Australian Government health program evaluation: Who are the evaluators?

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Program evaluation is an emerging discipline that expanded rapidly towards the end of the twenty-first century, primarily in response to increased expansion of government activities and calls for accountability in the expenditure of government funds through audit and performance measurement – the foundations of program evaluation. Understanding these foundations is important in understanding the theoretical influences that have shaped the past and continue to drive the future of program evaluation. Program evaluation is not a discrete discipline and borrows much from the backgrounds and affiliations of its practitioners. Evaluators each bring their unique experience to an evaluation, drawn from their backgrounds, professional affiliations, theoretical influences and content expertise. To understand current practices in Australian program evaluation, it is useful to identify evaluators and the experience and backgrounds that have shaped their professional practice. This paper will report on the findings of a content analysis of the evaluations commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing over the last five years. This analysis is based on consultancies published in Annual Reports between 2000 and 2005. The focus of the analysis will be on categories of successful consultancies, as published data does not include the details of individual consultants. The results of this content analysis will be discussed in light of international research on the evaluation profession, including implications for the future.

Introduction

There has been little information published about the 'profession' of program evaluation. What is known about evaluators is often extrapolated from the historical development of evaluation and surveys of membership to evaluation organisations. This paper is the first in a series that builds a contemporary model of program evaluation based on an understanding of current practice and practitioners. Essential to this treaty is the notion that program evaluation, particularly in the government sector, is driven by published explicit (often political) frameworks, often directly evident in evaluation terms of reference, that must marry with the implicit private framework of the evaluator. To understand the development of these implicit frameworks of program evaluation it is useful to understand the professional background and experiences of the evaluators that have developed them. While some

insight on the evaluation community is provided through historical analysis, and a few evaluation societies have conducted membership surveys, this paper reports on another source of potential evidence – an analysis of evaluation organisations successful in gaining Australian Government health consultancies as published in annual reports between 2000 and 2005 (2001; Department of Health and Ageing 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005).

Historical development of program evaluation

In a public context, program evaluation is fundamentally the systematic investigation of the means whereby government gives effect to policy. Different evaluators, and different program administrators, will approach an evaluation differently. In understanding these differences it is useful to review the historical development of program evaluation. Another advantage of understanding the history of program evaluation is that is allows evaluators to balance old priorities with new and emerging directions (Lunt and Trotman 2005).

While in a broader sense the origins of evaluation may be traced back to the beginnings of 17th century development of social research methods (Rossi et al. 2004), as a formalised activity program evaluation is a young discipline (Pawson and Tilley 1997) reflecting the expanse of social programs and increased requirements for social and economic information. In addition, the rapid growth in social programs also brought pressure to apply the scientific concepts of management used in industry to government programs and activities. In the U.S., these approaches are generally acknowledged as having been first adopted by the Department of Defence before gaining importance across portfolios. World War I gave a significant boost to the development of evaluative research as evaluators like Stouffer were employed by the U.S. Army to develop procedures to monitor soldier morale, personnel polices and propaganda techniques. World War II provided a second impetus to the expansion of evaluation with the post-war launch of government funded programs in urban development, education, occupational training and preventative medicine. In a few decades program evaluation was a common practice in public programs (Rossi et al. 2004).

Systematic formal program evaluation in Australia and New Zealand is generally acknowledged as dating from the post war period with the 1950s and 60s heralding a sharp increase in the evaluation of government programs. As with the U.S. experience, fields like education and agriculture were at the forefront of the rise of program evaluation in Australia and New Zealand (Lunt and Trotman 2005; Sharp 2003).

In the 1960s the U.S. General Accounting Office initiated a focus on 'performance' audits that soon moved to other countries such as Australia (Barrett 2001) and Canada (Greene 2002). Such audits had the advantage of a reasonably well developed framework of evaluation methods and techniques and a sound analytical approach (Barrett 2001).

This period saw the audit and evaluation framework in the Australian public sector revised and clarified. With a focus on 'value for money' large scale evaluations were undertaken by the Treasury. These evaluations included investment appraisals; and

independent reviews of commodity, industry, trade and infrastructure. These evaluations were conducted by independent research organisations, such as the then Bureaux of Agricultural Economics and Transport Economics, and the Tariff Board. These organizations were often affiliated with universities and employed university staff working on evaluations as consultants or on secondment (Barrett 2001).

By the 1970s Australia was applying evaluation practices to areas such as health, social work and industrial relations. Evaluation was becoming a performance monitoring and improvement tool with a focus on self-evaluation from groups including The Australian Schools Commission.

Sharp comments that while program evaluation was not supported by a whole-of-government approach until the late 1980s, formative program evaluation was a widely implemented practice in agricultural extension, state primary schools and TAFE much earlier. Agricultural has contributed much to the development of statistical methods and evaluation. Indeed, some of the statesmen of evaluation, including Michael Quinn Patton, commenced their careers in agricultural before transferring their evaluation practices to other areas such as human services (Sharp 2003). While many evaluators focus on evaluation method as their area of interest and have some portability across content areas, as Rossi notes, evaluation also attracts people that are experts in a content area and may have little formal training in methods (Rossi et al. 2004).

The evaluation movement continued to grow towards the end of the 21st century, with the UK, European, and Australasian evaluation societies being founded in the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, this period also saw the introduction of national and international conferences on evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Sharp 2003).

The development of program evaluation is a social response to the changing role of government. Evaluation flourished with the expansion of public programs and need for financial accountability in a devolving service delivery system. Over time, the focus of evaluation has shifted from financial accountability, to performance measurement, to value, to outcomes. The cross-sector development of program evaluation has meant that as different researchers are pulled into evaluation practice, so too are their values, methods and approaches.

Professional association membership requirements

A review of the membership requirements of evaluation societies demonstrates few requirements to joining an evaluation community. For example, members of the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) agree to uphold the society's constitution and abide by the code of ethics (Australasian Evaluation Society 2006). There are no minimum experience or qualification requirements. Similar requirements are used in the American and Canadian evaluation societies. The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) requires members to uphold The Program Evaluation Standards (Canada Evaluation Society 1993). This publication provides standards on evaluation utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. To maintain the credibility of the evaluator it is noted that "persons conducting the evaluation should be both trustworthy and competent to perform the evaluation, so that the evaluation findings achieve maximum credibility and acceptance."

The professionalisation of evaluation, and maintain evaluation standards, is a topical issue internationally. In December 2005, the Canadian Treasury Board Secretariat commissioned the University of Ottawa to develop a discussion paper to recommend strategies to advance the professional development of evaluators to improve evaluation quality (Cousins and Aubry 2006). This paper found that the lack of certification or licensure processes, criteria for determining membership to professional associations, and accredited preservice training programs for evaluators have limited the capacity of program evaluation to reach the criteria to be considered a profession. Further, it has been argued that the evaluation community faces several barriers in its professionalisation including both issues relating to practitioners (such as the use of non-evaluators in evaluation practices, unstructured career path, and lack of support for certification) as well as broader issues in the field (such as the lack of an accepted definition of evaluation and cost of implementing a certification program). While Counsins and Aubry wrote of this experience from their Canadian experience, it would apply equally to many other western countries (Cousins and Aubry 2006). However, work in areas such as the core competencies of evaluators is continuing to improve the professionalisation of evaluation (Zorzi et al. 2002).

Membership surveys

Rossi comments that while evaluators should have social research training, their professional and disciplinary backgrounds vary widely (Rossi et al. 2004).

A survey of participants to the 2004 American Evaluation Association (AEA) conference (Mason et al. 2005) revealed that of the 883 participants who completed a survey 38% where primarily employed in colleges or universities, 18% where employed by government, 15% were employed by private consultancies, 14% were employed by non-for-profits with the remainder have other affiliations (such as Foundations and schools). By profession, most attendees were drawn from education (40%), health (18%), social services (18%). These data suggests that the early partnering of evaluation with universities, and use of internal evaluation experts in government, are still strong force in current evaluation practice – at least in the U.S.

Furthermore, reporting on data provided by Susan Kistler of the AEA in 2003, Rossi (2004) found that most of the 3,429 current members of the AEA considered their main professional activity to be evaluation (39%) or research (15%). This leaves a large proportion of people with an interest in evaluation whose primary work focus is outside of this area. Primary disciplines were described as education (22%), psychology (18%), evaluation (14%) and statistical methods (10%).

The CES conducted a membership survey in November/ December 2003 with the results reported in May 2004 (Canadian Evaluation Society 2004). Using an online method, and excluding institutional and international members from eligibility, a survey of 689 individual members of the CES reveal that the majority of members described their role as researcher (26%), manager (26%), consultant (24%) or policy developer (15%). Again demonstrating a focus boarder focus than specialisation in evaluation or research method. A later Canadian study conducted to provide a portrait of evaluators in Canada surveyed 861 evaluators (including both members and non-members of the CES). This survey found that the producers of evaluators were more likely to be internal to the organisation (42%) than external (26%). This is

not surprising, given the structure of the Canadian system and role of the Comptroller General. Furthermore, these producers of evaluation spent an average of 57% of their professional work life working on evaluations (Borys et al. 2005).

While memberships surveys can and do provide useful information about evaluation practice, due to the diverse range of professionals that conduct evaluations, membership survey have limited utility in providing a profile of current practitioners are their affiliations. The aim of this paper, to be presented at the AES conference will be to provide another method of identify current evaluators of Commonwealth health programs.

The data to be provided in our conference presentation will include an analysis of consultancies commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and published in Annual Report between 2000 and 2005. In Annual Reports, consultancy services are reported separately for advertising and market research, and other services. Adverting and market research includes organisations involved in advertising, market research, direct mail, media adverting and public relations. In some cases there was overlap between market research and consultancy activities, in which case the Department reports the contact under both categories. In this study the analysis of data was restricted to the consultancy category (including activities also listed under other categories).

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