The Role of Evaluation Planning in Capacity Building

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Abstract

Statewide demonstration programs can provide an opportunity to review the value of local initiatives and assess cross-state programs as a whole. Program staff in a number of regions may be responsible for planning, implementing and evaluating local projects, with the statewide evaluation function requiring a review of the findings derived from the amalgamation of projects.

While evaluators may be employed to evaluate local and statewide projects, they are often contracted to assist with evaluation planning. The role for the evaluator in this context is not to evaluate the program but to assist in planning an evaluation that program staff will undertake. The processes of evaluation planning may not only result in formal evaluation plans to guide evaluation, but may contribute to the capacity of program staff. This paper presents an evaluation planning process that is based on activities undertaken in a consultancy with the Breast Services Enhancement Program. The Breast Services Enhancement Program is a Victorian State Government initiative established to enhance the quality and consistency of care for women with breast disease. The program provides incentive funding for service providers across nine consortia to develop and implement best practice models of service provision. Evaluation of the program was emphasised from the early stages of program development. External consultants were employed to assist program staff in developing evaluation plans that would assist them in improving and reviewing the value of local initiatives and facilitate a statewide evaluation. The contributions of collaborative evaluation planning to capacity in evaluation are reviewed.

Key words
Evaluation planning, collaboration, statewide programs

The importance of planning an evaluation is well established: without an adequate plan for the design, collection and reporting of evaluation, it may not be effective or useful (Patton, 1997; Robson, 2000). In large complex programs, external evaluation consultants are frequently contracted to assist program staff in planning evaluation. This is a particularly important role when program staff are responsible for evaluation of local program initiatives.

Evaluation consultants undertaking a planning role are not responsible for conducting the evaluation but in assisting in the development of a comprehensive, practical and rigorous plan for an evaluation that will be undertaken by others. The process of effective evaluation planning in this context does not just entail the production of an evaluation plan based on stakeholders' needs, but involves working alongside program staff to strengthen knowledge and skills of evaluation processes. This is not a trivial point as capacity of program staff is clearly related to the quality of an internal evaluation (Love, 1991). If a plan is developed but staff do not have the skills, confidence or interest to implement the evaluation, it will be weak.

Strengthening the capacity of program staff in evaluation increases the likelihood that the evaluation will address local information needs and can contribute to the technical quality of the evaluation. Capacity is by this description more than the provision of training and information about evaluation processes, it necessarily entails increasing the interest and motivation of staff to engage in the systematic evaluation of program initiatives.

While there is considerable literature that describes ways to involve program staff in evaluation, there is little written about the ways evaluators can effectively work with program staff to strengthen evaluation capacity in the planning stages. Working with a diverse group of staff to facilitate effective planning requires an explicit value base and an effective approach. Being aware of, and following, some key process strategies can facilitate both the development of evaluation plans and strengthen staff capacity in evaluation. In order to clarify key principles, this paper reviews the process of evaluation planning conducted with program staff in a statewide demonstration program, the Breast Services Enhancement Program. The case described demonstrates the ways in which evaluation planning activities can foster a culture of participation, collaboration and competency in evaluation.

It will first be necessary to acquaint the reader with the program. A generic framework for planning evaluation in multi-regional programs will then be presented. Each step in the framework will be illustrated with specific reference to how that step was applied in the Breast Services Enhancement Program. The implications for collaborative planning processes in program evaluation will then be reviewed.

The Breast Services Enhancement Program
The Breast Services Enhancement Program was initiated late in 1999 as part of a broader strategy to redevelop breast disease services in Victoria. Extensive consultation and review of regional programs had revealed that service quality was variable and fragmented across the state. The BreastCare Victoria Coordination Unit, situated within the Victorian Department of Human Services provided incentive funding to nine regional programs to develop and trial projects to enhance the quality and consistency of care. The nine programs were required to develop initiatives that were reflective of four broad areas defined as best practice in breast care. A program manager, clinical coordinator, and project staff were appointed in each region to pilot best practice initiatives across the priority outcome areas.

The four priority outcome areas provided a directional focus for the development of initiatives and program staff were encouraged to generate initiatives that were responsive to local issues. In the early stages of program development, program staff were encouraged to map local needs, implement trials or pilots of new initiatives and identify local strategies that would enhance the sustainability of successful initiatives. As program staff would largely be responsible for evaluation of local initiatives, they were encouraged to incorporate considerations about evaluation into program plans.

The BreastCare Victoria Coordination Unit facilitated program development through a centralised coordinator and provision of regular group meetings to support and review emerging achievements and challenges. The Unit recognised that in the early stages the emphasis of the evaluation of the demonstration models would be developmental; identifying local needs, trialing models of care, documenting achievements and challenges, and identifying the lessons learned. In later stages of the program a statewide evaluation was required that would generate information about the merit of particular approaches to breast service redevelopment across the state.

By this stage of program development, most programs had developed a range of projects across the core priority areas they had selected and many had plans for reviewing initiatives. However, the nine regional programs differed in the stage of project development and skills of program staff in evaluation processes, and the initial project plans lacked a framework that would facilitate cross regional or statewide evaluation.

External evaluation consultants were appointed in September, 2001 to assist program staff in developing formal evaluation plans to guide their evaluation activities. The consultants were contracted to work collaboratively with program staff for six months to develop evaluation plans tailored to initiatives being undertaken in each of the nine programs. An important aspect of their role was to provide assistance and support to staff by working with them in the design stages of the evaluation.

The external evaluation consultants applied the following five-step framework to facilitate the development of regional evaluation plans that would be useful both locally and at the state level. Figure 1 outlines the stages in the evaluation planning process. With an awareness that local staff would be responsible for evaluating local program initiatives, the steps undertaken also emphasised strengthening the capacity of local staff so that they could evaluate their programs, act on the findings, and review program outcomes.

1. Building Collaborative Partnerships with Staff - consultants' value base that meaningful collaboration enhances planning and ownership of the evaluation plan

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2. Program Familiarisation - Review of program documentation and policy context - Site visits and formalisation of roles with program staff - Identification of key projects, objectives and evaluation questions - Identification of professional development needs in evaluation - Values Inquiry or stakeholder mapping

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3. Provision of Tailored Training to Program Staff - Identification of appropriate evaluation approaches - Joint evaluation training programs tailored to program needs - Tailored programs provided to regional programs to address specific local needs (e.g., focus group methods, survey design)

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4. Development of Statewide Evaluation Framework - Development of Evaluation framework in consideration of local and statewide information needs

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Presentation of Local Evaluation Plans within the context of the broader statewide framework

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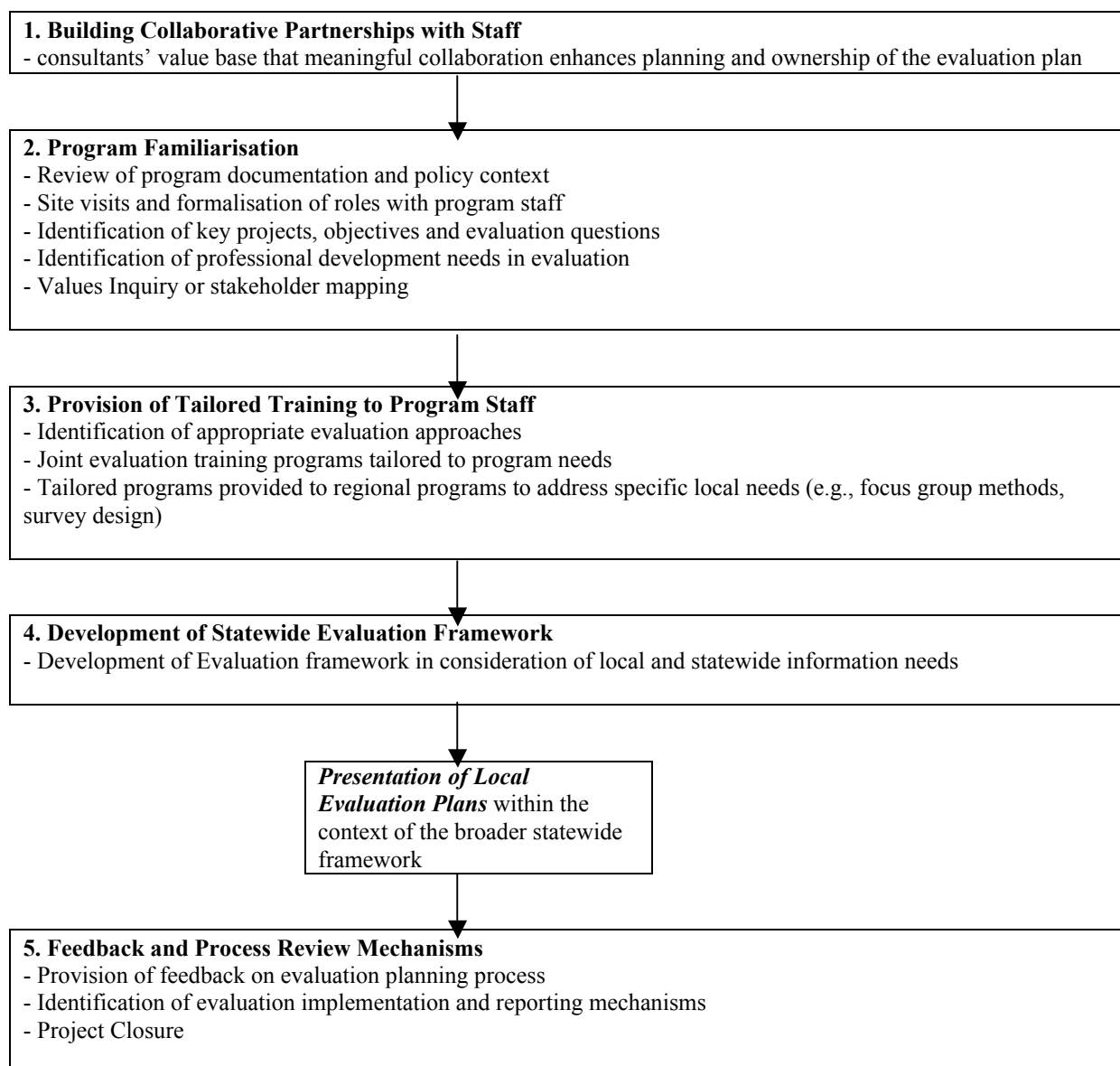| **5. Feedback and Process Review Mechanisms**
- Provision of feedback on evaluation planning process
- Identification of evaluation implementation and reporting mechanisms
- Project Closure |
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Fig 1: Core stages in Evaluation planning

1. Building Collaborative Partnerships with Staff

Good evaluation practice requires more than a high level of technical expertise and understanding of evaluation theory. This is especially true in collaborative approaches to evaluation planning that emphasise strengthening capacity. Just as it is important for evaluation consultants to have a good grasp of the theory and practice of evaluation, it is important for them to have the demeanour and skills to build constructive and responsive partnerships with program staff. This point cannot be over emphasised. Even the most well conceptualised evaluation plan is destined to failure unless the interest, motivation, and cooperation of stakeholders is achieved.

Taking the time to get to know and understand the needs, concerns and values of program staff is often more important to the final outcome than having the ability to identify appropriate methods of data collection. In collaborative evaluation planning activities, evaluation consultants often act more as facilitators than expert outsiders. When facilitators are able to connect with program staff, to talk with them personally, to respond to their concerns, and to build a relationship of cooperation staff feel respected, interested, and anxious to contribute to the best possible outcomes.

In the consultancy with program staff in the Breast Services Enhancement Program, the consultants listened to concerns and fears about evaluation processes and ensured that these concerns were addressed in planning the evaluation. For example, while staff were aware that all programs were implementing initiatives within four broad priority outcome areas, they were keen to ensure that local initiatives be captured in evaluation at the local and state level. They also expressed legitimate doubts about how they could clearly identify the outcomes from multilevel, multifaceted projects. Evaluation consultants acknowledged their concerns and explored design options that could be integrated into service planning and delivery.

The consultants identified collaboration as a central value to effective evaluation planning. In this sense this orienting value provided the foundation for the other stages of the evaluation planning process.

2. Program Familiarisation
An initial stage in assisting program staff to develop evaluation plans is for the consultants to learn about the program from the perspectives of local program staff.
After reviewing progress reports and relevant policy and program documentation, the evaluators arranged a preliminary site visit to each of the programs. While an important purpose of this initial visit was to identify project objectives, key stakeholders, and current evaluation strategies, the major purpose was to understand the context in which the program was operating and to begin to build an effective working partnership with key program personnel. Program staff were able to share their views and to ask the evaluation team questions about their values, background, training, and approach. This example highlights the value of information gathering activities in fostering effective working relationships. Meetings and site visits in this context are not seen just as mechanisms to complete tasks, but as opportunities to build credibility and develop an effective working relationship.

More than a single site visit will usually be necessary to accomplish these goals. In this six month consultancy up to four site visits were made to each regional program. Later site visits were provided to review drafts of evaluation plans and to clarify program theory.

Mapping Stakeholder Information Needs: Values Inquiry
Differences in values about a program or its measurement are not uncommon in evaluation and an important task in planning evaluation is to map those differences. A values inquiry (Mark, Henry & Julnes, 2000) was initiated to identify and document the range of stakeholder views about the program. The rationale for this approach was that the values of the stakeholder groups were diverse and while staff had hunches, little was known about the views of stakeholder groups towards the Program as a model of service development, nor about other stakeholders' information needs. Interviews were conducted with 58 stakeholders including breast cancer consumers, clinicians, and hospital executives. The aim of these interviews was to generate information about the local program context and to gather broader perspectives on key issues in the program to guide development of evaluation questions and to maximise utility.

The process of undertaking the interviews with such diverse groups resulted in some shifts from the original conceptualisation of the program by the evaluation team. Further, when themes from the interviews were shared with program staff, they developed a better understanding of stakeholder views and where they were similar or divergent from their own. For example, some program staff were concerned that clinicians would dismiss evaluation approaches that did not adopt a randomised control trial design. The interviews revealed a level of understanding by all stakeholder groups that in the context of the Breast Services Enhancement Program randomised trials were rarely feasible. The sharing of this information gave program staff additional confidence and motivation to continue with development of evaluation strategies best suited to the nature and stage of program development.

The consultants learned a considerable amount from early visits and from the interviews with stakeholders. Findings from this phase revealed that while all nine programs were developing and implementing strategies to enhance the quality and continuity of care for women with breast disease, each site had a unique set of contextual features that influenced the implementation and outcomes of particular initiatives. These local factors would clearly need to be taken into account if an effective understanding of program outcomes was to be achieved. The evaluation consultants were thus sensitised to these local factors through both the site visits and the values inquiry.

3. <u>Provision of Tailored Training to Program Staff</u>
Before a multi-site collaborative evaluation planning process can take place it is important that the consultants and staff involved in the process speak and understand the same language. Convening workshops on evaluation provides an opportunity to strengthen staff skills in evaluation and may also assist the evaluation consultants in identifying common issues across regions. Ideally, evaluation training workshops should not be provided to program staff before the facilitators have developed a good understanding of program components in order to target training to needs of staff.

The Breast Services Enhancement Program evaluation planning project involved provision of two tailored, centrally located, evaluation workshops for staff working in the nine programs. The two workshops reinforced the skills and current achievements of program staff and addressed evolving information needs. The topic content emerged from needs identified in the site visits and from a review of evaluation progress to date. They were participatory and offered opportunities to work on case examples related to program initiatives.

4. <u>Development of Evaluation Framework</u>
Consultants employed to plan an evaluation across a multi-regional area may want to look at what is to be evaluated and begin forming a plan for the evaluation immediately following the award of the contract.

If consultants arbitrarily impose a framework for evaluation without consultation with program staff, it may be dismissed or undermined because it has not addressed local needs. Capacity comes from increasing knowledge, communication, interest, motivation, and involvement. The major development of the evaluation plan should come through collaboration with trained, onside, motivated program staff. When staff from regional sites are, and want to be engaged, a far superior evaluation plan will emerge.

The outcome of the evaluation planning exercise was a tailored evaluation plan for each of the nine programs. Further, a statewide evaluation framework was developed that clarified the relationship of the local evaluation to state level information needs.

The design of the multilevel evaluation framework was derived from an appreciation of local resources and constraints and in consideration of the information needs of local and policy level stakeholders. This framework identified the importance of three levels of evaluation, the first level of the evaluation was based on the tailored evaluation plans. Evaluation findings derived from local project initiatives were to be reported to local stakeholders and to the Coordination Unit. A second level also to be undertaken by program staff was proposed. In this stage of evaluation, individual projects are clustered by local program staff and evaluated according to broader set of generic evaluation questions that pertain to the four priority outcome areas. The consistency of key evaluation questions across the programs maximises consistency and utility of reporting across the state. The third level of evaluation addresses policy level requirements.

5. <u>Feedback and Process Review Mechanisms</u>
Through the process of evaluation planning collaborative relationships are built, program staff are further trained and brought into the process of evaluation, and an evaluation plan is structured that meets the needs of stakeholders and the needs of the participating program staff.   When the role of the evaluation consultants nears an end it is important to maintain the engagement of program staff with feedback and consultations on sustainability, and it is also important to provide closure in the relationship with the consultants. Without this feedback and closure the program staff may not maintain the level of focus and enthusiasm for the continuing evaluation for which they are an integral part.

The regional and state-level staff involved in the evaluation planning process for the Breast Services Enhancement Program were brought together in a central location for a feedback workshop, updating all staff on the evaluation, the vision, and the future direction of the evaluation. A consultative process provides an opportunity for feedback, discussion and refinement of the evaluation framework.

Implications
This paper has presented five essential steps in developing an evaluation plan in a statewide program and has illustrated the ways in which collaborative planning can strengthen the capacity for local staff; building a collaborative partnership base, familiarisation with the program, provision of customised training, development of a tailored evaluation framework, and provision of feedback. The focus of this paper has been on the role that evaluation planning processes may play in promoting capacity in program evaluation among internal staff in the

Breast Services Enhancement Program. A number of implications for the practice of evaluation more broadly can be derived from a review of this case.

The purpose of the consultancy was to assist staff in developing evaluation plans not to evaluate the program. However, the roles and tasks assumed by the consultants highlights the need for evaluators to acquire a range of skills beyond the technical or methodological domain (Torres, Preskill & Piontek, 1996). Skills in facilitation, group process, organisational change and development and conflict resolution are important additions to the evaluators' toolkit.

Collaboration takes time. The time it will take for consultants and clients to progress through the planning stages will inevitably depend on the characteristics, scope, motivation and needs evident in the setting. These time constraints may mean that stakeholder participation in evaluation planning is limited to particular groups (Brandon, 1998). In the evaluation planning process for the Breast Services Enhancement Program, the consultants scoped the needs and values of clinicians consumers, and other stakeholders through the values inquiry. While a written summary of these findings was presented to participating groups there was little opportunity to involve these groups more systematically in the planning stages. Consultants will need to consider creative strategies to ensure the equitable participation of stakeholder groups to facilitate effective planning in spite of short timeframes.

It is evident from the case study presented in this paper that there was considerable organisational support for consultative and collaborative planning processes. The groundwork for collaboration had already been laid. The BCCU envisaged the role of evaluation by program staff as a way to enhance organisational learning and contribute to a grounded understanding of the local context of service redevelopment. Despite the potential value of collaborative, capacity building approaches, these values may not be shared across organisations. Robson (2000) suggests conducting a pre-evaluation review of organisational readiness. He outlines four potential prerequisites: existence of autonomy in decision making among staff responsible for the evaluation, openness to input across organisational levels, encouragement and appreciation of leadership role among program staff, and evidence that participation of program staff in decision making is valued. Evaluation consultants may also advocate for the role of collaborative planning processes by identifying the organisational value and disseminating the outcomes of such work.

An important lesson to draw from this case is that these processes also contribute to the capacity of the evaluators in identifying their own and others' value positions, and in facilitating evaluation processes among diverse groups. As evaluators, we talk a lot about capacity and empowerment of client groups but more should be written about the ways in which evaluators learn and modify their practice in light of such relationships. The experience of the consultants in this planning process has contributed to a better understanding of the importance of partnerships and the roles that can be played by all participants in the process.

Planning the evaluation of programs offered across diverse regional areas pose considerable challenges for evaluation but the value of developing evaluation plans to guide statewide and local evaluation is undisputed. Collaboration in developing evaluation plans both between evaluation consultants and among program staff is beneficial, not only to produce a useful, relevant, and rigorous plan but to strengthen the capacity of program staff in implementing the evaluation. Evaluation planning processes that are based on establishing meaningful collaboration and engagement have the potential to contribute to build confidence and capacity in evaluation and contribute to a comprehensive evaluation.

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