



Australian Government
The Treasury

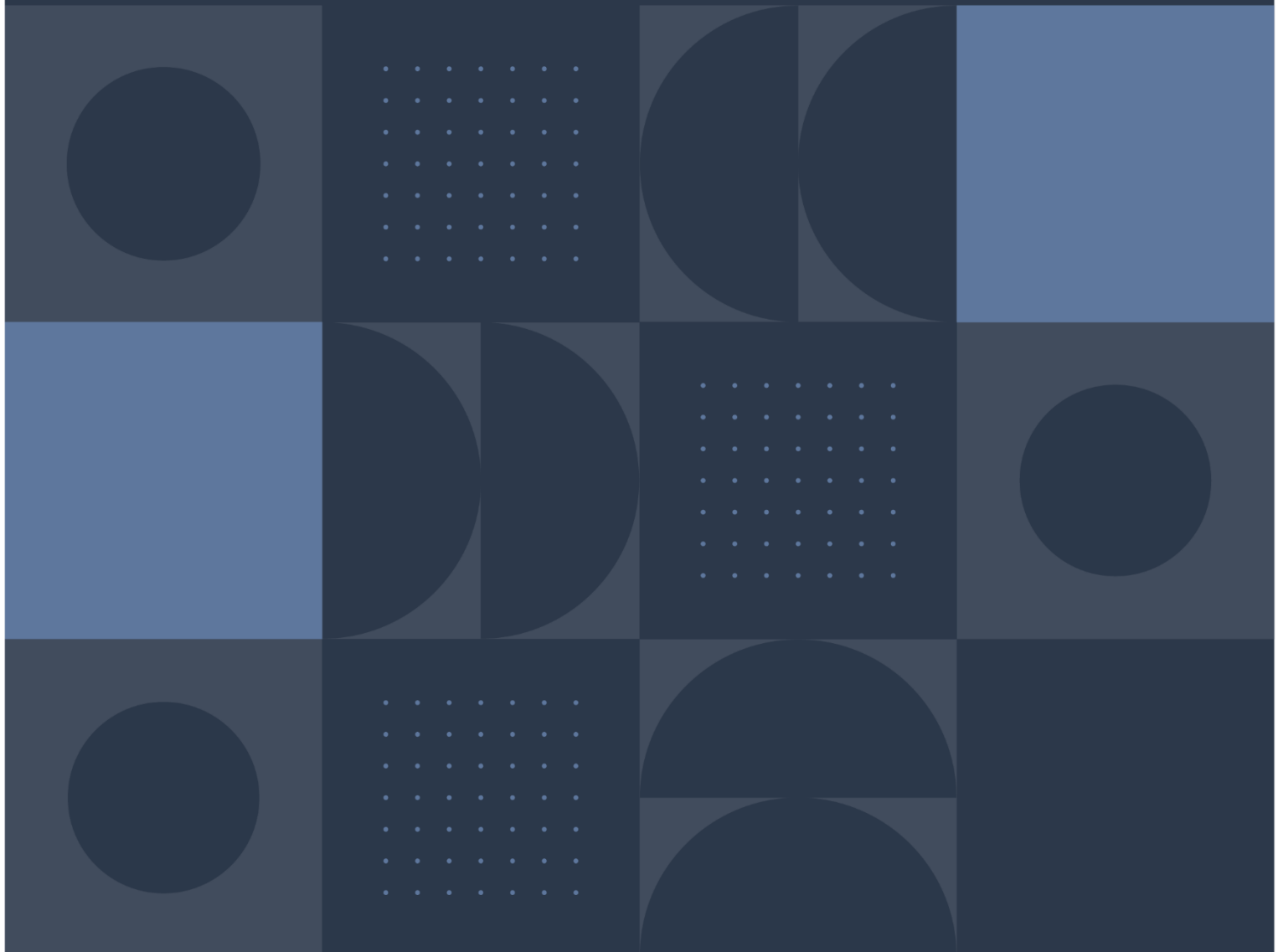
Australian
Centre for
Evaluation

ace

Impact Evaluation: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian public policy

Workshop report

17th June 2024



Contents

Introduction	3
Next Steps	3
Facilitating collaboration on impact evaluations and evidence among government, academia and practitioners	5
Current state	5
A vision for greater collaboration on impact evaluation	5
Ideas to move towards our vision	5
Increasing demand for impact evaluations	7
Current state	7
A vision for increased demand for impact evaluations	7
Ideas to move towards our vision	7
Supporting capability building in impact evaluation within the APS	9
Current state	9
A vision for impact evaluation capability building	9
Ideas to move towards our vision	10
Improving access to, and accessibility of, administrative data and research	11
Current state	11
A vision for data access	11
Ideas to move towards our vision	11
Appendix A: List of participating organisations	13

Introduction

Impact Evaluation: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian public policy consisted of three events held on 17 June 2024 in Canberra hosted by the Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE). These events were: a morning workshop with invited public servants, academics, and other evaluation practitioners; a larger public session with keynote speakers; and a senior executive dinner. The aim of the events was to promote the use of high-quality impact evaluation in Australian government.

The morning workshop brought together more than 100 evaluation specialists from government, academia, not-for-profits and the private sector. See [Appendix A](#) for the full list of organisations that participated.

This workshop report summarises the discussions that were captured during the morning workshop by facilitators and note-takers from the ACE staff.

Workshop delegates were divided into groups of 8-10 to work on a discrete theme that affects the quality and quantity of impact evaluations that are delivered across government. Each group comprised a mix of people from different sectors and institutions. The four themes that groups focused on were:

- **Facilitating collaboration** on impact evaluations and evidence among government, academia and practitioners
- **Increasing demand** for impact evaluations
- **Supporting capability building** in impact evaluation within the Australian Public Service (APS)
- **Improving access** to, and accessibility of, administrative data and research

This workshop report is also structured according to these four themes. Within their theme, groups first discussed the current state of evaluation. This was followed by a second round of discussion on their vision of the ideal state, and brainstorming of concrete initiatives to achieve the desired outcome.

This report provides a summary of the discussions from the workshop. Not all ideas are shared or endorsed by the Australian Centre for Evaluation.

Next steps

Participants brainstormed creative solutions to challenges that we collectively face in building a culture of evaluation across the APS and beyond, and they are detailed in this report. Some of those ideas could be delivered quickly and others could take years to complete. The ideas in this report are not the responsibility of any one individual or team. The ACE will work with our partners to carry some of the best ideas forward. Please take this report as an open invitation to use the ideas that were generated at the workshop in a spirit of collegiality.

At the ACE will be working to embed rigorous evaluation in government practice, deliver high quality evaluations, and build capability across the APS. Initiatives that the ACE are leading include:

- Developing an Evaluation Community of Practice and a specialised Impact Evaluation Practitioners Network (in partnership with the Australian Education Research Organisation);

- Training for the public service on planning and using impact evaluations, and development of a series of online modules on foundational concepts in evaluation;
- Evaluation partnerships with Commonwealth Government departments to deliver flagship impact evaluations including randomised trials;
- A review of the Commonwealth Evaluation Toolkit and further development of guidance, tools and templates to support good practice; and
- Development of an evaluation profession in partnership with the Australian Public Sector Commission.

Facilitating collaboration on impact evaluations and evidence among government, academia and practitioners

Current state

Government and academia misunderstand one another and work to different timeframes. Many delegates reflected that academics and public servants have different needs, priorities and working “rhythms”. For academics, longer-term knowledge building and sharing through publication are highly valued. Governments often need rapid information and evidence to inform policy decisions and sometimes have unrealistic expectations about the speed with which high-quality research and evaluations can be completed. These different requirements and expectations around timing can lead to frustration from all parties.

Academics would like earlier, deeper engagement with government. Many academics also expressed a desire to be engaged earlier in the evaluation process. This would allow researchers to contribute to the early design and roll-out of evaluations, ensuring that the best evaluation and data collection methods are feasible. Academics are seeking deeper, long-term partnerships with government but often find they don’t know who to talk to in government or how to approach them.

There is an inconsistent approach to evaluation across government, and silos within departments. Evaluation expertise within government is unevenly distributed and could be spread more broadly throughout departments. Some departments are much more sophisticated and proactive in their approach to evaluation than others.

Currently, policy and evaluation teams often work in silos and do not communicate in a systematic way. If policy teams had a better understanding of evaluation and treated it as a standard part of the policy cycle, the overall quality of evaluations could be much higher.

Policy teams often engage external consultants or academics to deliver evaluations but don’t always have realistic expectations. Without a fundamental understanding of evaluation, policy teams can struggle to provide clarity to contractors or distinguish good evaluation proposals from poor ones.

There are practical barriers to collaboration. Funding for evaluations is not always prioritised. Government departments sometimes struggle to find staff with evaluation expertise. Widespread use of evaluation jargon makes it hard for outsiders to understand the work that evaluators are doing. Finally, procurement processes can cause delays in engaging external support.

A vision for greater collaboration on impact evaluation

Workshop participants envisioned a more cohesive evaluation sector with deep ties between organisations. Government and academia would have shared goals and a shared language that create a common understanding of high-quality evaluation and how it should be done. There would be greater staff mobility between academia, government, NFPs and private industry and better career advancement opportunities for evaluation specialists within government.

Ideas to move towards our vision

- **More intermediaries:** Support and develop people who understand multiple sectors into roles that can help to build bridges and translate knowledge between government, academia, NFPs and the private sector.

- **Secondments or ‘academic fellowships’:** Create positions that create easier movement between academic research centres and the public sector. Australia could learn from the US or Scotland where there are deeper ties between the sectors. This was a particularly popular idea among workshop delegates.
- **An evaluation clearinghouse:** Foster collaboration by supporting access to evaluation findings through an evaluation clearinghouse or repository. The Closing the Gap clearinghouse could be a model for this.
- **A standard set of approaches to ethics and privacy:** Make it easier to secure timely HREC approval for evaluations and assure decision makers that ethical concerns have been addressed.
- **More opportunities for face-to-face connection:** This could include side events at economics or evaluation conferences for those with a specific interest in public sector impact evaluation.
- **Government 101 for academics** (and academia 101 for public servants): Training opportunities that help each party to understand the incentives, priorities and constraints imposed upon staff from other kinds of institutions.
- **A central repository of institutions and practitioners:** Help people to find the right experts to help with their problem. The UK Evaluation and Trial Advice Panel is a model that could be adapted for this purpose.
- **Ongoing dialogue at the senior executive and ministerial level:** Support senior engagement between academics and policy practitioners to emphasise the importance and potential of impact evaluation.
- **Dedicated funding for academia-government partnerships on evaluation:** Explore possible funding vehicles to promote collaboration. For example, consider an Australian Research Council funding stream dedicated to evaluation and government partnerships.

Increasing demand for impact evaluations

Current state

Evaluations are commissioned too late in the process. Delegates raised the need for evaluation to be embedded in the policy cycle. Evaluation is often considered only after a program has been rolled out. This limits the kind of data that can be collected and the range of evaluation approaches that are feasible. Many delegates described being asked to evaluate a program after the fact and with a short timeframe to complete the evaluation.

The importance of engaging evaluators early extends beyond evaluation methods and data collection. For example, professional evaluators can provide valuable input on a theory of change and to clarify program intent to inform the key evaluation questions, data and methods. However, it was a common experience for the theory of change to be finalised before tendering for an evaluation, without an opportunity to review and revise.

Impact evaluation is not a standard part of policy development. Testing how effectively a program is working should be an expectation, but it is often treated as a separate function from policy design and implementation, and not given priority by policy or program teams.

The appetite for rigorous impact evaluation varies greatly between and within departments and agencies. This often depends on the expectations of senior leaders in the department. Where senior leaders do require evaluations, it is often possible to cut through many of the other challenges such as data access. Capability is another challenge, and many policy teams lack an understanding of impact evaluation and its value.

Evaluations are not always fit for purpose. Process evaluations are currently more common than rigorous impact evaluations. Impact evaluation is often seen as too complex or infeasible. As a result, teams use unreliable impact evaluation methods or overinterpret the findings of process evaluations.

Government expectations are sometimes unrealistic: Some delegates described being commissioned to deliver impact evaluations that were infeasible due to limited data access and other constraints.

A vision for increased demand for impact evaluations

Senior leaders and ministers are knowledgeable about impact evaluation and require it as a standard part of the policy development cycle. Policy teams have core skills in evaluation, including impact evaluation, and are given the support and resources to commission good-quality impact evaluations. Evaluation results are accepted, used to improve policy, and made public where appropriate.

Ideas to move towards our vision

- **A 'what works' library of evaluation examples:** Policy makers could use this library as a source of evidence. The library could also help to demonstrate that impact evaluations are feasible and useful.
- **Build evaluation into strategic plans:** Improving evaluation practice is built into strategic plans so that departments commit the necessary resources and investments in capability.
- **Publishing evaluation results wherever possible.** This increases accountability and makes evaluation a standard practice. It also incentivises academics to collaborate, because publication is a priority for them.

- **A key senior executive sponsor for each impact evaluation;** someone who will champion the work and help to cut through administrative barriers.
- **Funding for evaluation should be prioritised** and become an expected part of new policy proposals.
- **Allow more time to deliver impact evaluations.** It often takes time to see the results of a program. We should allow the necessary time to deliver credible results.

Supporting capability building in impact evaluation within the APS

Current state

Key evaluation skills are missing at all levels of the APS. This is relevant to APS evaluation teams, policy and program teams, and senior leaders.

- Evaluation teams need a more consistent understanding of causal inference and the suite of tools that can assess causality. They need the confidence and space to communicate the importance of good evaluations, including impact evaluations, to the rest of their department and senior champions to help them change the culture.
- Policy and program teams need to better understand how to plan evaluations, and to use evaluation results to improve programs. This includes, for example, how to interpret a 'null' result and think through the potential explanations for the result. The ability to synthesize findings from process and impact evaluations and then iterate on the policy design should be a standard practice in policy and program teams.
- Senior leaders also need a basic understanding of causal inference and how it can be assessed to help them understand impact evaluation results, as well as the value of commissioning impact evaluations. Finally, they need the courage and authorising environment to make changes based on evaluation results.

The culture in many departments undervalue evaluation, including impact evaluation. Many delegates said that evaluation and causal inference skills were not widespread in their department. They also described the lack of career opportunities for specialist evaluators. Evaluation skills are not required or rewarded at senior executive levels. Furthermore, some departments do not have evaluation teams.

There is also room to build capability in interpreting evaluation results. A lack of understanding of impact evaluations can also lead to misinterpretation and devaluing of results. For example, decision-makers may disregard small (but still material) effect sizes in large populations. Or they may have difficulty interpreting results that are not definitive (for example, if impact estimates have a wide confidence interval). More generally, policy officers do not always see a direct link between high-quality evaluation and better policy.

Routine data collection is lacking in some departments and agencies. As the raw material for evaluation, and especially impact evaluation, administrative data needs to be collected consistently and efficiently. In some departments and policy areas this is not the case, and where data does exist it can be hard to use or difficult to access. A greater capacity for data collection and management would be a worthwhile investment that would facilitate better evaluation.

A vision for impact evaluation capability building

A broad-based understanding of evaluation and causal inference across the whole of the APS and in the general public. A culture that values evaluation and knows how to use evaluation results effectively, which results in the best possible evaluation method being used for every program. High quality data that is easily accessed and can inform robust evaluation findings.

Ideas to move towards our vision

- **Mandated evaluations:** Consider mandates for evaluation for certain policies and programs (for example, expenditure policies that exceed a certain expenditure threshold). These mandates could be established through government policy (such as the Budget Process Operational Rules) or through amendments to the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability* (PGPA) Act.
- **Senior executive level roles for expert evaluators:** Create roles at the senior executive level to embed this expertise in the public service and incentivise more junior staff to invest in evaluation skills.
- **Public service training:** Conduct training for public servants on: how to procure an evaluation, what to look for in a high-quality evaluation, and how to communicate evaluation findings and explain results in a clear and purposeful way.
- **Deeper collaboration within government between policy and evaluation teams:** This could be built on a hub-and-spoke model where every team has one member with evaluation skills and every department or agency has an evaluation team that holds deeper expertise.
- **External advocacy for evaluation:** Advocacy for better evaluation, and better impact evaluation, from influential outsiders, such as industry bodies or academic groups.
- **School education:** Start causal literacy education in school, to create a broad-based understanding and support for impact evaluation in the general public.

Improving access to, and accessibility of, administrative data and research

Current state

New linked data assets have great potential for impact evaluation: The work that the Australian Bureau of Statistics has done to create the Person-Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) and the Business Longitudinal Analysis Data Environment (BLADE) has been enormously helpful and offers great potential. This was widely acknowledged by delegates. Delegates expressed support for the expansion of these data assets to include more sources from a wider range of government agencies.

There is a high degree of variation in the quality and quantity of administrative data. Some departments and agencies keep well organised data that is easy to access and use. In other cases, data collection is haphazard and is not stored in easily useable formats. Practitioners from outside government said they have difficulty knowing what data government has and how it can be accessed.

It is hard to combine separate data sources. For data sets that are not in large, linked datasets (such as PLIDA or BLADE), there is a lack of standardisation or interoperability between government data assets. It falls to individual researchers to develop the resources needed to combine data sets. If this work was coordinated centrally, evaluators could avoid lots of “double handling”.

There is a lack of clarity and transparency about data and access protocols. Processes for accessing data and associated ethics approval are different for every agency. In addition, some researchers said they had trouble finding out what was in a dataset until they were given access. This speaks to the need for better documentation and record keeping about data assets.

Academics and others would like greater access to findings from government evaluations. Delegates from outside government also spoke about the desire to access research findings that are produced within governments. While it is not always possible for government research to be published, greater availability through a central repository would facilitate deeper collaboration.

A vision for data access

Government data sets are easy to access, well documented and interoperable with standardised requirements for clearance and ethical approval. It should be standard practice for data to be used to inform policy decisions, and all public servants should know where they can access the data they need.

Ideas to move towards our vision

- **Commonwealth-State data linkage:** Better linkage of State/Territory and Commonwealth administrative data sets.
- **A whole-of-government evidence library:** Establish an evidence library that would allow public servants to access past evaluations and research to inform future program and policy design.
- **A user's guide to government data:** Develop a guide that lays out all the government data sets that can be accessed, what data they contain and the access requirements.
- **Dedicated data brokers:** Appoint data brokers in dedicated roles who can facilitate the relationship between researchers and data custodians.

- **Training on data sharing for all public servants:** Training could cover frameworks that facilitate data sharing (such as the Five Safes framework) and the value of sharing data.
- **Funding:** Establish a consistent approach to funding for evaluations and data access in the budget process.

Appendix A: List of participating organisations

The following organisations were represented at the workshop by one or more delegates.

Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences

Australian Bureau of Statistics

Australian Centre for Evaluation

Australian Education Research Organisation

Australian Evaluation Society

Australian Institute for Family Studies

Australian Institute of Criminology

Australian National University

Australian Taxation Office

ARTD

Attorney-General's Department

Centre for Evidence and Implementation

Curtin University

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

Department of Education

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Department of Health and Aged Care

Department of Home Affairs

Department of Industry, Science and Resources

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

Department of Social Services

Department of Veterans' Affairs

First Person Consulting

Grosvenor

KPMG

Minderoo Foundation

Monash University

National Indigenous Australians Agency

NSW Behavioural Insights Unit

NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

NSW Department of Customer Service
NSW Treasury
Paul Ramsay Foundation
Policy Performance
University of Melbourne
University of Newcastle
University of New South Wales
University of Sydney
University of Technology Sydney
University of Queensland
Urbis
Victoria Police
Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

© Commonwealth of Australia 2024

This publication is available for your use under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode) licence, with the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, the Treasury logo, photographs, images, signatures and where otherwise stated. The full licence terms are available from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode>.



Use of Treasury material under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode) licence requires you to attribute the work (but not in any way that suggests that the Treasury endorses you or your use of the work).

Treasury material used ‘as supplied’

Provided you have not modified or transformed Treasury material in any way including, for example, by changing the Treasury text; calculating percentage changes; graphing or charting data; or deriving new statistics from published Treasury statistics — then Treasury prefers the following attribution:

Source: The Australian Government the Treasury.

Derivative material

If you have modified or transformed Treasury material, or derived new material from those of the Treasury in any way, then Treasury prefers the following attribution:

Based on The Australian Government the Treasury data.

Use of the Coat of Arms

The terms under which the Coat of Arms can be used are set out on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet website (see <https://www.pmc.gov.au/honours-and-symbols/commonwealth-coat-arms>).

Other uses

Enquiries regarding this licence and any other use of this document are welcome at:

Manager
Media Unit
The Treasury
Langton Crescent
Parkes ACT 2600
Email: media@treasury.gov.au