'house' the current learning materials so that they will remain available.

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Abbreviations

ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Diversity and Social Inclusion
JAF	John Allwright Fellowship
JAFeL	John Allwright Fellowship Executive Leadership Program
JDF	John Dillon Fellowship
JSF	JAF Support Facility
KEQ	Key Evaluation Question
LMS	Learning Management System
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning
MELF	Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning Framework
MWF	Meryl Williams Fellowship
PASS	Pacific Agriculture Scholarships & Support
ToC	Theory of Change
UQ	University of Queensland

ACIAR Learn Evaluation

1. Background

1.1 The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) forms part of Australia’s international development portfolio. ACIAR’s mandate is to amplify the impact of Australia’s outstanding capabilities in agricultural science by brokering and funding agricultural research for development partnerships in developing countries. With a focus on applied agricultural research, ACIAR works with public and private research institutions to improve the productivity and sustainability of agricultural systems and the resilience of food systems in partner countries.

1.2 A Comprehensive Approach to Capacity Development

ACIAR agriculture research projects are designed towards strengthening agri-food systems through six strategic objectives aligned with the Australian Development Policy. ACIAR works to ensure that its portfolio of applied research-for-development projects is not only achieving impact but also developing the capabilities of individuals, organisations and systems to perform agricultural research-for-development.

Capacity development is achieved through a suite of intersecting strategies. They include capacity development action within projects; Fellowships and Scholarship Awards; and Capacity Support Services (Table 1). ACIAR Learn is one component within the overall approach to capacity development.

Table 1. ACIAR’s comprehensive suite of capacity development investments

Research for development projects and partnerships	Fellowships and Scholarship Awards	Wrap around Capacity Support Services
<p>Capacity development integrated into the design of each ACIAR project and linked to the realisation of project outcomes and partnerships.</p> <p>Actions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentoring, short courses and workshops, online learning, job placements, formal study, peer-to-peer learning Support to project design (e.g., context analysis, and assessment of competencies needed). Incentives for research innovation via industry and private sector partnerships and the trialling of new approaches. 	<p>John Allwright Fellowship (JAF) (postgraduate degrees in Australia; Australia Awards)</p> <p>John Dillon Fellowship (JDF) (leadership and management training, site visits and networking opportunities)</p> <p>Meryl Williams Fellowship (MWF) (training and mentoring for women agriculture professionals in the Indo-Pacific)</p> <p>Pacific Agriculture Scholarships & Support (PASS) (scholarships and research management capacity at University South Pacific & Fiji National University)</p>	<p>JAF Executive Leadership Program (accompanies postgraduate research; a JAF requirement)</p> <p>ACIAR Learn (blended online learning platform)</p> <p>Networking and Mentoring Opportunities (whilst in Australia).</p> <p>JAF Support Facility (ensure Fellows complete their study and transition back to their organisations)</p> <p>Alumni Research Support Facility (small funding opportunities for research post-Fellowship)</p>

1.3 ACIAR Learn

Overview

ACIAR's focus on creating meaningful and enduring partnerships between Australian researchers and researchers around the globe was disrupted by COVID-19, placing restrictions on existing modes of learning. This prompted ACIAR to explore new and innovative ways to continue supporting research capabilities in partner countries and to sustain ACIAR's global research networks. Post-COVID, it became apparent that the initial investments in online learning could augment and extend ACIAR's capacity development efforts.

The ACIAR Learn platform incorporates three components:

- Online ACIAR Learn Courses, blending self-paced learning with facilitated interactive sessions.
- The ACIAR Learn Collaboration Hub, supporting collaborative learning and networking.
- Additional learning resources.

Since its inception in May 2021, there have been three distinct phases. Table 2 summarises and compares the capabilities in each phase.

Table 2. Comparison of ACIAR Learn Phases and Capabilities

Phase 1 (May '21 – May '23)	Phase 2 (June '23 – Dec '24)	Phase 3 (Jan '23 – Dec '23)
Different courses offered for Alumni & Project Staff.	Learner access to all courses. Discussion forums introduced.	Self-paced courses. Discussion Forums recommended.
Emphasis on mobile devices first External LMS – e-learning & instructional design capabilities hosted by Catalpa. LMS features: micro-learning & in-app discussion boards	Switched LMS (Acorn), instructional design & e-learning hosted by UQ Content downloadable to any device (more flexible learning) Ad hoc program wide live learning activities e.g., panel discussions & workshops engaging ACIAR staff and experts. Admin flexibility; learner and course designer visibility & control; and enhanced working dynamics and workflows. Cost savings realised.	
Facilitated sessions to deepen understanding and learning (mandated 50% attendance; alternative activity for those unable to attend live sessions).		No facilitated live sessions. Recorded Phase 2 live sessions provided where applicable.
Course Feedback Summaries informed reflection meetings and iterative design.		Course Feedback Summaries but updates not guaranteed.

Phase 1 (May 2021 – May 2023) of the learning platform, delivered by the University of Queensland (UQ) and Catalpa International, validated a mobile-first, blended learning approach designed to suit participants working in low-resourced locations. The emphasis on mobile devices meant learning could be done anywhere, anytime, at any pace. Online learning was complemented by live interactive sessions where participants connected and collaborated with experts and with their peers around the globe.

Phase 2 (June 2023 - Dec 2024) began with a switch to a new learning platform (Acorn), housed within the UQ and saw the exit of Catalpa as a delivery partner. The new platform gave learners and course designers more visibility and flexibility e.g., learners were able to self-register, track progress and download content. The shift also realised significant cost savings (compared with the previous platform).

By the end of Phase 2, 19 tailored courses were designed (Table 3), and delivered to 28 cohorts (exceeding contractual requirements).

Table 3. Courses available through ACIAR Learn (July 2024)

<p>ACIAR Learn Course Guide (July 2024)</p> <p>Foundational Courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Interdisciplinary, Critical, and Participatory Approaches to Research for Development (R4D)Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in ResearchMonitoring, Evaluation and Learning in ResearchPrinciples of Ethics in ResearchResearch Project Management Essentials <p>Extension Courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Research for Development Design and PracticeApplying Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in ResearchResearch Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in PracticeEthical Research in PracticeResearch Project Management in Practice <p>Elective Courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Academic Writing - Introduction to Academic WritingAcademic Writing - Writing an Empirical Journal ArticleMentoring SkillsPolicy Influencing SkillsQualitative Research MethodsQuantitative Research MethodsResearch in the FieldResearch Proposal SkillsScience CommunicationScientific Data Analysis & InterpretationValues-based Leadership
--

A third scaled down phase currently underway (Jan - Nov 2025) offers self-paced learning but without facilitated live sessions and will be reviewed pending the outcome of this Evaluation.

The UQ has been the ACIAR Learn Managing Contractor through each phase, providing oversight for program quality, course design and delivery, monitoring and evaluation and adaptive learning. In addition to mobilising their own expertise UQ also worked with Australian higher education and research organisations – the Course Convenors – who worked with Instructional Designers to develop the tailored courses. The Course Convenors then facilitated the live discussions during delivery.

A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) has provided input on strategic direction and priority setting for ACIAR and UQ stakeholders and ensured that the platform remained relevant to ACIAR and Australian Development Policy and Program priorities.

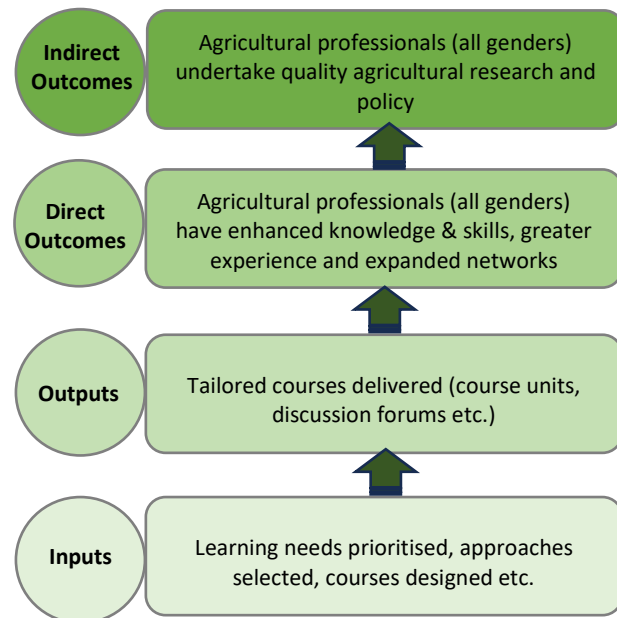
ACIAR Theory of Change

The ACIAR MELF (detailed in Annex II) aligns with the ACIAR Capacity Development Program objectives and provides coherence to the collection, analysis and use of data to inform continuous learning.

The MELF measures direct learning outcomes, noting that results at the level of indirect outcomes are influenced by changes across the other interconnected capacity development domains and by the organisations where the research professionals work.

The MELF supports day-to-day and strategic management decisions, allows for adaptive learning and ensures accountability for the use of allocated resources. It also documents contributions made to research networks and the wider Australian public and science diplomacy agenda.

Fig. 1. ACIAR Learn Program Logic



2. The Evaluation

2.1 Purpose

ACIAR commissioned the Evaluation to:

- Provide an independent verification of the performance of ACIAR Learn and the outcomes identified by learners, contributors and ACIAR personnel (*effectiveness and impact*).
- Articulate how ACIAR Learn contributes and adds value to ACIAR's capacity development efforts (*relevance & coherence, effectiveness and efficiency*).
- Articulate how ACIAR Learn contributes and adds value to ACIAR's partnerships and linkages between researchers and research institutions (*relevance & coherence, effectiveness and sustainability*).
- Explore the extent to which ACIAR Learn demonstrates Value for Money (VFM) and best use of resources (*efficiency, effectiveness & sustainability*).
- Use evaluative evidence to provide *recommendations* to guide future investments in the platform.

2.2 Scope

The Evaluation focuses largely on Phase 2 implementation (June 2022 – Dec 2024) but does include some analysis of the development of the approach through each phase.

2.3 Key Evaluation Questions

To this end the Evaluation responds to the following Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) developed through formative consultations with ACIAR leadership.

KEQ 1 Relevance & Coherence	To what extent does the investment in ACIAR Learn align with and respond to ACIAR's competitive advantage, strategic priorities, capacity development outcomes and wider objectives of the Australian development program?
KEQ 2 Effectiveness	To what extent and in what ways is ACIAR Learn contributing to strengthening research capacities and networks?
KEQ 3 Impact & Value Addition	Is there evidence that ACIAR Learn is contributing to and adding value to ACIAR's partnerships, linkages between researchers and research institutions, or the application of field research skills?
KEQ 4 Value for Money	To what extent is the learning platform demonstrating efficiencies and Value for Money in terms of delivering on its outcomes?
KEQ 5: Potential Future Platform	What does the evaluative evidence tell us about the potential characteristics of a future learning platform positioned to contribute to ACIAR's strategic objectives and deliver on partner needs in an effective and efficient way?

Sustainability has not been considered as a stand-alone KEQ so as not to presume that ACIAR Learn should remain as a stand-alone activity. Instead, sustainability has been considered as a cross-cutting issue within each of the KEQs – relevance and coherence, effectiveness, impact, efficiency – and in particular, the extent to which the benefits of the program will continue vis-a-vis capacity and the best use of ACIAR resources.

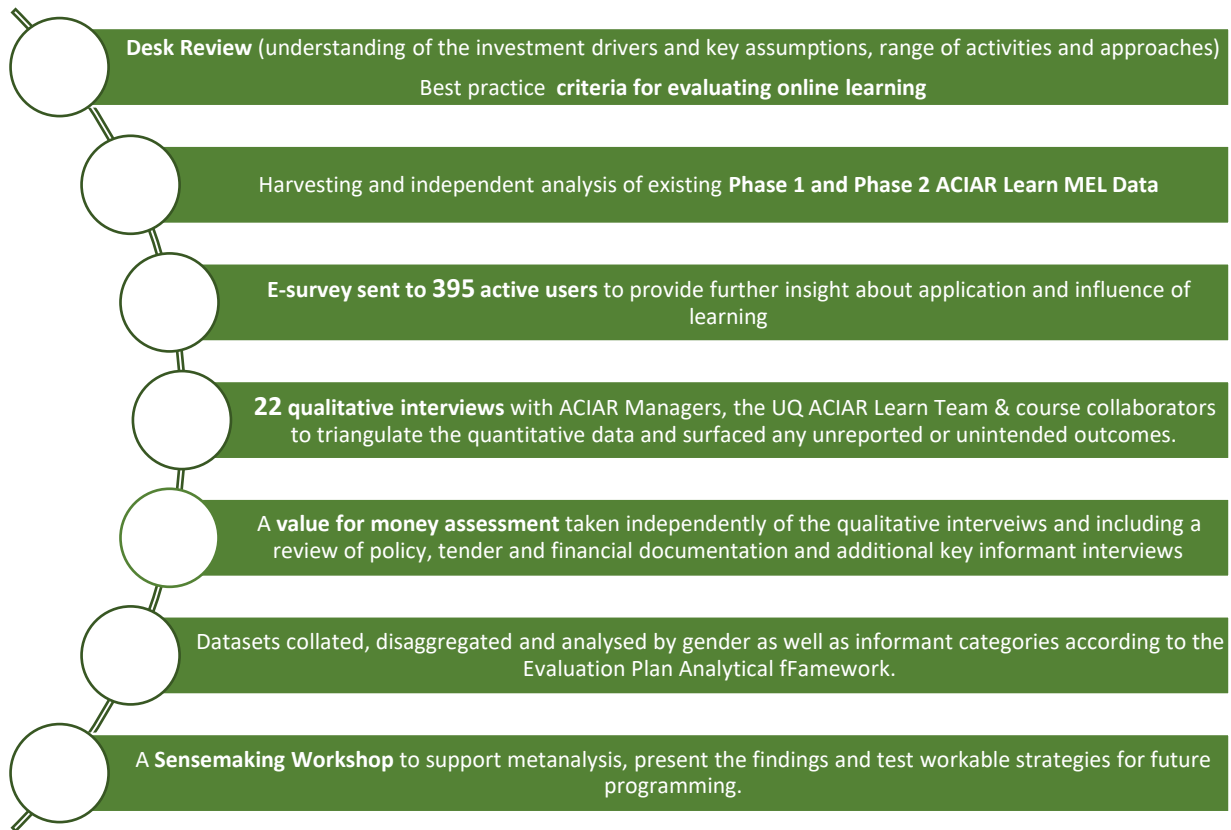
2.4 Approaches and Methods

The Evaluation has been guided by the principles of impartiality and independence, credibility usefulness, partnership and participation, which reflect OECD-DAC and DFAT Guidance.¹

The Evaluation centred around a utilisation mixed-methods approach (Fig. 2) to ensure that a wide range of evaluative evidence could be applied to strategic decision making regarding the potential shape and form of any future investment in ACIAR Learn.

¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ethical-research-evaluation-guidance-note.docx>

Fig. 2. Mixed Methods Approach



2.5 Limitations

The large numbers of learners (395) meant an electronic survey was the most efficient approach to gaining a robust sample of active participants (registered users who had completed at least one ACIAR Learn course in Phase 2). Open-ended e-survey questions provided opportunities for users to reflect on and provide a deeper understanding of user experience. The response rate on the e-survey was 36%.

Value for Money (VfM) was assessed in the context of our analysis of efficiency and effectiveness, specifically the extent to which ACIAR and UQ considered VfM at implementation. A detailed cost benefit analysis and assessment of comparative financial data was beyond the scope of the Evaluation.

2.6 Informants

A graphic of the informants – and the gender breakdown – is provided in the next section.

3. Results

The results presented in the infographics in this chapter have been drawn from three data sets:

- a. Aggregated Phase 1 and Phase 2 end-of-course evaluations (UQ ACIAR Learn).
- b. Aggregated e-survey data, which asked participants to identify what they saw as significant learning post course and allowed the Evaluation Team to validate the UQ Data Reports.
- c. Qualitative data gathered through interviews with ACIAR and UQ stakeholders and collaborators further validated the findings.

Our methods included a review of all of the UQ/ACIAR data sets by an independent data analyst. We found **no discrepancy between data presented by UQ and our own independent analysis**. Our independent qualitative e-survey of ACIAR Learn users also yielded similar results to those reported by UQ.

The Evaluation also assessed the Quality of Evidence (QoE) of data collected throughout the Evaluation using the tool provided at Annex III. The Evaluation found that **the QoE brought to the Evaluation was high, meaning that the Evaluation team was able to access verifiable data from multiple sources** to evidence the findings and recommendations.

This confirms the rigour of the ACIAR Learn MEL Framework and information management system.

3.1. ACIAR Learn has reached a broad demographic of participants

During Phase 2 ACIAR Learn reached out to a broad demographic of project staff and alumni.

- 395 participants (52% women) completed at least one tailored ACIAR Learn course.
- Participants included ACIAR alumni, current Fellowship awardees (Table 1 above) and current and recent project staff (some of whom were also alumni).
- 19 tailored ACIAR Learn courses were developed and delivered to 28 cohorts. (Some courses were repeated).
- The majority of participants were from Southeast Asia and the Pacific, followed by South Asia, East and Southern Africa and Australia and New Zealand.
- The majority were early and mid-career research professionals, working either in a university or tertiary institution or government research Institution.
- Users mainly heard about ACIAR Learn through existing relationships – from their project leaders (36%) or through their networks and workmates (36%).
- This was followed by the ACIAR website or social media, accounting for (11%).



















DEMOGRAPHICS	
395	active users
19	tailored courses
28	cohorts delivered
56%	project staff
11%	alumni
	33% S. East Asia 28% Pacific 39% rest of world
	57% tertiary 19% government
	70% early & mid-career research professionals
	72% personal relationships

Fig. 2 ACIAR Learn Results

CONSISTENTLY HIGH FEEDBACK		INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN FEATURES			
SATISFACTION LEVELS		ASSESSMENTS		ACCESSIBILITY	
	97% satisfaction rating (70% very high)		94% useful learning tool		93% platform easy to use
	72% completion rate (73% F; 70% M)		91% appropriate # & type; requirements easy to understand		83% courses were well-structured & easy to navigate
	94% gained new knowledge & skills	COLLABORATIVE LEARNING			83% design features used consistently
RELEVANCE			94% live sessions	ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS	
	92% to both work & organisational needs		72% discussion forums		25% experienced barriers to fully engage (these constraints did not affect course completion rates)
	93% to future careers		71% peer learning opportunities		
COURSE CONTENT			72% networking opportunities		
	97% both interesting & engaging		62% new networks		91% applying learning to agriculture research
	93% easy to understand		55% satisfied with Buddy Group system		84% influencing others

3.2 ACIAR Learn has received consistently high feedback

In Phase 2, the ACIAR Learn courses received a **97% satisfaction rating**:

- 94% of learners reporting acquisition of new knowledge & skills.
- 92% reported the ACIAR Learn courses were relevant to both work and organisational needs.
- 93% reported the courses were relevant to future careers.
- 95% reported the skills and knowledge gained had direct application into their work.

During the same period, **course completion rates** were **73% for female learners and 70% for men**.

These findings were confirmed in the follow up e-survey, when respondents identified the following course strengths depicted below.

Fig. 4, ACIAR Learn Course Strengths



Reflections from Course Convenors provided insights into why ACIAR Learn has received consistently high feedback:

“ACIAR Learn is a simple way to gain information that you need to know if you want to get funded or take part in or run an ACIAR project... It was the familiarity. Many of the courses spoke to their working experience: research project management, ethics in research, qualitative and quantitative research. These focused courses supported their learning whilst undergoing their PhDs in Australia or whilst actually working on ACIAR projects.” (Course Convenor 1)

“... it’s excellent for networking. I mean the connections I’ve seen people make through ACIAR Learn – where they support each other to learn... the alumni network is a really important network for people who have just embarked on project management or people who have just got into an ACIAR project... for someone who is wanting to make her mark.” (Course Convenor 2)

Importantly, the ACIAR Learn courses have had wide appeal because they are available to all levels of project staff, regardless of position, length of time in a project or prior education. In this way, ACIAR Learn is supporting equity and democratising capacity development.

3.3. Instructional design features support engagement & inclusion

Learner-centred inclusive instructional design, quality assurance and a strong focus on maximising the learner experience were central concerns throughout Phases 1 and 2.

Throughout Phases 1 and 2, careful consideration was given to potential technology and connectivity issues and to ensuring content was straightforward and responsive to different learner needs and abilities. Inclusive accessibility standards are incorporated into a **Course Development Guide** developed by the UQ Team.

Learners reported:

- the platform was **easy to use**; courses were **easy to navigate and well-structured**; and the **instructional design features were applied consistently** across all courses.
- the design features **supported accessibility** and were **consistent across courses**:
 - **offline access and downloadable content** (supporting connectivity and any-time learning).
 - **inclusive design features** (e.g., magnified text, audio options, descriptive text for visuals, inclusive language, different learning abilities etc.)
 - **compatibility across devices** (mobile phones, laptops, or desktops).
- **course assessment** requirements were **easily understood**, and learners could **track their progress**.
- opportunities to **network regionally and globally** allowed learners to **connect with experts and each other** and explore like-research interests.
- access to **additional learning resources** via the UQ Research Library and embedded links to reference materials were a bonus, especially for learners operating in resource poor environments.

3.4. Flexible delivery supports accessibility and engagement of diverse users

Affirmative efforts ensured that ACIAR Learn offered flexibility and accessibility for a wide range of users.

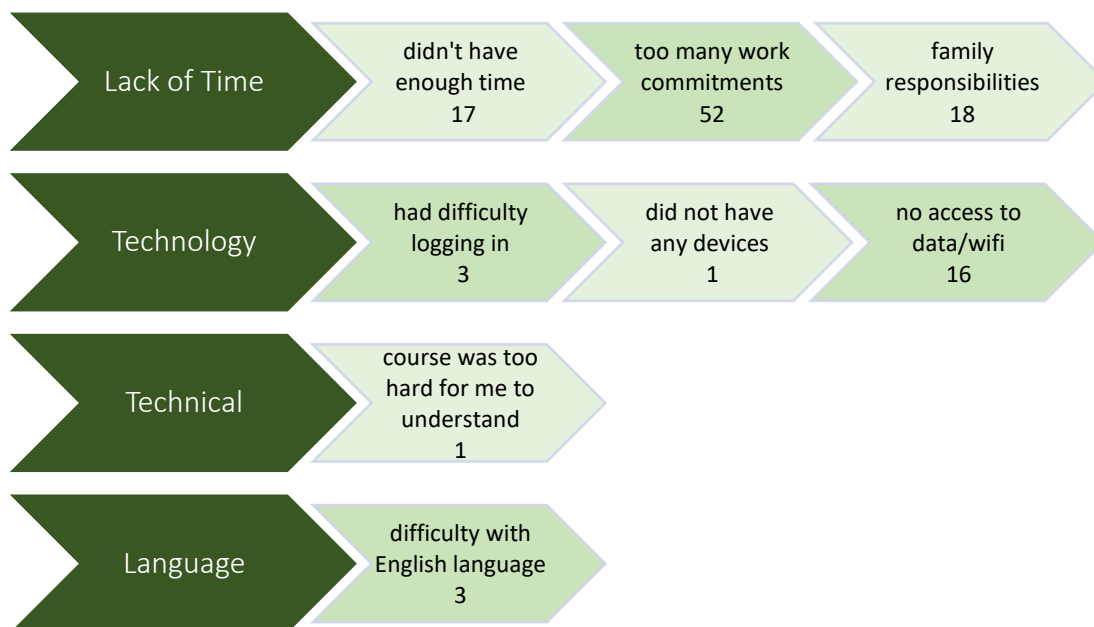
- Gender parity in participation coupled with the slightly higher course completion rates for women (in a field traditionally dominated by men) are outcomes of the platform’s twin track-approach to both affirmatively reach out to women, and to also create flexible arrangements to accommodate the differing needs of women and men.
- Similarly, efforts were made to provide reasonable accommodations for people of all learning abilities including flexible/anytime access, plain language, use of assistive technology compatible design and layout including alternative text and captioning, consistent navigation etc.

- Initially, learners were required to participate in live sessions in order to receive recognition of completion however time zone differences and competing commitments presented challenges for some. The live sessions later became voluntary and alternative activities were provided for those that could not join the live sessions.

Despite these considerations, 25% of respondents to our survey reported experiencing some form of barrier to engage with the ACIAR Learn platform (lower than the 36% reported in Phase 1). Balancing work, life and study commitments was the greatest challenge followed by connectivity and/or technology constraints, which were prevalent in resource-poor locations (Fig. 5).

What is perhaps most significant in this is that while these constraints were reported, the high completion rate means that they did not deter users from using the platform or from completing courses. This further highlights the extent to which the **ACIAR Learn course are valued by users.**

Fig. 5. Barriers to engagement



3.5. ACIAR is supporting collaborative learning and networking

The ability to interact and learn collaboratively has been one of the most valued features of ACIAR Learn and distinguishes the platform from other online university learning platforms.

- 95% of learners reported the facilitated live sessions as useful or very useful.
- 81% reported that online forums and discussion groups had benefited their research practice.
- 72% were satisfied with networking and discussion forum opportunities.

In Phase 2, the emphasis on collaborative learning shifted from Buddy Groups towards participation in ad hoc discussion forums. While this accounts for Buddy Group sessions receiving a lower score (55%) for usefulness in Phase 2 than in Phase 1, the result still highlights the value learners placed on user-to-user connections with and across regions. ACIAR Learn not only builds connections between Australian and non-

Australian agricultural researchers, it also builds horizontal connections across diverse regions (South–South connections).

“Discussion forums served to reinforce learning ...helping learners assess whether their understanding aligned with the course content and the perspectives of others.”

“Knowledge sharing discussions with fellow researchers stimulated our critical thinking about how to adapt and localise methods.”

“Learning together about common issues and challenges helped to problem solve and localise ...design more effective interventions.”

“Q&A sessions with experts...provided real-time solutions.”

“Hearing the diverse perspectives from a global network enriched and broadened knowledge ...it encouraged collaboration.”

During interviews, Course Convenors also highlight the importance focusing on applied research and on how collaborative learning and networking supported cross- regional connection:

“The most powerful thing was the ability to connect with other researchers ...everyone knew that it didn't matter where you came from (Pakistan, Africa, Fiji or Southeast Asia) the actual problems that you came across were similar even though you might have worked through them differently.” (Course Convenor 3)

“Seeing what other, more senior researchers are doing... was probably the most important [aspect], you know, for those who could find the time to come and had actually prepared... Some people would put only a little time into the course work ...not dive deep or complete all sections. But in the live sessions you actually have them engaging and interacting.” (Course Convenor 4)

The live sessions allowed Course Convenors to blend self-paced course work with human-to-human connection to deepen learning and foster relationship building thus laying the foundation for strengthening research partnerships and networks.

Given the demand for interactive learning, it is not insignificant that completion rates have dropped in the first quarter of 2025, since self directed learning was established in Phase 3. **These findings have significant impact for ACIAR as it considers the shape of any future platform.**

One Course Convenor – recognising that not everyone was able to attend scheduled live sessions – described how she modified her approach to ensure no learners would miss out (further evidence of how adaptive learning approach was woven into the ACIAR Learn approach):

“You could set up sub-regional sessions. A Southeast Asian [research] group could ...have a workshop together with the project leader going: “look, this is really useful... let's do it together... you could get a Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laos group because they're all on a similar time zones ...but you would lose the richness of the engagement from the different countries and different perspective. The [learners] find it very interesting ...somebody in the Philippines hearing some from Ethiopia about their experience operating within different systems. So, you would lose that richness... you could have a hybrid version of regional and international live events.

We can draw on the goodwill of in-country participants ...after having completed the course the graduates became champions, telling other people about the live sessions... These were ACIAR alumni who had graduated from universities in Australia and were fully engaged in my discussion posts... I always brought them along as a resource person so they became the people who would [promote the program] ...that

created a lot of curiosity. Whenever I had like a live session ...I always brought in a resource person from the country or region ... to talk about what they learnt based in the case study and sometimes it was from their project, not mine. So that was my biggest surprise

If we make them a requirement, others might drop out because [of competing commitments] ...that would limit those participants who would like to engage... what we did was record the session and made it available later ...and I'd have a chat box so people can ask questions after ...people started putting in "I did not attend the session but I'm keen to know what happened." [And then] the Philippines team the Pakistan team and Lao and Vietnam – they all formed small clusters, small groups to interact with each other and to discuss any challenges." (Course Convenor 4)

3.6. Skills gained through ACIAR Learn are contributing to research partnerships

91% of learners surveyed reported the courses had direct application to their agricultural research projects.

A key factor in determining ACIAR Learn's value proposition is the extent to which the platform contributes to ACIAR's research objectives. Key informant interviews highlighted the **unique value proposition of ACIAR Learn** plays in delivering critical applied research skills that in turn support ACIAR's research partnerships. In particular ACIAR Learn users highlighted the value of applied project management skills, e.g., program logic, theory of change and monitoring and evaluation, coupled with cross cutting issues, e.g., gender and social inclusion, which are not generally taught as part of University degree programs.

This is a point of difference for the ACIAR Learn platform, namely, the immediate practicality of the content, which is both relevant and specific to applied research. Specific courses referenced in the e-survey as having strong relevance included:

The **GEDSI (gender-based research)** training *"...deepened my understanding of integrating gender considerations into new agricultural research projects and [about] actively involving women."*

The **Scientific Writing** course *"...increased my confidence to effectively communicate my research ideas or findings in scientific reports, articles and proposals."*

I have applied the **Research Project Management Skills** course *"to my planning team meetings."*

The **Effective MEL Practice** course *"...deepened my understanding of data collection and analysis approaches."*

The **Research Ethics** course has *"...enhanced my understanding of ethical principles and interdisciplinary research."*

The **Mentoring Engagement** course has *"...deepened my understanding of effective teaching approaches ...and ethical practice in research."*

At the end of Phase 2, the UQ team surveyed ACIAR Project Leaders (June 2024). Despite a lower than anticipated response rate, the majority of Project Leaders agreed that ACIAR Learn was aligned with the ACIAR mandate and that ACIAR Learn is complementing the overall goals and objectives of their research projects. Importantly, **50% said they could identify tangible outcomes resulting from application of the knowledge and skills gained by their project team members.** Given that ACIAR Learn has only been in operation since 2022, this is a promising result. It is also an indication of the potential for integration across the research and capacity development branch.

These findings highlight, first, that **ACIAR Learn is making a direct contribution to ACIAR's mandate (applied research partnerships).** Second, that **ACIAR is contributing to the wider objectives of the Australian Development Program in terms of scientific and public diplomacy and creating key touchpoints and deepening of relationships between Australian and the Indo Pacific region.**

3.7. ACIAR Learn is having a 'ripple effect (thus expanding reach)

ACIAR Learn offers a high degree of relevance to learners as well as their institutions. Learners are actively promoting the platform. (Promotion of an online platform by the users is a further proxy indicator for relevance.) In so doing, they are expanding the platform's reach.

- 84% of learners reported using the skills and concepts gained in their courses to influence peers and partners.
- 86% of learners reported referring colleagues and partners to ACIAR Learn, sharing learning resources, and encouraging others to register.

Examples given included:

"...presented excerpts from the course to reassess a project outline and evaluate progress"

"...collaboratively reviewing research papers and writing"

"...shared data collection and analysis techniques with my project team"

"...used materials to train technicians and other scientists [in the university]"

"...integrating new methods into my own teaching and course materials"

"...providing guidance on gender analysis and participatory approaches to team members... collaboratively making efforts to involve more women in agricultural research"

"...discussed my learning experiences and skills gained with colleagues and newly recruited project staff"

"...motivating project partners to enrol...promoting the ACIAR Learn website."

This ripple effect indicates potential to extend reach by making ACIAR Learn more widely available to project research partners. This in turn would increase value for money.

3.8 ACIAR Learn is joining up other ACIAR capacity development interventions

ACIAR Fellowship and Scholarship Awards are a central pillar in ACIAR's capacity development approach. **ACIAR Learn has become an academic resource for Scholarship Awardees**, supporting them to lead and influence others and to increase their effectiveness as researchers.

- The John Allwright Fellowship Executive Leadership (JAFEL) program is a requirement for all John Allwright Fellows during their time in Australia. The Fellows participate in face-to-face workshop sessions, during which they are directed to ACIAR Learn courses that complement their learning. Some JAFEL faculty are also Course Convenors for ACIAR Learn courses e.g., [Values-based Leadership](#).
- The Meryl Williams Fellowship (MWF) supports women agriculture professionals in the Indo-Pacific through leadership and management training and mentoring, in line with ACIAR's strategic objective of Empowering Women and Girls. Beginning in 2025, the intake of MWF and their mentors were given access to the ACIAR Learn courses both before starting and throughout their Fellowship.

It would be possible to direct other awardees to online courses prior to arrival in Australia e.g., [Introduction to Academic Writing](#) and [Science Communication](#), which would be helpful for those Awardees who need pre-sessional support before starting their post graduate studies. Similarly, project teams could be directed to project-specific courses prior to participating in face-to-face regional workshops.

A senior ACIAR Research Program Manager identified opportunities to augment project-based capacity development with online learning.

“I think there’s a bit of a disjuncture between capacity development outreach and the research managers... we’re not seeing the potential of ACIAR Learn... online training has been used effectively in emergency management training ...why not in our work?”

We are seeing a high turnover of staff in the Pacific ...and we have to [return] to basic training for new staff ...project-specific training gets out of date very quickly and needs to be refreshed... I see the potential here of online training and extra resources where teams can go back later and double check their understanding or refresh. I have training materials that I have developed, and I still draw on... other research team leaders also have training materials... Some of these could be developed into online resources and spread around. It came up again [recently] at an end-of-project review ...there were quite a lot of Australian project leaders and research team members there who were relatively new into management of bigger teams and feeling a little overwhelmed ...they’re looking for support.

We [Australian researchers] almost need a training course for the online system. We have brown bag seminars. That would be a good place to start.” [ACIAR Manager]

Course Convenors agreed ACIAR Learn could be a useful tool to build skills and connections for young, emerging Australian researchers alongside international researchers.

“Some of the project team leaders or project managers... They're thrown into management roles and... they don't have the management skills... I don't think [ACIAR Learn] should be limited to international researchers. I think it should be for Australians even some of those project leads.” [Course Convenor]

“I was really interested to get involved because I thought ... we could use ACIAR Learn to put these researchers in the spotlight and get them to be more empowered about taking a lead in the projects ...very often it's just Australians who make decisions about the proposals and [then] tell the local people what to do basically... So, I thought [ACIAR Learn] was a great opportunity to enhance ... contribute to design of multi-disciplinary research ...critical skills so that they might be more confident to participate in the projects.”

[Course Convenor]

There are opportunities for research project leads to interact with the platform e.g., to help focus design priorities on critical project-level skills, to contribute as subject matter experts in live discussion forums and to adapt project-specific training materials and make these available online.

4. Value for Money Assessment

4.1 VfM Assessment

ACIAR Learn delivers very good Value for Money to ACIAR.

The VfM Assessment applied the DFAT VfM Framework (Annex IV) that moves beyond a simple consideration of cost and benefit by taking into account factors such as quality of the investment (results), efficiency of delivery, relevance, value addition, proportionality and accountability. It has a dual utility: 1. as a retrospective assessment, it enables ACIAR and UQ to understand the extent to which ACIAR has delivered VfM; and 2. in light of the strategic nature of this Evaluation, it allows ACIAR to assess and judge VfM in the design of any future programming, including the selection of design options and modality choices.

The following table highlights some of the key findings relating to VfM. These are further discussed in the response Key Evaluation Question 4 and 5 (see 5.4.and 5.5).

Table 5. Value for Money Assessment

Criteria	SCORE	EVIDENCE
ECONOMY	VERY GOOD	
Cost Consciousness	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost was a key consideration and one of the scoring criteria used in the competitive tender process. • ACIAR and UQ have demonstrated careful attention to cost: annual budgetary reviews enabled reallocation of resources; and significant cost savings identified during implementation led to efficiency dividends. • UQ delivers a competitive management fee. • The delivery cost of ACIAR Learn will drop with increased completions. • The budget conflates direct and indirect costs of delivery which provides a skewed picture of the actual costs of delivery vs management costs.
Encouraging Competition	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACIAR Learn was procured through a competitive approach to market, following Commonwealth procurement guidelines. • Delivery is not limited to UQ and includes other organisations.
EFFICIENCY	VERY GOOD	
Evidence based decision making	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ACIAR Learn MELF and information management system provides a robust set of data supporting day-to-day and strategic decision making. • The MELF has enabled adaptive learning. • The TAG ensures alignment and complementarity with ACIAR strategic priorities and initiatives. • The decision of ACIAR to move to self-directed learning (Phase 3) however, was not based on the MELF evidence; this has impacted the score, which may otherwise have been excellent.
Proportionality	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging a Managing Contractor reduces the internal management burden, allowing ACIAR staff to focus on strategic leadership rather than day to day administrative and project management tasks. • UQ has consistently reviewed business processes for ACIAR Learn to deliver efficiency dividends. The change in the LMS resulted in significant operational savings in Phase 2. • A relatively small investment is delivering significant results in all areas (evidenced in course completions, skills development and impacts on public diplomacy and on research projects).

EFFECTIVENESS		Very Good
Performance & Risk Management	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The MELF provides quality evidence to support decision making. • Strong results have been achieved at all stages of implementation. • ACIAR Learn has a low risk profile; risk is managed through the TAG and addressed in regular reporting and partnership dialogue.
Results focus	Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Robust data generated and reported through the MELF has been used for adaptive decision making and quality improvement • Results apply across a wide range of user groups - and gender equality and disability inclusion have been mainstreamed. • Preliminary data show that Phase 3 design decisions are having a negative impact on completion rates and are likely to impact VfM. • The public diplomacy aspect of ACIAR Learn, which adds significant value to the platform, is insufficiently articulated and measured.
Experimentation & Innovation	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established to keep researchers connected and learning during COVID-19, ACIAR Learn has evolved to have new meaning and relevance. • Courses have been designed in response to user / ACIAR identified needs. • Course designs have been continuously adapted to keep users engaged and address barriers to engagement e.g.; completion requirements were changed to overcome issues of accessibility, such as those experienced by learners in remote areas or where time differences impacted.
ETHICS		Good
Accountability & Transparency	Very Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACIAR Learn is well governed and delivered as a partnership that draws on the comparative strengths and capabilities of UQ and ACIAR. • UQ systems meet Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines and have mechanisms to manage fraud and risk. • The TAG has a key role in ensuring strategic alignment with ACIAR priorities as well as those of the wider Australian Development Policy. • Research ethics are taught and also applied to design and delivery.

4.2. ACIAR Learn's Value Proposition

Drawing on the results reported above and the VFM, the Evaluation has identified ACIAR's value proposition:

Table 6: ACIAR Learn's Value Unique Proposition

<p>The delivery of mission critical applied research and project management capabilities via ACIAR Learn supports the creation of regional linkages that are strengthening research outcomes and research partnerships.</p> <p>The platform's twin track-approach to affirmatively reach out to women and to create flexible arrangements to accommodate the differing needs of women and men allows for gender parity in participation.</p> <p>Facilitated live sessions deepen understanding on how concepts can be adapted and contextualised. These person-to-person connections contribute to strengthening existing relations between Australian and non-Australian agricultural researchers and to creating and sustaining horizontal South-South connections within and across regions.</p> <p>In this way ACIAR Learn is contributing to locally led development in line with development effectiveness principles and Australia's commitments to these principles.</p>

5. Response to Key Evaluation Questions

The follow section of the report provides a summary analysis of how the evidence gained in the Evaluation is addressing the Key Evaluation Questions

5.1. KEQ 1 - Relevance and Coherence

To what extent does the investment in ACIAR Learn align with and respond to ACIAR's competitive advantage, strategic priorities, capacity development outcomes and wider objectives of the Australian development program?

The **focus on applied agriculture research-for-development skills and knowledge** (ACIAR's core business) is a distinctive feature of ACIAR Learn.

Participant feedback clearly shows that the ACIAR Learn suite of courses is providing **learning content that is current, accurate, comprehensive, engaging and relevant. Learner-centred, inclusive instructional design** has been a central focus from the outset.

The ACIAR Learn Course Development Guide incorporates Inclusive Accessibility Standards that **consider the different needs of women and men, diverse learner abilities, disabilities and cultural and linguistic contexts**. The Guide's Community of Practice approach has allowed the Course Convenors and Instructional Designers to learn from each other when updating course content and instructional features.

The ACIAR Learn MELF is aligned with the overarching, high-level ACIAR Capacity Development Program objectives to provide coherence to the collection, analysis and use of data. **The emphasis on adaptive learning has allowed for continuous improvement to sustain satisfaction and engagement.**

The MELF is also aligned with the broader objectives of the Australian Development Policy. Importantly **ACIAR Learn contributes to public and scientific diplomacy efforts through creating new touch points and deepening relationships between Australian and regional research institutions and researchers.**

Case studies embedded in courses help exemplify how the knowledge, skills and tools introduced can be applied in practical ways. Participants have asked for more ACIAR project-specific case studies and examples.

5.2. KEQ 2 - Effectiveness

To what extent and in what ways is ACIAR Learn contributing to strengthening research capacities and networks?

The Evaluation has shown that ACIAR Learn is contributing to strengthening research capacities and research partnerships and networks.

Learners are using the skills and tools acquired through ACIAR Learn to work with and influence colleagues and partners. For example, they are using project planning skills to shape teamwork, localising new research approaches, applying critical thinking skills, integrating GEDSI principles into work and personal lives, and more confidently communicating research ideas in scientific reports. More deliberate follow up, for example, through in-depth case studies would generate a richer layer of change stories for internal and external communications.

Importantly, learners have been actively encouraging others to sign up, a strong proxy of **relevance, satisfaction and perceived effectiveness**. **This unexpected outcome is creating a multiplier effect.**

Nearly 60% of ACIAR Learners were from a partner-country university or tertiary institution and are **using the ACIAR course flexible materials in their classes**. **This is creating a further multiplier effect.** However, there were concerns that this transfer may be occurring without due consideration for contextualising the materials. Course materials on adapting teaching materials and tips for facilitation would help allay these concerns.

In Phase 1 and the earlier part of Phase 2, there was confusion around priority setting and the determination of learning outcomes. A key learning is the need for **oversight of how ACIAR Learn is positioned within and complements ACIAR's suite of capacity development programs**, including capacity development opportunities. This **would allow for greater clarity in identifying priorities for course design**.

Should ACIAR wish to continue with developing online learning courses, it will be important to ensure future course design is focused on:

- **Mission critical research capabilities** aligned with ACIAR's six high-level outcomes and including, for example, ToC, program logic, partnership brokering, GEDSI and Climate Adaptation.
- **Existing and emerging project specific skills** (minimum standards, project management skills, data collection etc)
- **Competencies that can help shape balanced researchers** who understand the principles and benefits of gender equality, diversity and inclusion and can lead and influence others.

The facility to access courses online and offline has helped counter internet connectivity issues though **connectivity remains an issue in many resource-poor locations**.

5.3. KEQ 3 - Impact and Value Addition

Is there evidence that ACIAR Learn is contributing to and adding value to ACIAR's partnerships, linkages between researchers and research institutions, or the application of field research skills?

This key evaluation question is essentially asking: Is this the right thing to do? The Evaluation concludes that **ACIAR Learn is the right thing to do**.

The skills and confidence gained through the ACIAR Courses are **contributing to productive work relationships within teams and externally with their partner organisations**.

Learners have welcomed the opportunity to learn collaboratively, and we **should not under-estimate the thirst for human-to-human connection**. This is particularly relevant when working with researchers from collectivist societies, which place significant emphasis upon relationships and community over the needs and ambitions of individuals.

Participation in facilitated live sessions and discussion forums has been a distinctive feature of ACIAR Learn (a feature that is generally absent in the field of online learning). Such sessions deepen understanding of the concepts introduced in the online courses and provide clarity on how these concepts can be contextualised. Interacting with the Course Convenors and other subject experts in live session provides access to first-hand, current experience; spotlights opportunities and challenges encountered in international development research; and allows learners to collaborate with one another across regions.

For ACIAR scholarship Awardees, networking activities begin during their time in Australia through their participation in training sessions, face-to-face meeting and academic conferences, the JAF Executive Leadership Program etc. Country and regional-level networking activities provide further opportunities to “try out” their networking skills.

ACIAR Learn is complementing and reinforcing these contributions and allowing project staff to hone their networking skills. In this way ACIAR Learn is contributing to strengthening both research capacities and network relationships.

These conclusions are supported by findings presented in the 2024 JAF Tracer Study, which found that ACIAR alumni are building on the multiple networking opportunities available during and post-Fellowship to expand their research networks and forge relations across multi-sectoral and regional boundaries. This, in turn, is leading to an increased appreciation of the value of collaboration and brokering and strengthening partnerships.

5.4. KEQ 4 - Value for Money

To what extent is the learning platform demonstrating efficiencies and Value for Money in terms of delivering on its outcomes?

This assessment positions the Value for Money of ACIAR Learn within a formula that confirms that the platform is delivered in a cost-conscious way and **delivers results in line the program's theory of change, in this case, strengthening applied research capabilities and research partnerships.**

The Evaluation finds that ACIAR Learn delivers a Very Good Value for Money for ACIAR.

A number of factors when considered together, contribute most significantly to this assessment:

Cost Consciousness, Proportionality and Transparency

Both ACIAR and UQ have worked within appropriate standards and guidelines related to competition, budgetary and fiduciary management and demonstrated the ability to adapt business systems and create efficiency dividends as ACIAR has evolved.

Cost of Delivery and Reach

Based on the **total** financial investment (including management and non-direct delivery costs), the completion costs per user were as follows:

- Phase 1 and 2 = total completions 902 = \$4185 per user
- Phase 1 and 2 = total content completion = 1084 = \$3482 per user.
- For Phase 2 = total completion rate was \$3100 per user (due to efficiency dividends created by a change to the ACORN platform)

These costs are significant when considered against the costs of other Australian and ACIAR investments in international capacity building for research Award Programs. These are of course very different programs and qualifications, however, the value of having a lower cost capacity development opportunity in ACIAR's portfolio means that it is accessible to a larger cohort and wider demographic of researchers, the majority of whom will never have the opportunity to access Scholarship Awards or face to face conferences and meetings.

Significantly, when we consider the importance of public diplomacy as an intended outcome of ACIAR Learn, the realised value of this investment extends beyond skills and knowledge to research to researcher and institution to institution relationships that contribute to the public diplomacy objectives of Australia's development program.

This democratisation of ACIAR capacity development opportunities across ACIAR's partnerships is not currently articulated within the ACIAR theory of change, although it is strongly inherent in the objectives of the Australian Development Program and ACIAR's own strategic intent. **As such there is an un-monetised value of ACIAR Learn courses that is currently not considered within ACIAR Learns Value Proposition.**

Evidence suggests that there is an ongoing demand for ACIAR Learn courses – as this demand is realised, completion costs will fall. Further, the Evaluation results demonstrate that there is significant opportunity to further strengthen ACIAR Learn's value proposition by expanding the user base and considering working with regional Course Convenors.

Quality - Performance

There is significant evidence that ACIAR is highly relevant, effective and delivering results on several levels:

- ACIAR Learn users.
- ACIAR Learn MELF.
- ACIAR's corporate results.
- ACIAR PAF reporting to DFAT.

The targeted focus on skills and knowledge required for applied agriculture-for-development research partnerships is its unique value proposition: ACIAR Learn not only delivers outcomes for users and their organisations but there is evidence emerging that these outcomes are having a material impact on ACIAR supported research partnerships themselves.

Finally, a question of whether ACIAR could deliver ACIAR Learn in-house for less money arose frequently during consultations. The VfM assessment highlights that an in-house delivery modality is beyond ACIAR's core technical capabilities and would require additional resourcing for back-office support.

A secondary consideration is the extent to which the investment required to deliver ACIAR Learn in house might move ACIAR staff and systems away from their core capabilities. In short, while ACIAR Learn contributes to ACIAR's core business, instructional design is not and can be efficiently and effectively delivered through alternate cost-effective arrangements. This ensures ACIAR's internal resources remain focused on strategic alignment and utility of ACIAR Learn to applied agricultural research. (See further discussion in 5.5. below.)

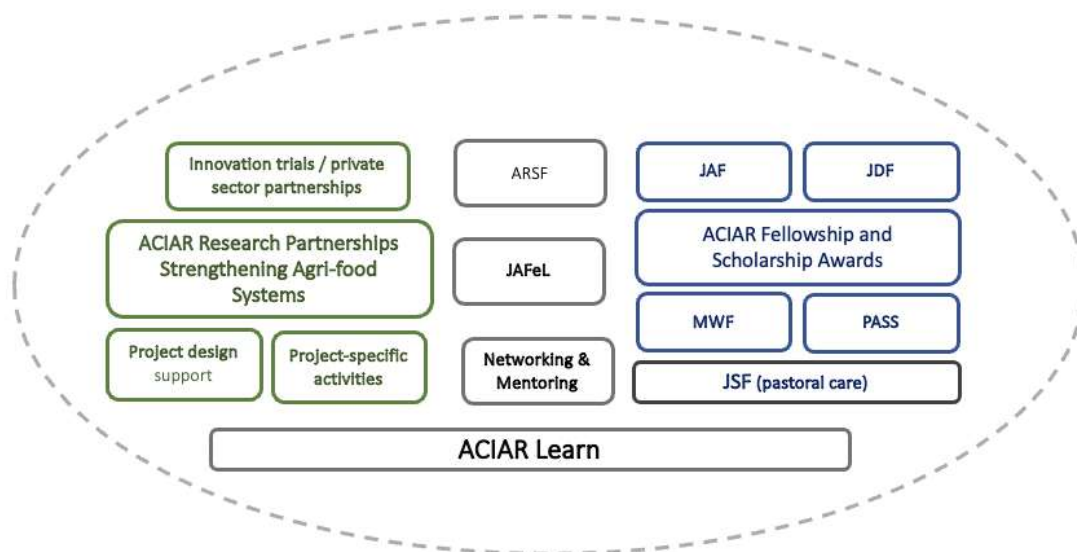
5.5. KEQ 5 - Future Focus: Potential Scenarios and Design Considerations

What does the evaluative evidence tell us about the potential characteristics of a future learning platform positioned to contribute to ACIAR's strategic objectives and deliver on partner needs in an effective and efficient way?

Expanding the reach and scale of ACIAR Learn would increase its VFM proposition

ACIAR Learn is a **complement to and adding value within the ACIAR capacity development framework**. There is an opportunity for ACIAR to **build on what was achieved in Phase 2** to extend the use of online blended learning across ACIAR's suite of capacity development investments. This would allow ACIAR **to achieve a systems-wide approach to capacity development (as illustrated in Fig.5).**

Fig. 5. Coherent, systems-wide approach to capacity development



A recent restructure that places Capacity Development Outreach within and reporting directly to the Research Manager will help close the gap between the Outreach Program and Project-based Capacity Development investments. A deliberate internal communications strategy – to make known the potential of online learning and to engage project staff and other stakeholders – would accelerate the shift.

There are opportunities to expand reach and scale, e.g.,

- Continue to offer ACIAR Learn to ACIAR Alumni and to scholarship Awardees (as a complement and in parallel to the postgraduate study requirements or as a pre-arrival requirement).
- Continue to make course available to ACIAR project teams and extend access to their project partners.
- Make the courses available to United Kingdom and Australia-based ACIAR researchers.
- Explore opportunities to make courses available to non-ACIAR Australia Award recipients.
- Provide open access to ACIAR Learn resources to non-ACIAR funded research institutes.

Most significantly the Evaluation considers that there is very real opportunity to explore expanding the delivery of ACIAR Learn programs from exclusively Australian institutions to engage regional partners to support greater South-South co-operation and locally led development.

Importantly, **expanding the reach and scale of ACIAR Learn will also increase its value for money proposition** e.g., existing courses will be delivered to additional cohorts, offsetting some of the initial investment costs through increased completions at lower cost.

It will be important to ensure future course design remains **firmly focussed on mission critical capacity development for applied research partnerships and projects.**

What might ACIAR do next?

Before finalising this report, the Evaluation Team facilitated a Sensemaking Workshop with senior ACIAR staff. The purpose was to take a deep dive into the evidence gained through the Evaluation, and to explore what these tell us about possible future investment. In addition to exploring the findings, the Sensemaking Workshop tested the evaluative evidence against a number of potential design choices for a future ACIAR Learn Platform.

It should be noted that a discussion on design choices is distinct from and should always precede any discussion of modality choices. The former considers the strategic objective and the desired outcomes of the investment. The second is about the modality or mechanism, through which the objectives could be delivered.

The design choices explored during the Sense Making Workshop were:

- Build on and maximise existing investments, blending new and updated self-paced courses incorporating mission critical capabilities and facilitated live sessions (Phase 2 model); and explore opportunities to expand reach and enhance value for money.
- Provide access to courses within the current (Phase 3) model with self-paced online courses, retaining the capacity to update and add new courses, but without facilitated live sessions.
- Close out ACIAR Learn, while ensuring the existing online content remains available.

The group explored the value proposition, inherent risks and feasibility of each design option for ACIAR, alumni and research project teams (Table 3). The outcome of that discussion, which is strongly aligned to the independent findings of the Evaluation is that:

- **ONLY option one (Model 2.1) would deliver a clear value proposition for ongoing ACIAR investment in ACIAR Learn**
- **Option two (the Phase 3 model) was discounted** on the understanding of the evidence that:
 - The emphasis on person-to-person connections combined with capacity development targeted around practical applied research capabilities and the creation of regional linkages are creating the demand for ACIAR Learn.
 - This, in turn, is contributing to strengthening research outcomes and research partnerships across regions.
 - **The loss of this connection would negatively impact completion rates and the value for money proposition by watering down results and negatively impact the public diplomacy outcomes** being achieved through the connections build between ACIAR (Australia) and its partners.

As such the Sense Making Workshop highlighted that the two options for ACIAR to consider are: either to **continue investing in the 'Phase 2.1 model'**, or to **Close out**.

The Value for Money Assessment provides evidence that VFM is good and commensurate with market. Further, **strong results indicate that an ongoing investment in ACIAR Learn is justified and would add significant value to ACIAR's Capacity development and research portfolios. It would also contribute more widely to Australia's scientific and public diplomacy efforts.**

Having come to its recommendations, the Sense Making Workshop then discussed the implications of different delivery modalities. While the conversation about modality is really a consideration for design, bringing this conversation into the Evaluation is important due the frequency of reflection of whether or not ACIAR could deliver a future platform in-house, and the expectation that the Evaluation will identify key considerations for design.

The conversation around potential operational modalities provided an opportunity for ACIAR team members to think about the institutional capabilities that would be required for ACIAR to deliver in house and the potential cost and VFM implications of these. These include:

- Instructional design – including developing new courses and reviewing existing courses for developing both generic project management skills and strategic research capabilities.
- Leadership for internal integration and coherence (governance).
- Brokering multiple partnerships, including the ability to bring in Course Leaders from the regions where ACIAR research projects are located to complement Australian expertise.
- Flexible and responsive business processes.
- Responsive back-office support to facilitate and support multiple sub-contract relationships.
- Strong M&E Capacity including ongoing ability to design and apply surveys, analyse course data and undertake meta-analysis of courses.
- The ability to undertake rolling training needs analysis and incorporate the perspectives of research partners.
- Web hosting and design capability.
- Expanding the reach of ACIAR Learn.

When the extent to which ACIAR would be able to services these key functions internally, the answer was **NO**. As such the Evaluation concludes that ACIAR will need to find a partner to deliver ACIAR Learn moving forward but that it should continue to play a key role in the strategic direction and governance of the ACIAR Learn to ensure that ACIAR Learn capacity development activities are grounded in the supporting strong applied agriculture for development research projects and building relationships between Australian and regional agricultural scientists and institutions.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

“What’s powerful about ACIAR Learn is it provides young, middle management researchers with the opportunity to gain new knowledge and skills. Second, it provides access to learning resources connected to their research that they might otherwise not be able to access. And it allows them to network with and learn from other researchers across regions or internationally.” (Course Convenor)

6.1 Conclusions

The ACIAR Learn online suite of courses is providing learning content that is current, accurate, comprehensive, engaging and relevant. Learners are applying the skills and tools acquired through ACIAR Learn to work with and influence colleagues and partners. A rigorous emphasis on adaptive learning and continuous improvement has allowed ACIAR Learn to sustain satisfaction and engagement.

Courses are available to all levels of project staff, regardless of position, prior work experience or education.

Best practice ‘Inclusive Accessibility Standards’ consider the different needs of men and women, diverse learner abilities, disabilities and cultural and linguistic contexts. A twin track-approach to affirmatively reach out to women and to create flexible arrangements accommodates the differing needs of women and men allows for gender parity in participation.

A defining feature of ACIAR Learn has been the blending of online course work with person-to-person contact through facilitated live sessions that support collaborative learning and strengthen research outcomes. This, in turn, strengthens existing relations between Australian and non-Australian agricultural researchers; creates and sustains horizontal South–South connections within and across regions; and create additional touch points for Australia’s public diplomacy objectives. In this way, ACIAR Learn is contributing to locally led development in line with development effectiveness principles and Australia’s commitments to these principles.

An understanding about how ACIAR Learn is positioned within and complements ACIAR's comprehensive suite of capacity development investments would allow for greater clarity in identifying learning priorities. Should ACIAR decide to continue with online learning, it will be important to ensure course design is focused on mission critical research capabilities as well as competencies that can help shape balanced researchers who understand the principles and benefits of gender equality, diversity and inclusion and can lead and influence others. There are opportunities to expand reach and scale, which would increase value for money.

The Sensemaking Workshop with senior ACIAR staff explored possible future investment and design choices. The group settled on two forward facing choices:

- Build on and maximise existing investments, the Phase 2 model and expand reach and VFM.
- Close out ACIAR Learn, while ensuring the existing online content remains available on demand.

The outcome of the discussions, which is strongly aligned to the independent findings of the Evaluation, is that ONLY option one would deliver a clear value proposition for ongoing ACIAR investment. Continuation of the current Phase 3 model was discounted on the understanding that the loss of person-to-person connections would water down results and negatively impact completion rates and the value for money proposition.

As such, The Evaluation concludes that **ACIAR Learn is the right thing to do and that an ongoing investment based on the unique value proposition of ACIAR Learn articulated through the Evaluation is justified.**

6.2 Recommendations

1. Should ACIAR **decide to continue investments in ACIAR Learn**, based on the value proposition established by the evaluative evidence, the Evaluation recommends that:

- 1.1. ACIAR **invests in the ACIAR Learn approach developed in Phase 2**, blending self-paced online courses and facilitated live session, while also expanding reach and ensuring greater integration and engagement across the ACIAR suite of capacity development investments.
- 1.2. In order to build on the success of ACIAR Learn, ACIAR adopts an **externally facilitated design process** that builds on the evidence collected through the Evaluation to:
 - Clarify alignment and integration within the ACIAR capacity development framework.
 - Update the ACIAR Learn theory of change to align it more strongly to its role in supporting applied agricultural research partnerships.
 - Focus course design on mission critical skills and knowledge and needs articulated by research partners.
 - Identify opportunities to expand reach and maximise value for money.
 - Further address barriers to accessibility and strengthen measurement of access issues for women and people living with disability.
 - Explores greater opportunity for South-South engagement including in course delivery.
 - Carefully explores comparative costs and strengths and capabilities of different operational modalities **before going to market.**

2. Should ACIAR **decide to discontinue investments** in the platform, the Evaluation recommends:

- 2.1. ACIAR **initiates a planned close out** and explores alternative internal and/or external arrangements and associated resource requirements to 'house' the current learning materials so that they will remain available.

ANNEXES

Annex I. ACIAR Learn MEL Framework

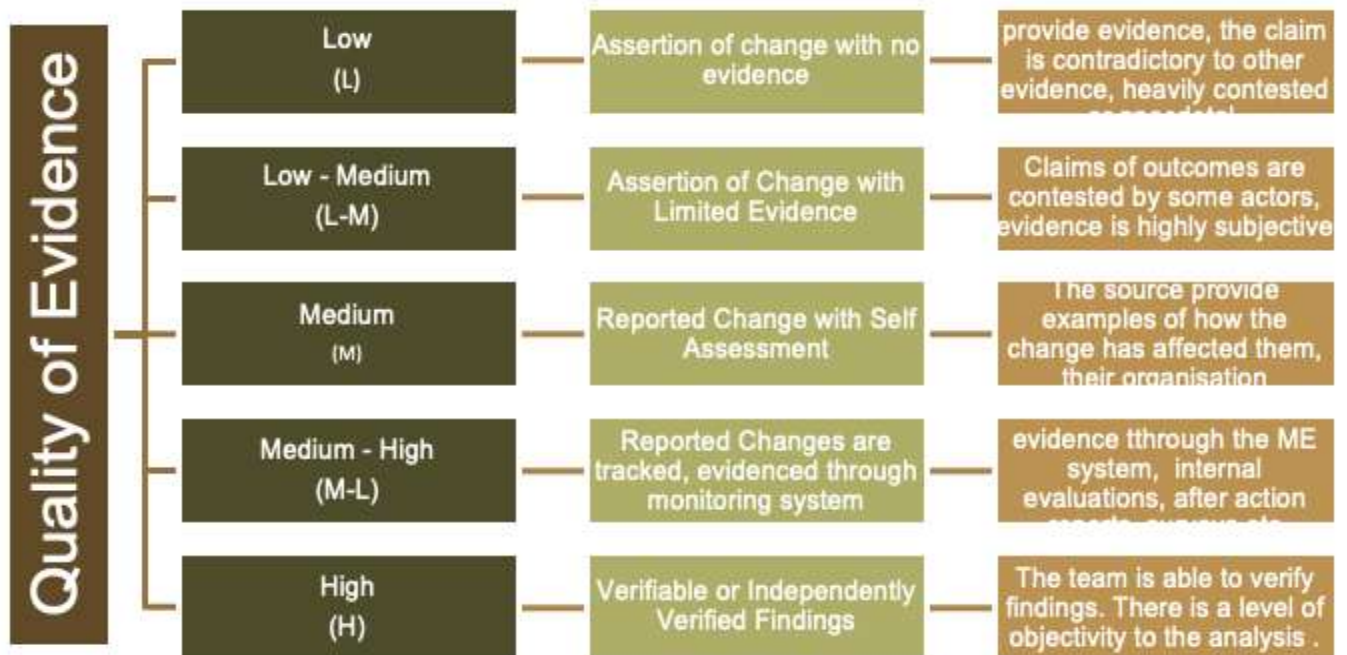
The ACIAR Learn MELF draws on a mixed-methods approach to collecting quantitative and qualitative data to drive effectiveness and efficiency.

What	When	Why
Demographic data & learning needs	At the time of registration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Informs Course Convenors of the diversity of each cohort ▪ Shapes approaches to content delivery. ▪ Allows responses to be formulated to potential barriers to participation (e.g. language, disability, connectivity).
Pre- and post-course assessments linked to expected learning outcomes	Before starting and on completion of a course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-reported knowledge and skills acquisition (course effectiveness) ▪ Inform improvement / tailored learning ▪ Allows participants to reflect on their learning journey and to track their progress
Course Satisfaction Survey (Anonymous unless participants self-identify)	Post course completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide participant feedback (satisfaction, relevance, content, learning experience etc. ▪ Identifies any engagement barriers ▪ participants. ▪ Informs course redesign.
Focus groups	Ad hoc (varying intervals after course completion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gather qualitative data on how learning has been applied into work or life ▪ Inform improvements to enhance the program and boost engagement.
Engagement surveys	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enhance usability and functionality of the platform and courses. ▪ Create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for all.
Learning needs assessments	Ad hoc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To support content development of new courses.

Annex II. Quality of Evidence Tool

A Quality of Evidence (QoE) tool was applied to all methods and data sources to guide the team in identifying multiple forms of verifiable evidence that will assist in moving reported evidence through a range of dimensions from low to high, enabling the team to assess and articulate the robustness of findings.

We found the overall QoE rating for all data as **HIGH**.



Annex III. Value for Money Framework

Value for Money analysis contributes to our assessment of efficiency and informed by quantitative, qualitative data and an assessment of high, medium, low VfM provided against the four principles and seven criteria of the DFAT’s VfM framework² and a **brief** summary of evidence supporting this assessment provided within the Report.

The key intent of the VfM assessment is to assist ACIAR and implementing partners to appreciate, assess and judge VfM in the implementation and design of any future programming.

While the VfM assessment included an analysis of financial data and did consider costs commensurate with other DFAT and ACIAR programs, and the extent to which ACIAR and partners are considering VfM at implementation. It did not extend to a comprehensive comparative cost benefit analysis of similar initiatives or alternative approaches delivered by other institutions.

Value for Money Assessment Framework



² <https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/who-we-work-with/value-for-money-principles/Pages/value-for-money-principles>

Annex IV. References/resource materials

In addition to the wide range of data generated through the ACIAR information management system, the Evaluation team also accessed a wide range of documentation which included reports, policy documents and external resources. The key documents that have been considered as part of this Evaluation include.

- ACIAR (2008) [Guidelines for assessing the impacts of ACIAR's research activities](#). ACIAR's Impact Assessment Series 58.
- ACIAR (2012) [Developing and Testing a Tool for Measuring Capacity Building](#)
- ACIAR (2017) [Gender Equity Policy and Strategy 2017–2022.pdf](#).
- ACIAR (2018) [Capacity Development Policy](#) (March 2018).
- ACIAR (2018) *Gender Equity Policy and Strategy 2017-2022*.
- ACIAR (2020) Project Development Guidance: [capacity building for project development toolkit](#)
- ACIAR (2021) *ACIAR Capacity Development Program: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework* (Updated April 2021). At: [Capacity Development Program FINAL.pdf](#)
- ACIAR (2022) [ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2nd Edition.pdf](#)
- ACIAR (2024) [Annual Report 2023-24](#).
- ACIAR (2024) John Allwright Fellowship Tracer Study Report 2019–2023 (September 2024)
- ACIAR [10-year-strategy-2018-2027](#) (2nd Edition 2022)
- ACIAR Learn (2023) *Lessons learnt from Phase 1 (May '21-June '23) and their application in Phase 2 (June '23 – Aug '24)*. Technical Advisory Group Meeting (August 2023).
- ACIAR Learn (2024) Course Development Guide. Phase 2 (June 2023-Nov 2024) (May 2024)
- ACIAR Learn: [Report on Key Lessons Learnt May 2021-May 2023](#)
- ACIAR Learning Pathways. ACIAR Learn - Course Convenors meeting 8th June 2023
- ACIAR Research Proposal Capacity-building Guidance. [ACIAR capacity building for project development toolkit](#)
- Australian Evaluation Society: https://www.aes.asn.au/images/stories/files/membership/AES_Guidelines_web_v2.pdf
- E-Learning Quality Network | Research Centre (2021) A Broad Overview of Online Educational Methods: From Live Sessions to Gamification. [E-Learning Quality Network Research Publications](#) (September 2021 ISN 00134-00932)
- E-Learning Quality Network Research Publications (2018) [Key criteria in evaluating the effectiveness of e-learning platforms](#) (October, 2018)
- John Allwright Fellowship Tracer Study (2019–2023). Conducted by University of New England for ACIAR (September 2024).
- OECD (2006) *The Challenge of Capacity Development: Working Towards Good Practice*. DAC Guidelines and Reference Series. At: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dcdndep/40945568.pdf> (accessed 10 Jun 2024)
- OECD (2021) *Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully*. OECD: <https://doi.org/10.1787/543e84ed-en>