



Balancing and managing different perspectives in evaluation steering groups

UK Evaluation Society Conference 2017, Theme 1: Exploratory Session
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Context

- The purpose of the Conference is to explore
 - 'How evaluation can become more useful to its commissioners, to the subjects of the evaluation, and to society more widely'
- ... and Theme 1 is focused on
 - 'Distinguishing between wants and needs, for commissioners, evaluators, beneficiaries and society, and negotiating appropriately to balance rigour and relevance'
- Experience suggests that as well as different 'wants and needs' *between* these groups, there can also be differences *within* them, including the 'commissioner'
 - As reflected in evaluation Steering Groups

Issues to explore

1. What are the different requirements and perspectives of commissioners and steering group participants, and how do they influence the focus, delivery and independence of evaluations?
 2. How can commissioners and steering groups most effectively balance these perspectives in different types of evaluation, and what is the role of evaluators in managing and working with these different perspectives?
- Share experiences and best practice

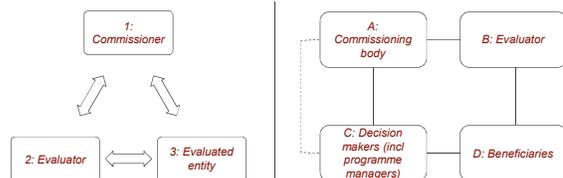
My perspective

- Evaluation consultant with SQW for 10+ years
 - UK-based SME providing research and analysis in economic and social development
- Led or managed 25+ project/programme evaluations, commissioned by (largely UK) public bodies
 - National → regional → local clients
 - Process / formative → impact studies
 - Longitudinal → interim → ex-post stages
 - Innovation/enterprise → regeneration → public service improvement policy domains
- In most cases, evaluations commissioned by the organisation funding and/or delivering the intervention being evaluated

Underpinning logic

- The basic premise underpinning the session is that governance structures and systems for evaluations matter
- Governance informs
 - Understanding of purpose between the evaluator and those commissioning the evaluation
 - Expectations of the evaluation by those that have commissioned the evaluation ... and how these may change
 - Independence and credibility of findings
- ... and that there are a range of ways in which these can operate in practice

Tricky triangles and rectangles across evaluation governance structures



- Range of models in practice, with formal separation of the three elements most common
- The evaluated entity as commissioner also common in UK public sector evaluation
- Different relationships have different strengths & weaknesses in terms of independence, and power relationships between roles

- Alternative model of evaluation governance that includes the 'citizen' as the ultimate beneficiary of the intervention being evaluated
- Range of models with A&C often combined, appointing an external evaluator
- Recognition of trade offs and issues in terms of costs and information asymmetries between different parts in delivering evaluations

De Laat, B. The Tricky Triangle. Evaluation Connections 2014

Picciotto, R. The Tricky Rectangle. Evaluation Connections 2014

Tricky issues *within* evaluation governance structures

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- These models (and other literature) focuses principally on the relationships *between* parts of evaluation governance structures, not *within* them
 - Implicit assumption that there is 'one voice' in each element
- In practice, commissioners and decision makers on Steering Groups often have different 'needs and wants'
 - This is legitimate, reasonable and can be helpful in representing different interests, and offering insight/knowledge
 - ... and '*negotiating mutually conflicting interests and demands*' is an important evaluation skill
 - But it influences how the evaluation is conducted, and potentially the outcomes of the evaluation

SOW

Tricky issues *within* evaluation governance structures

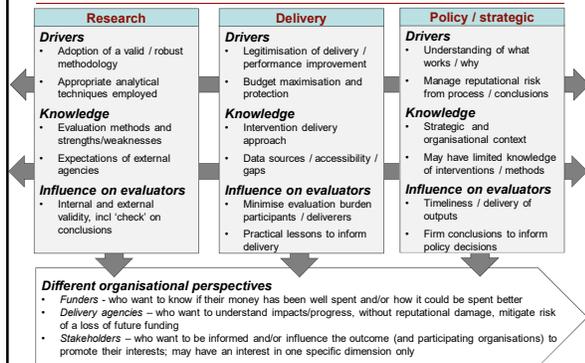
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- Steering Groups also regularly include 'stakeholders' from other agencies/departments, providing further perspectives and positions
 - e.g. those with a policy, spatial or sector interest in the outcome of the evaluation, but not involved directly in its funding or delivery
 - Arguably a fifth element in understanding the dynamics across evaluation governance systems – a 'tricky pentagon'(!)
- Clearly a wide range of other factors that can influence how a steering group operates
 - Size
 - Decision making model
 - Purpose and approach

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Perspectives within Steering Groups – a headline depiction

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The challenge for evaluators and evaluations

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- In theory, a well-developed ToR, scoping phase, method etc. should manage these different perspectives
 - But 'balance of power' varies in different contexts
 - Potential for conflict between e.g. robust method vs. minimising burden, firm conclusions vs. recognising limitations of method
 - Varied views often only emerge over time, or at reporting stage
 - > Often as political and strategic contexts evolve
- Which practically can mean risks in terms of
 - Delays in research / reporting
 - Clarity and/or robustness of findings compromised where all perspectives are accommodated ...
 - ... or loss of buy-in/engagement where they are not
 - Both of which can have implications for on-going delivery

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Tales from the coalface (1)

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- Process evaluation of public service improvement programme
- Steering Group (x6)
 - Research/evaluation officer from funding body
 - Director-level and officer-level policy reps in the funding body
 - Director-level and officer-level in the delivery agency
 - Chair, from a separate department of the funding body
- Very different perspective across the Group, but a number of factors were key in balancing and managing them
 - Active chair – senior level rep, prepared to challenge the evaluators and SG members, engaging substantively in the evaluation process
 - Formal scoping report confirming evaluation purpose and approach, with single sign-off and comment process
 - Engagement by evaluators and Steering Group with the external Programme Board at draft findings stage ... limiting scope for funder or delivery agency perspectives to influence outcomes

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Tales from the coalface (2)

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- Ex-post impact and process evaluation of a business development programme
- Steering Group (x6)
 - Research/evaluation officers from delivery/funding body (x2)
 - Manager and delivery officer from the delivery/funding body
 - Chair, from a separate department of the delivery/funding body
 - Representative from external strategic stakeholder
- Factors that were challenging in balancing perspectives
 - Information asymmetry across SG on programme aims and activity, including Chair limiting scope to manage conflicting perspectives
 - Staff engaged directly in delivery with no incentive to accept challenge/findings
 - SG sought to use the evaluators to make judgements between varied comments from different perspectives

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Perspectives *within* the commissioning group – tales from the coalface (2 cont.)

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- Factors that were challenging in balancing perspectives cont.
 - External strategic stakeholder seeking to steer the evaluation into considering broader issue and topics than the delivery/funding body
- Lessons from this example
 - Establish and record different perspectives in the SG at the outset
 - > Identifying transparently where there may be conflict
 - > Working with the SG to agree where to prioritise and balance
 - > Revisit through the study
 - Greater engagement with Chair of SG
 - > Work to fill information gaps (as appropriate), to enable decision making
 - Development of formal 'rules of engagement' to mediate different perspectives, to ensure credibility and usefulness of findings?
 - Earlier involvement of the Steering Group in the commissioning process to maximise buy-in and agreement on overall aims, methods, expectations?

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Topics for discussion

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- For **commissioners**, how have you sought to deal with different perspectives, within, and working with other organisations?
- For **evaluators**, like wise, and how have you looked to manage these different perspectives?
 - ... *and do different approaches work better for some kinds of evaluations than others?*
- For **everyone**, who should be responsible for 'holding the ring' – the evaluator, the Steering Group, the Chair, an *independent* actor/body?
 - ... *and should recognising these different perspectives be more of a focus in analysis and reporting of evaluation findings*

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