

Assuring our future: It's time for action

Howard Markland

Public-sector programme evaluation in New Zealand has advanced significantly since the early 1990s, with growth in evaluation activity, improved service quality, and establishment of a formal training pathway and a national governance body. However, there is evidence of emerging challenges, particularly with respect to supply, quality, transparency, and leadership. This article briefly explores the evolution of evaluation in New Zealand and recent developments, and suggests that there may be some emerging challenges to the sustainability of our current operating model.

Introduction

Our COVID lockdown gave me the opportunity to consider matters that I did not have the head space for during those distraction-rich days before lockdown. Among other things, I explored the delivery and direction of evaluation in New Zealand, which revealed several contradictions and challenges. Following lockdown, *Evaluation Matters* called for contributions exploring the future of evaluation in New Zealand. So I have decided to share my thoughts in the hope that they might broaden the dialogue, and potentially build the

resilience and sustainability of our embryonic profession. I would like to emphasise that this think piece is simply that, based on publicly available documents and my personal experiences and observations. I did not conduct any formal interviews or surveys, but did speak with several people involved in public-sector evaluation in New Zealand, and I have taken their comments and views into consideration.

Early guidance

I am not the first to be concerned about the status and trajectory of evaluation in New Zealand. Over 20 years ago, the State Services Commission (SSC) noted “a dearth of outcome evaluation” and concluded that there was “a shortage of skills and capabilities in the public and private sectors both to carry out evaluation and to manage external evaluators” and a “significantly inadequate and/or ineffective use of information, research, evaluation and consultation techniques as inputs to policy development” (State Services Commission, 1999a).

The SSC assessment considered evaluation demand and supply, although its recommendations focused heavily on boosting demand. That said, it did also acknowledge that supply and quality were undermined by a lack of academic and other training opportunities (State Services Commission, 1999b). In response to these recommendations, the SSC and the Treasury issued guidelines encouraging the use of evaluation by government departments (State Services Sector, 2003). This boosted the demand for evaluation services, which was met by a combination of building public-sector capability, growth in private-sector offerings, and establishment of the Postgraduate Diploma in Social Sector Evaluation Research at Massey University.

Current leadership

The growth of public-sector evaluation over the past two decades has increased the need for oversight, co-ordination, and leadership for the emerging evaluation sector. While ANZEA is arguably the most influential sector governance body, there is also a much smaller Māori Evaluation Association (Mā te Rae) which focuses on indigenous evaluation. The Australian Evaluation Society (formerly the Australasian Evaluation Society) was established in 1982 and naturally focuses on evaluation in Australia, although around 8% of its 1,000 members are based in New Zealand (AES, 2020).

ANZEA was established in 2006 for the “promotion, enhancement and development of high quality services”, to “promote excellence in evaluation”, and “advance education” (ANZEA, 2016). It currently has around 540 members (60% of whom are corporate registrations) and its current strategic goals include a commitment to “Building Evaluation Quality, Capability and Practice” (ANZEA, 2020). Its annual reports (ANZEA, 2020) reveal an organisational focus on membership numbers, progress against its strategic goals, and priorities; its annual conference and the *Evaluation Matters* journal; financial performance; and a summary of branch highlights. Its website also offers a directory of evaluation consultants (15) and members. In May 2020, ANZEA began to offer online presentations and workshops as an upskilling opportunity for members. ANZEA’s most notable achievement over the past decade, however, has been to support the quality of evaluation delivery by publishing its value-based *Evaluation Competencies* (ANZEA, 2011) and principle-based *Evaluation Standards* (Superu, 2015).

ANZEA has repeatedly explored the need for improved evaluation delivery in New Zealand. At its last annual conference, organisers encouraged members to “pause, reflect, explore uncertainties and challenges”, and posed the question “Why and how might—or

should—evaluation change?” Its *Evaluation Matters* publication has previously explored evaluation capacity building in organisations or sectors (Dyson, 2018; Weir & Fouche, 2016; White et al., 2018), although it does not yet appear to have explored the national supply context.

The *Evaluation Competencies* provide aspirational guidance encompassing 15 individual competencies and 90 exemplars distributed across four “domains” (contextual analysis and engagement; systematic enquiry; project management and professional practice; and self-reflection and professional development). The competencies provide evaluators with a self-assessment framework, but are not intended to be used as a means of communicating evaluator competence to others.

The *Evaluation Standards* set expectations for good-quality evaluation, expressed via 20 standards that are founded on four principles (respectful, meaningful relationships; ethic of care; responsive methodologies and trustworthy results; and competence and usefulness). Conformance with these standards is voluntary.

Looking ahead

The New Zealand Government has recently published guidelines that encourage proactive release of public information (Ombudsman, 2020; Public Service Commission, 2020), which are designed to implement Cabinet’s commitment to “actively releasing high value public data” (Cabinet, 2011). While they do not explicitly reference the publication of evaluation reports, doing so would be consistent with the intent of Cabinet’s directive.

While SSC’s initiative to improve evaluation demand has had a significant impact on the uptake of evaluation across the public sector, it appears that constraints are now shifting to the supply side, creating a deficit that has consequences for the cost, quality, and

availability of evaluation services. This is already evident to some of those commissioning evaluation services, who are finding it harder to find a local provider or are paying premium fees for services that fall short of their expectations. While new providers are emerging, many are from Australia and the UK, while local growth is coming from sectors more familiar with audit rather than evaluation (e.g., engineers and chartered accountants).

The challenge is compounded by a contraction in our tertiary sector. New Zealand's only evaluation-focused postgraduate qualification is no longer accepting enrolments, due to a combination of low student numbers and loss of a key staff member. Consequently, the only readily available equivalent is the University of Melbourne's Graduate Certificate in Evaluation or Master of Evaluation. Its online delivery makes it widely available, although the AUD14,000 student fees may be a deterrent to some prospective students. Our only local alternatives for developing evaluation skills and understanding are limited to individual papers, short courses, or learning by doing, none of which are likely to provide those commissioning evaluations with substantive assurance of evaluator competence.

Given the limited student enrolments and the lack of a recognised evaluation qualification in New Zealand, there is a risk that the supply of new evaluator talent will stall at the same time that many in our cadre of experienced evaluators are approaching retirement. This will further increase our dependency on alternatives, with obvious consequences for the cost, quality, and availability of evaluation services.

Discussion

Despite the steady growth in demand for evaluation services, the evaluation sector in New Zealand faces a number of challenges that threaten its sustainability. The most prominent challenges are outlined below:

Supply—While some government departments have developed their in-house evaluation capacity, public-sector enthusiasm for outsourcing means that much of this resource is now focused on procurement and contract administration rather than delivery of evaluation services. Meanwhile, the pool of home-grown evaluator talent is shrinking due to the ageing demographic of evaluation professionals, and the lack of vocational or academic pathways to on-board prospective evaluators.

Quality—Given the absence of barriers to entry (such as professional registration, minimum qualifications, or experience requirements), anybody can offer evaluation services, while the lack of consensus about what constitutes an evaluation makes it hard to determine the acceptability of the services they provide.

Transparency—While New Zealand's public service prides itself on transparency, many evaluations it commissions are not made publicly available, or their findings are not implemented. This is inconsistent with our Government's proactive release policy, and also represents a missed opportunity for improvement and an ethical challenge for evaluators.

Leadership—Evaluators strive to objectively assess value, characterise performance, and cross-reference information sources to ensure their validity. While we embrace this approach when evaluating programmes, we do not appear to be applying the same scrutiny to ourselves.

There are many questions we need to answer to understand how we have reached this point. Other than my personal interest in finding out if others share my concerns, other interesting questions include:

- Given the prospect of healthy fees and long-term work, why do students have so little interest in a tertiary qualifications pathway to a career in evaluation?

- Has outsourcing undermined public-sector evaluation capability, understanding, and commitment?
- Does our permissive operating environment create a “free-for-all” in which evaluation quality is ultimately compromised?
- To what extent do withheld reports degrade evaluation to a tick-box exercise and dispirit evaluators?
- Has the steady stream of well-paying evaluation work distracted our evaluation community from monitoring emerging risks and succession planning?
- Has our resistance to codifying evaluation fuelled perceptions that evaluation is an art that can only be adequately delivered via academic enquiry?

While it is easy to ask questions, it is much more challenging to answer them and respond to issues requiring attention. However, some possible next steps for ANZEA, SSC, and academia to consider are:

SSC

- Revisit the 1999 assessment of public-sector evaluation to characterise significant developments and determine if further recommendations are required.

ANZEA

- Review the state and direction of our sector, with a particular focus on evaluation quality, the supply:demand trends, member demographics, and succession planning.
- Consider the use of other metrics in annual reporting (e.g., evaluations conducted, active members, publication rates, and member perceptions).
- Advocate for public release of public-sector evaluation reports as a default setting.

- Require members to meet minimum requirements for qualifications and/or experience.
- Amend the *Evaluation Standards* to include minimum standards for what constitutes an acceptable evaluation.

Academia

- Work with SSC, the Tertiary Education Commission, and ANZEA to consider the consequences of losing New Zealand's only tertiary qualification in evaluation, to test the rationale for its reinstatement or replacement.

Despite the havoc that COVID-19 has wrought around the world, it has also taught us some important lessons. The one I consider most relevant to evaluation in New Zealand is that we can make dramatic changes very quickly when needed—provided we can see the urgency and benefits of doing so. I would like to think that this article provides readers with an insight to the challenges that threaten the future of evaluation in New Zealand, in the hope that we respond to them sooner rather than later.

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