

AES Conference: Perth 2008

Symposium Title: Dealing with Values in the Evaluation of Large Scale Programs

Presenters: Cummings, R, St Leger, P and Owen, JM.

This session addresses ways in which the knowledge products from focused evaluative enquiry meet the information needs of those responsible for decisions about large-scale interventions. At the same time there is an issue of how evaluators can be constructively critical rather than an advocate for the program under review. The issue of values can be integrated into this discussion.

While the objectives of an intervention usually signal the values of program managers (those responsible for the design of that intervention), findings might show that the benefits implied by these values are not delivered (faulty implementation) or not accepted by program implementers (faulty objectives). These notions may be unappreciated by program managers and there is a role for evaluators to educate them on such issues. The session provides examples of how these issues were dealt with in practice, and warnings that such issues can lead evaluator into conflict with key stakeholders.

Large-scale or large-end interventions involve significant financial and human resources. For the purposes of this seminar large-scale interventions are taken to mean initiatives, which are manifest in policy and multi-level multi-site programs, created by government agencies or not-for-profit organisations.

During the early focus on large-end program evaluation in the 1960s, the majority of interventions were sponsored by government. Now, however, provision is more complex with the emergence of arrangements such as public-private partnerships that have altered the politics of program accountability, and the realisation that these arrangements can affect the quality of program provision. Contemporary evaluators must come to grips with these developments if they are to function effectively

This presentation argues that progressive managers at the system level place a high value on evaluation work that results in a heightened understanding of how a given intervention (policy or Program) should be, or can be delivered. A key issue is whether the intervention is feasible, that is, whether implementation is possible in a given context, across organizations or agencies that are part of that system. Several strategies can be employed to achieve these objectives, including the development of multi-level logic models and the use of these models in program trials.

The evaluator must also acknowledge that the values underlying the delivery of given program should be an issue for policy makers, and that findings might show that implementation issues prevent the achievement of outcomes consistent with these values. Also, it is possible that the values of a given program are not consistent with the values of those responsible for program delivery and this can lead to program failure

This symposium provides three example cases related to these issues to provide a stimulus for discussion with attendees. The fact that the cases are drawn from different contexts provides case comparisons within a similar socio-political context. The presentations will therefore focus on the common features of the values debate and lessons learnt for the benefit of audience participants.

Cummings will address these issues in a presentation titled: *Strategic Approaches to Evaluating Whole-of-Government Intervention*. He argues that, in Australia, governments are increasingly recognising that complex social issues should be addressed through long term interventions which integrate the resources of public and private agencies within a strategic framework. This is

often portrayed as a move from a programmatic to a strategic approach to social intervention and brings with it a dramatically increased complexity of the intervention in terms of outcomes, stakeholder relationships and underlying logic. It also places additional demands on evaluators for managing stakeholder expectations, describing processes, assigning accountability and reporting findings. There is a corresponding need for evaluation approaches that can cope with this increased level of complexity. This presentation uses the evaluation of a state level strategic intervention into homelessness to explore the use of a strategic change framework as a basis for understanding whole-of-government interventions and highlight some of the critical success factors.

St Leger will address these issues in a presentation titled *Meeting Hearts and Minds through Program Clarification*. She concludes that evaluators sometimes uncover contentious issues surrounding initiatives as their data begin to reveal stakeholder values that differ from those of the policy makers who are responsible for implementation. In public government sectors, policy makers' work is often politically driven requiring rapid responses and this imperative may result in poorly thought through, and therefore flawed implementation strategies. This presentation focuses on a recent evaluation of an alternative curriculum program that has been embraced by a small number of primary (elementary) schools. The program is an initiative that has strong philosophical or value underpinnings, the realities of which were not fully understood by teacher and parent stakeholder groups. It is argued that, had clear logic models been developed at central policy and local school levels, and the knowledge needs of parents and teachers recognized, the initiative could have been implemented more smoothly, or alternatively, decisions may have led to the initiative not being implemented at all.

Owen in a presentation titled *Saliency of Program Clarification to Explicate the Values of Policy and Providers* argues that progressive managers at the system level should support evaluation work that results in a heightened understanding of how a given intervention should be, or is being delivered. A key issue is whether the intervention is feasible in a given context, across providers that are part of that system. Several strategies can be employed to achieve these objectives, including the development of multi-level logic models and the use of these models to compare the idealized view of program champions and the opinions of implementers. The evaluator must acknowledge that program understanding is an issue for policy makers, and develop responsive and realistic evaluation designs that respond to this knowledge need. The paper draws upon a recent case of a contentious school improvement program (The High Performing Schools Program) to illustrate how these strategies can inform decisions of key program stakeholders. The case also discusses the need to handle conflicts that arise when system level stakeholders are made aware that their program is not meeting expectations.