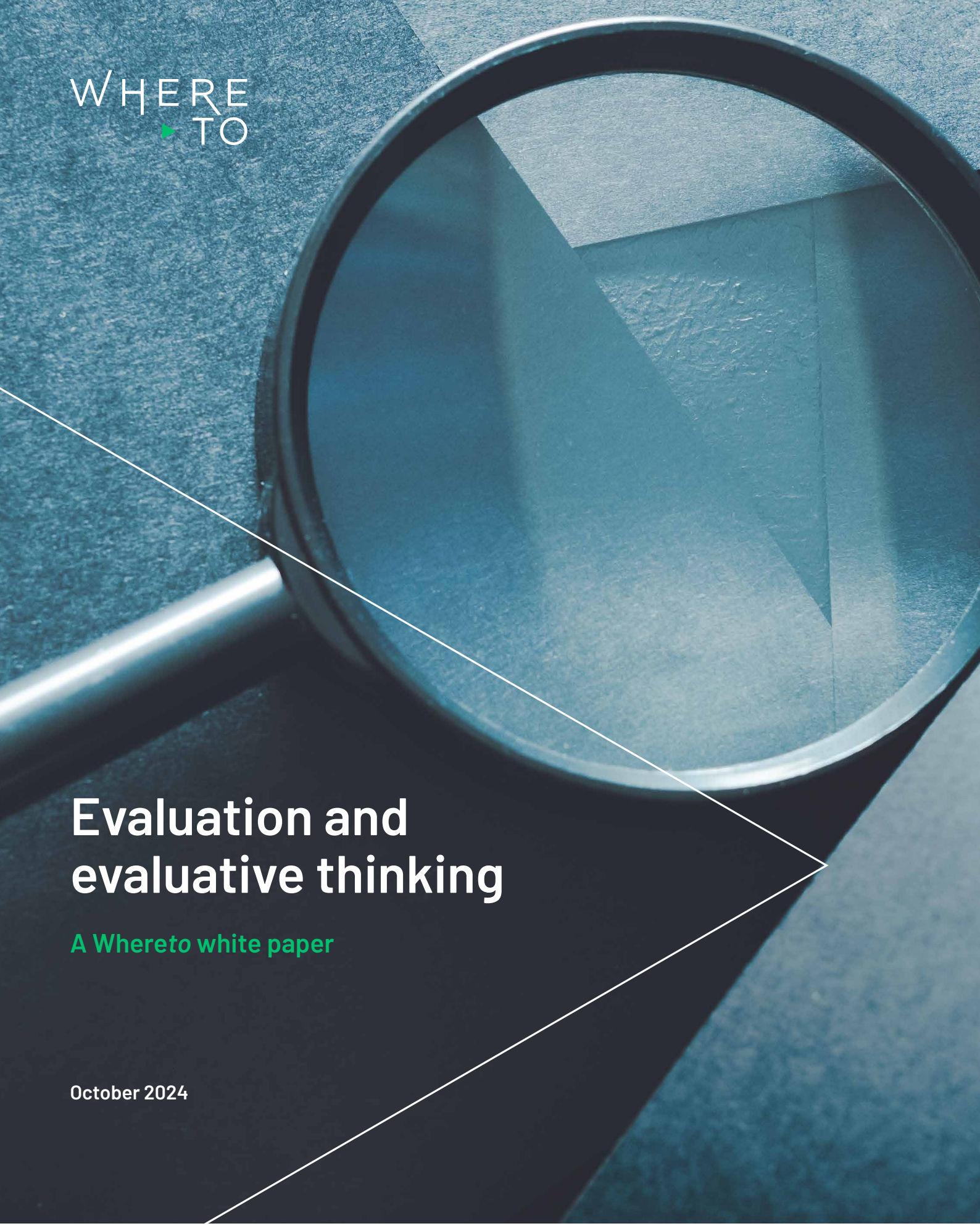

Evaluation and evaluative thinking

A Whereto white paper

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WhereTo Research Based Consulting Pty Ltd
PHONE +61 3 8648 3148 / info@wheretoresearch.com.au / wheretoresearch.com.au

Introduction to evaluation and evaluative thinking

What is evaluation?

Evaluation can be thought of as a systematic and objective process to assess merit, worth or significance by combining evidence and values (adapted from *Better Evaluation*[1]).

This can include a broad range of activities and types of evaluations for different purposes. While we recognise that the term evaluation can be used in different ways, this broad description allows for evaluative thinking to be embraced by everyone, even those who may not consider themselves to be evaluators.

All of us have conducted some sort of evaluation, whether formally or not. We do it almost every day when we decide what to wear or how to prioritise the various tasks that lay before us. A more specific example is when it comes to buying expensive items, such as a car or home. We tend to weigh various criteria to make a decision — for example, price, location, number of rooms in the case of a house or safety features in a car. That's evaluation, supported by evaluative thinking.

Evaluation is the doing, while **evaluative thinking** is the being

What is evaluative thinking?

Evaluative thinking is a disciplined approach to enquiry and reflective practice that helps us make sound judgements using good evidence, as a matter of habit.[1] It is a core skill for evaluators but also an important concept for people more generally to embrace. It is a mindset that can help us in a range of personal and professional roles to make informed decisions, cultivate a culture of continuous learning and enhance the effectiveness of programs, policies or systems. By integrating evaluative thinking into daily operations, government and non-government organisations can improve their ability to address challenges, innovate and achieve more impactful and sustainable results.

> *'Evaluative thinking is the capacity to ask good questions, gather credible information, and use that information to make decisions. It's an everyday way of thinking that helps individuals and organisations grow, learn, and improve.'*
>
> (King and Stevahn 2013[2])

Evaluative thinking is more than a technical tool or a process. It considers the context in which evaluation takes place, which is often dynamic and complex environments within interconnected systems. Evaluative thinking involves interpretation and meaning making. This requires an awareness of how evaluation outcomes are influenced by social values and broader ecosystems, and that the judgements and insights derived from evaluation have broader implications for society.

> *'Evaluative thinking requires critical reflection on assumptions, values, and evidence. It is an interpretive act — one that involves making judgments based on contextual understanding, rather than simply applying technical methods.'*
>
> (Schwandt 2015[3])

The emergence of evaluative thinking has been shaped by various evaluation pioneers over time and continues to take shape. In Australia, evaluative thinking has been widely adopted and is part and parcel of various evaluation disciplines.

1 https://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/evaluative-thinking
2 King JA, Stevahn L (2013). *Interactive evaluation practice: mastering the interpersonal dynamics of program evaluation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
3 Schwandt TA (2015). *Evaluation foundations revisited: cultivating a life of the mind for practice.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Core principles of evaluative thinking

Whereto has developed a set of principles to prompt the important ways in which we immerse ourselves in evaluative thinking. The principles remind us to always R-E-F-L-E-C-T with our evaluative thinking:

R **Relevant** – ensure evaluations are meaningful and targeted; focus on questions, data and outcomes that are future-focused and align with the goals of the project or program. Ask: 'Is this evaluation addressing the most important issues in this context?'

E **Evidence-based** – rely on credible and objective information. Any approach to evaluation should ensure reliable, valid and credible evidence that can withstand scrutiny and support evidence-based and contextually appropriate decision making.

F **Fit for purpose** – tailor the evaluation to its intended use, making sure it is designed and conducted in alignment with purpose and context to ensure relevance, appropriateness and meaningful and actionable insights that support decision making, learning and improvement. Fit for purpose ensures efficiency and appropriateness without over-complicating the process.

L **Learning and reflection** – encourage a mindset of critical reflection to question assumptions, consider multiple perspectives and reflect on data and experiences to make informed decisions while also encouraging a culture of continuous learning.

E **Ethical** – safeguard the rights and dignity of all individuals involved, following ethical procedures and considering the broader implications of the findings to ensure fairness and accountability throughout the process.

C **Collaborative and inclusive** – take a collaborative approach. Engage key partners and stakeholders to ensure success while also incorporating diverse perspectives to provide a balanced assessment of the needs, experiences and circumstances of all stakeholders, particularly users, resulting in accurate and meaningful evaluation outcomes.

T **Transparent** – maintain openness in process and results; this requires an approach to clearly document the process, criteria and findings to build trust and accountability, with clear communication and feedback loops for stakeholders and users as best practice whenever feasible.

Applying the R-E-F-L-E-C-T principles

RELEVANT	*Are evaluation activities tailored to the context and aims of the program or initiative?* *Are we asking evaluation questions and assessing outcomes that are relevant, meaningful and future focused?*
EVIDENCE BASED	*Is the evidence reliable, valid and able to withstand scrutiny?*
FIT FOR PURPOSE	*Is our approach tailored and fit for purpose?* *Are we being efficient and appropriate without over-complicating the process?*
LEARNING AND REFLECTION	*Are we questioning assumptions and considering multiple perspectives?* *Are we reflecting on the data to make informed decisions?*
ETHICAL	*Are we following ethical procedures?* *Have we considered the broader implications of findings?*
COLLABORATIVE AND INCLUSIVE	*Are we actively engaging a range of suitable partners, stakeholders and users (where possible)?* *Are we making it as easy to engage with the evaluation as possible?*
TRANSPARENT	*Have we clearly documented and communicated the methods, criteria and findings?* *Are we able to share findings to participants and stakeholders?*

What makes a culture of evaluative thinking?

A culture of evaluative thinking is one where critical reflection, learning and evidence-based decision making are embedded in the everyday practices of organisations. This culture goes beyond formal evaluations — it creates an environment where evidence and feedback inform ongoing improvement in processes, policies and practice. By fostering such a culture, organisations are better equipped to navigate complexity, adapt to change and make better-informed decisions.

Building a culture

To build a strong culture of evaluative thinking, there are several key factors and characteristics that can support such an environment. These are leadership commitment and support; building capacity and capability; encouraging curiosity and inquiry; continuous learning and improvement; and embedding R-E-F-L-E-C-T principles and practices. This is not a one-size-fits-all list of requirements; there may be many other factors that work to build strong cultures for different types of organisations and people.

Leadership commitment and support

Leadership commitment and support are central to fostering a culture of evaluative thinking. Leaders should actively champion evaluation processes, model a mindset of learning and reflection, and create an environment where feedback and evidence-based decision making are prioritised. This support signals to the organisation that evaluative thinking is valued and integral to achieving success.

Building capacity and capability

Evaluative thinking works best with a commitment from everyone in an organisation. To embed evaluative thinking, organisations need to invest in capacity building to ensure all team members have the knowledge, skills and confidence to engage in evaluative thinking. By building these capabilities across all levels, evaluative thinking becomes a shared responsibility and is applied consistently across ways of working.

> *'Good quality evaluation needs to be useful and valid and ethical and feasible all at the same time. Evaluative thinking supports this by helping people work together to identify what is of value and how it can be improved.'*
>
> (Patricia Rogers via Australian Evaluation Society 2019[4])

Encouraging curiosity and inquiry

Evaluative thinking sits naturally when there is an inherent curiosity to ask questions about why and how things work. There is a focus on learning from both successes and failures.

4 https://www.aes.asn.au/aes-blog/patricia-rogers-in-conversation

Continuous learning and improvement

Evaluative thinking is not a one-off event but a continuous learning and improvement approach. Continuous improvement requires an openness to learning from both successes and failures. This involves encouraging ongoing reflection on data, feedback and outcomes to identify both strengths and areas for development. Foster a learning culture where failure is viewed as an opportunity for growth. By using insights gained from evaluations, organisations can make informed changes to their strategies and operations to remain responsive and effective.

> *'Evaluative thinking helps ensure that evaluations are not just a one-time activity but are part of continuous improvement and adaptive management.'*
>
> (Commonwealth evaluation toolkit[5])

Embedding R-E-F-L-E-C-T principles and practices

Make space to embed the principles and practices that will support everyone with not only understanding what evaluative thinking is but also doing the thinking and putting it into practice.

Barriers

While organisations can focus on building the above factors to facilitate evaluative thinking, it is also important to consider the following common barriers when trying to integrate evaluative thinking into a culture and operations.

Misconceptions

Some may view evaluative thinking and the conduct of formal evaluation as a compliance-oriented activity, which can limit its adoption as a dynamic and flexible approach to learning and improvement. Others may view evaluative thinking as burdensome without understanding the benefits. Overcoming these misconceptions can be encouraged through building awareness about the importance and benefits of the principles and practice of evaluative thinking.

Cultural resistance

In some organisations, uncertainty or fear of failure can be a limitation to the concept of evaluative thinking. Individuals may be hesitant to embrace evaluative thinking because it involves openly discussing failures, uncertainties or challenges in order to learn from them. There may also be resistance to change in organisations with well-established processes or practices. In organisations with rigid hierarchies, there might be little room for input from all levels, reducing the potential for inclusive evaluation and learning. Addressing resistance takes time; embedding evaluative thinking into regular practices and ensuring it is part of decision-making processes at all levels of the organisation is important to foster change.

Resource constraints

Evaluative thinking requires time for reflection, data analysis and critical thinking. This can be seen as a luxury in organisations that are resource-constrained or have high demands on staff time. Evaluative thinking can sometimes be perceived as complex or academic, making it less accessible to people who are focused on practical, on-the-ground work. There can be a concern that evaluative thinking will lead to unnecessary over-complication that slows down processes, resulting in resourcing barriers. Addressing this barrier often requires strategic allocation of resources, time for capacity building and fit-for-purpose evaluation processes.

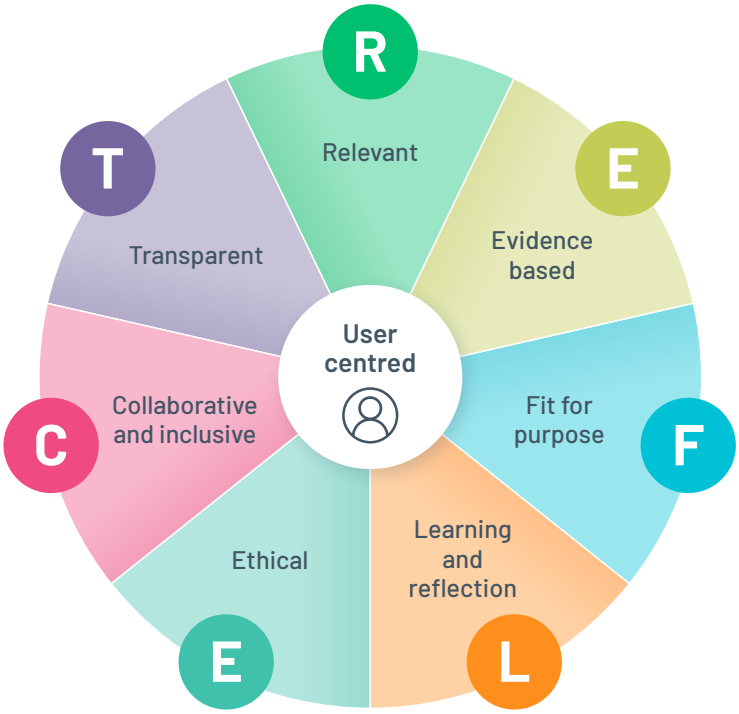
5 https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/what-evaluation

Overcoming barriers

There may be many other barriers that organisations experience. Commonly, overcoming these barriers (among others) involves the 'Building a culture' items described above. Addressing these barriers takes time and commitment, but it can lead to more resilient, adaptive and effective organisations.

Maintaining a user-centred focus

One of the most important concepts in understanding and implementing evaluative thinking is considering and maintaining a user-centred focus. It ensures the evaluation process and its outcomes are relevant, actionable and effective for the people it is intended to serve. It helps embed each of the R-E-F-L-E-C-T principles.



We talk more about what user-centred design in evaluation is below. In a nutshell, it focuses on involving end-users — such as program participants, stakeholders and community members — in the evaluation process to ensure the evaluation meets their needs and priorities.

Building a foundation for evaluation

Evaluative thinking helps build a foundation for evaluation. One of the key foundational elements is applying theory of change and logic models. This section introduces some practical concepts.

Theory of change and logic models

A logic model (or program logic) and theory of change both help to clarify the relationships between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Their names are often used interchangeably, but there are differences. Essentially, they provide a roadmap for understanding the connections between activities undertaken and how they contribute to a chain of results that lead to the intended or observed impacts.

Logic model

Logic models usually start with a program that illustrates its components, focusing on visually representing the relationship between resources, activities, outputs and outcomes. It is a simpler, often linear, representation of these program components that is more about detailing the operational aspects and how these components are linked. The key components typically include:

- inputs: resources and materials needed for the program
- activities: specific actions or interventions carried out
- outputs: immediate products or services resulting from the activities
- outcomes: short-term and intermediate changes or benefits resulting from the outputs.

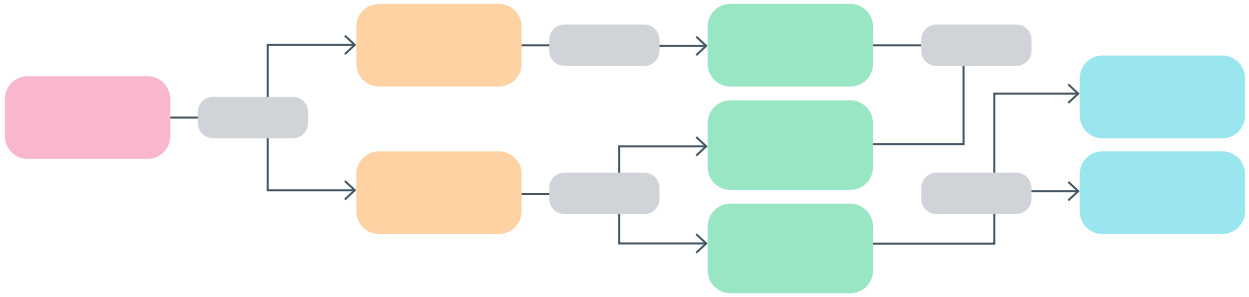
Logic models are great when you need to:

- show someone something that can be understand at a glance
- demonstrate you have identified the basic inputs, outputs and outcomes for your work
- summarise a complex theory into basic categories.

Theory of change

A theory of change is a comprehensive framework used to explain how and why a desired change is expected to happen within a particular context. It outlines the causal pathways and assumptions that explain how and why a program or intervention is expected to lead to desired long-term outcomes and impacts.

A theory of change is often visually represented in a diagram or flowchart that illustrates the causal pathways from activities to long-term goals. It's used for strategic planning, program development and evaluation, helping stakeholders understand and agree on how change will occur and what success looks like. It often has the same components as a logic model but adds more detail such as narrative descriptions and explanations of the underlying rationale and assumptions about expected change.



Theories of change are good to:

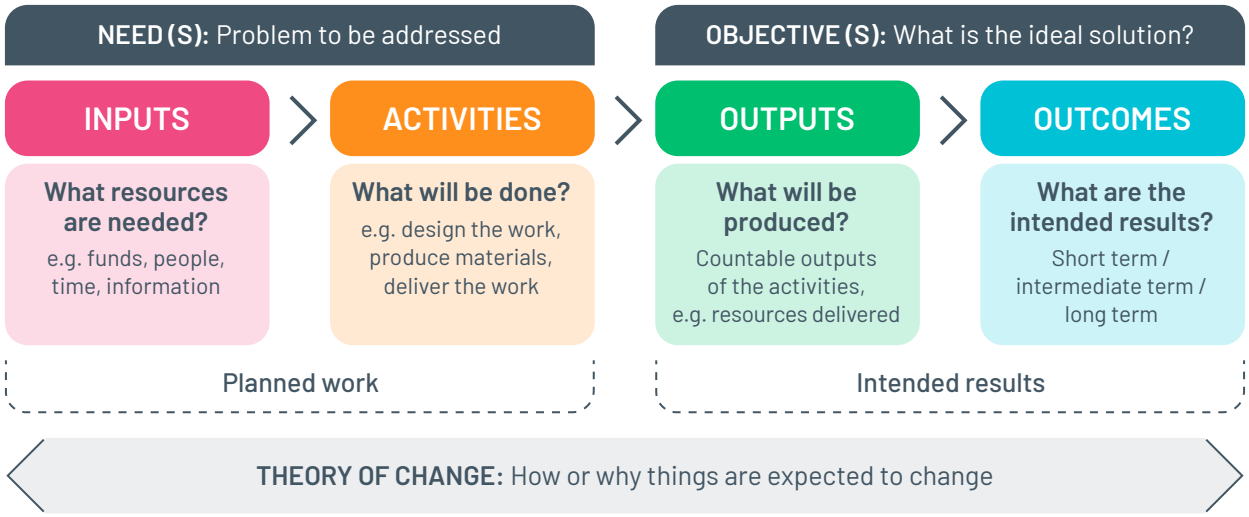
- design a complex initiative with a rigorous plan for success
- evaluate appropriate outcomes at the right time and in the right sequence
- map out the pathways of expected change for an initiative that can be assessed for what worked or did not work.

Both tools complement each other

In practice, both tools can complement each other. However, the name used for each tool is less important than the purpose for which the tool is being used. Combining a logic model and theory of change can provide a more comprehensive approach to planning, implementing and evaluating programs.

For demonstration purposes, this conceptual example shows how a simple logic model and theory of change can complement each other.

Logic model and theory of change – key components



More about evaluation

As introduced at the start of this paper, evaluation can be thought of as a systematic and objective process to assess merit or worth. There are many ways in which evaluations are used, for different purposes and contexts. The evaluation profession has developed systematic methods and approaches that can be used to inform judgments and decisions. Because making judgements and decisions is involved in everything people do, evaluation is important in every discipline, field, profession and sector, including government, business and the not-for-profit sector.[6] In this paper, we describe a practical and user-friendly approach to evaluation, applying evaluative thinking throughout. We have also provided a list of further references that you can explore with greater detail on a range of evaluation processes.

What are the types of evaluation?

Purpose

Evaluations may be used for different purposes, which can be broadly categorised as:

- formative evaluation — questions about the level of need, policy design and implementation/process improvements are usually best answered during early design and implementation/delivery
- summative evaluation — questions about program outcomes and impacts are usually best answered near or at the end of the policy or program (or after it has matured).

Types

There are many types of evaluation — before, during and after implementation. Examples include:

- needs analysis: analyses and prioritises needs to inform planning for an intervention
- ex-ante impact evaluation: predicts the likely impacts of an intervention to inform resource allocation
- process evaluation: examines the nature and quality of an intervention's implementation
- outcome and impact evaluation: examines the results of an intervention
- sustained and emerging impacts evaluation: examines the enduring impacts of an intervention sometime after it has ended
- value-for-money evaluation: examines the relationship between the cost of an intervention and the value of its positive and negative impacts
- syntheses of multiple evaluations: combines evidence from multiple evaluations.[7]

Monitoring and evaluation

When discussing evaluation, this involves discrete evaluations (at a point in time) and ongoing monitoring including:

- performance indicators and metrics
- integrated monitoring and evaluation systems.

6 https://www.eval.org/Portals/0/What%20is%20evaluation%20Document.pdf
7 https://www.betterevaluation.org/getting-started/what-evaluation

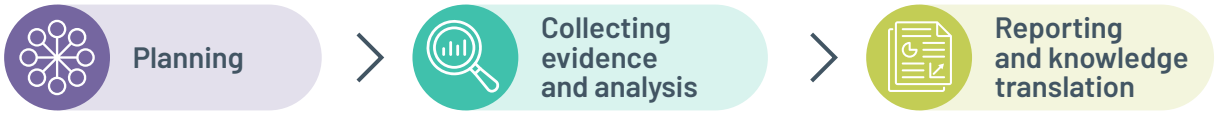
Fit-for-purpose evaluation

As described above, there are many concepts and approaches to consider in any evaluation. Selecting an approach and type of evaluation can be complicated. Our approach at Whereto is often to think about fit-for-purpose approaches informed by our underlying evaluative thinking principles. The Department of Treasury highlights the importance of a principles-based approach in its *Commonwealth evaluation toolkit*,[8] which underpins the selection of tools and approaches that are fit for purpose based on the specific program or activity and the purpose of the evaluation.

What type of evaluation is best depends on a combination of:

- the stage and maturity of the program or activity
- the issue or question being investigated
- what data or information is already available
- the timing of when evaluation findings are required to support continuous improvement, accountability or decision making.[9]

Stages to evaluation



The broad stages to conducting an evaluation listed here have been adapted from the evaluative stages developed by the Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE). ACE recognises that these stages are not mutually exclusive and may be adapted according to fit-for-purpose requirements.

One simple way to ensure that the evaluation remains fit for purpose throughout all 3 stages is to consistently ask the 'who, what, where, when and why' questions.

Planning

Understand context

Understand the operating context of an entity or organisation, where the program or activity fits in, and whether there are factors that need to be considered in deciding on an evaluation approach. For example:

- What is the purpose of the entity and objectives of the program/activity?
- What is important to the people involved, or clients of, the entity?
- What is the main purpose of the evaluation?
- Who is the audience for the evaluation?

8 https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/commonwealth-evaluation-toolkit
9 ref: https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/when-evaluate

Set evaluation objectives

There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Tailoring to meet your own needs and goals is important. This involves:

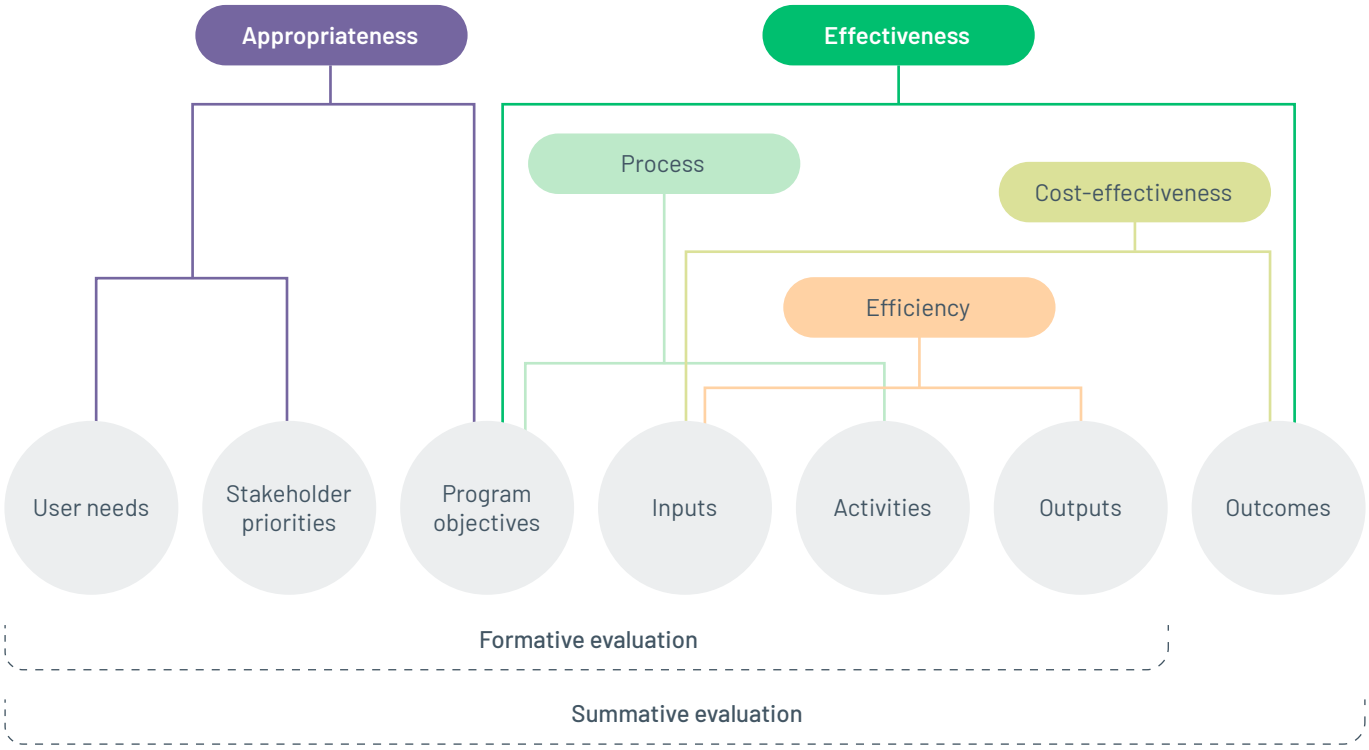
- defining what you want to evaluate and why
- understanding the goals and objectives of the evaluation
- considering the key stakeholders for the evaluation and how will they be engaged.

There is often merit in involving people in the early design thinking of evaluations through co-design or participatory approaches.

Dimensions of evaluation

Evaluations often assess the appropriateness, process (implementation), efficiency and/or effectiveness (including cost effectiveness) of a specific program, with each referring to specific stages of the evaluation process:

- appropriateness: evaluates whether a program is suitable for achieving intended objectives, meets the needs of users and fits with the context
- process: examines how a program is implemented, focusing on whether activities are carried out as planned and the quality of delivery
- efficiency: assesses whether inputs (think of these as the resources), including time, funds, materials and personnel, are used optimally to achieve program objectives
- effectiveness: measures the extent to which a program achieves its intended objectives and outcomes
- cost-effectiveness: analyses the relationship between financial inputs for the program and the outcomes achieved.[10]



10 https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/set-evaluation-objectives

Set scope and approach

Determining the scope and approach for the evaluation should identify aspects related to:

- the resources (finances, personnel, time) that will be allocated to do the evaluation
- the key evaluation questions that will be addressed (discussed further below)
- the fit-for-purpose evaluation design.

Developing evaluation questions

What are the questions to be addressed by an evaluation? What would you like to learn through the evaluation?

It is often good practice to develop evaluation questions collaboratively between evaluators and stakeholders.

Organising key evaluation questions under the dimensions (above) allows an assessment of the degree to which a particular program/activity is appropriate, effective and efficient and/or how it has been implemented in particular circumstances.

Evaluation plan

Developing an evaluation plan is a good way to bring together the purpose, scope and approach. This promotes transparency and accountability between all stakeholders involved in the evaluation. An evaluation plan may include an overview of the context, data sources, methodology, timeframes, the governance approach, ethical considerations, deliverables and any other important information from the planning phase.

Evaluation matrix

An evaluation matrix is a tool for organising evaluation questions and sub-questions and for developing plans for collecting the information needed to address them.

[example table]

	Stakeholder survey	Participant interviews	Program data	Literature review
KEQ1	✓	✓		✓
KEQ2	✓	✓	✓	✓
KEQ3		✓	✓	
KEQ4		✓	✓	

Collecting evidence and analysis

Determine evidence and data sources

There is an enormous amount of data that is collected and made available for a range of purposes. When deciding how to collect and analyse data for an evaluation, it is important to consider what information already exists. Also, be aware of legislation and governance arrangements designed to ensure its use is ethical, culturally appropriate and efficient and adheres to privacy principles. Some important considerations are:

- What are appropriate measures of success?
- Plan for what to measure, when and how to collect data, and from whom.
- How will you design or source your data/evidence collection tools?
- What methods are fit for purpose?

When collecting primary (new) data for an evaluation, mixed methods may involve quantitative and qualitative data collection:

Example quantitative collection	Example qualitative collection
• Outcomes measurement tools • Surveys with rating scales • Observation methods that count how many times something happened	• Interviews • Focus groups • Observation • Discussion boards • Participatory methods, e.g. story telling • Open-ended questions in a questionnaire

There are benefits to using a complementary mix of methods to gather evidence and data sources.

Cultural safety

Culturally safe evaluation aims to respect and uphold cultural values, practices and perspectives throughout the evaluation process. This approach goes beyond cultural awareness to take an active approach to ensure the evaluation process is culturally safe and inclusive and that all participants feel respected and valued regardless of culture. It is essential to ensure the evaluation is culturally appropriate and safe throughout all stages of the process — through design, data collection, stakeholder and user engagement, analysis, reporting and knowledge translation.

The Australian Evaluation Society's *First Nations cultural safety framework* provides foundational principles and practical guidance for conducting culturally safe evaluations involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It underscores the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision making at every stage of the evaluation while encouraging evaluators to engage in critical self-reflection and establish partnerships grounded in cultural accountability. Similarly, the Productivity Commission's *Indigenous evaluation strategy* promotes guiding principles of evaluations, with the overarching principle centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives, priorities and knowledge. This strategy acknowledges the strengths and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and advocates for evaluations that genuinely reflect and respect their values. It outlines the need for culturally appropriate methodologies and a commitment to data sovereignty, ensuring evaluations genuinely reflect the needs and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[11]

11 https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy

Ethical conduct in evaluation

Ethical conduct in evaluation is fundamental to ensuring evaluations are conducted with integrity, respect, transparency and accountability while also safeguarding participant rights through informed consent, maintaining privacy/confidentiality, avoiding harm and upholding cultural safety. Evaluations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have specific ethical considerations (refer to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for further detail).

Key resources on ethical conduct in evaluation in Australia include:

- NHMRC *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*
- Australasian Evaluation Society *Guidelines for the ethical conduct of evaluations*
- AIATSIS *Code of ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research*
- NHMRC *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities*.

Collect evidence and data

Effective data collection requires a fit-for-purpose approach that is targeted to the evaluation questions and avoids unnecessary data that could burden participants and resources. Ensuring data quality and reliability is fundamental to producing credible evaluation findings. This involves using rigorous and systematic collection methods, as well as ensuring collection and storage of data is ethical, culturally appropriate and properly governed.

Things to consider include:

- How will you collect credible data to answer your questions?
- How will you organise and store this information and ensure its quality?
- What is the best way to visualise the data?
- What will be the data collection timing?
  - Allow enough time for outcomes to be realised (depending on the type of evaluation you are undertaking).
  - Fit in with program activities.
  - Ensure your collection activities are not too burdensome on the respondents (choose a time and format that is convenient for them).

Analyse and interpret results

The analysis and interpretation of results should be robust, unbiased and anchored around the evaluation questions established by your evaluation plan.

The choice of analytical techniques and tools should align with the type, volume and complexity of the data collected, as well as the specific objectives of the evaluation. Using appropriate theoretical approaches and methods ensures the analysis is both systematic and suited to the evaluation context.

Triangulating multiple data sources, methods and results of the analysis to address an evaluation question is an important step in the final part of the analysis and interpretation process. By integrating diverse pieces of evidence, we can achieve a more comprehensive and reliable understanding and reduce the impact of potential biases from any single source.

Some valuable resources to guide analysis, such as:

- World Health Organization *Evaluation practice handbook*
- Better Evaluation — Analyse data.

Reporting and knowledge translation

Report findings

A critical step for turning your evaluation into meaningful information that supports continuous improvement, accountability and decision making is summarising and discussing the main findings.

The report findings should:

- answer the evaluation questions established during the planning phase
- identify any implementation challenges or limitations
- help decision makers understand whether the program or activity is on track and meeting its objectives.

Transparency in reporting requires evaluators to clearly document the methods, analytical approaches and any limitations encountered during the evaluation process to facilitate informed interpretations of the results.

An evaluation report typically makes constructive, actionable findings/recommendations and provides lessons learned to support continuous improvement. It is important that the report meets the needs of different and diverse stakeholder groups to have maximum impact and influence.

Design and disseminate

The way you design the reporting to present and share evaluation findings should be appropriate to the audience.

This usually takes the form of an evaluation report, but other products may also be needed to meet the needs of different stakeholders (for example, a plain English summary document, different language versions depending on the stakeholder cohort, or a short video or presentation for participants, staff or delivery partners).

Whenever possible, sharing summaries of results with participants and stakeholders enhances transparency, builds trust and allows those involved to reflect on the outcomes and implications of the evaluation.

Things to consider with evaluative thinking today ... to plan for tomorrow

While the practice of evaluation has a long history and has generally been regarded as more of an academic form of research, the practice is constantly evolving and adapting to be applied in many contexts for a range of purposes. Some of the core concepts and best practice approaches, as outlined above, stand the test of time and are applicable in many different ways. Evaluative thinking has always (and will continue to) underpinned the ways in which evaluation practice is conducted in today's world, as well as adapting to what is needed in tomorrow's world.

Areas that have emerged in recent times that we at Whereto consider to be important concepts for the ways in which we apply evaluative thinking are outlined below.

Understanding impact

The term 'impact' may be used in different ways for different purposes, as can the concept of an impact evaluation. 'Impacts' and 'outcomes' are terms that are often used interchangeably.

The ACE generally uses the term 'impact' to mean the average effect of a program or policy on the outcome or outcomes it was designed to influence. This requires a credible counterfactual to which robust comparison can be made to estimate the impact of the program on quantitative outcomes[12].

Questions about program impact are causal in nature — we are asking if the program caused a change in outcomes. Impact evaluation can include a broad range of approaches to assess causality, which may include:

- experimental design, such as randomised controlled trials
- quasi-experimental, such as regression discontinuity designs and difference-in-differences
- other theory-based approaches.

In fact, there are often combinations or mixed methods approaches used in impact evaluation.

Emerging trends in impact evaluation

The ACE is committed to developing impact evaluation evidence through conducting experimental and quasi-experimental designs and by introducing an Impact Evaluation Practitioners Network.

Impact evaluations using experimental or quasi-experimental designs have typically not been a common feature in the social policy landscape in Australia. There have been mixed perceptions about aspects such as the complexity, cost and ethics of the application in a social policy setting[13].

Considerations and challenges

Ethical considerations in impact evaluations

As the use of experimental designs increases, so does the attention to ethical implications, especially in contexts where withholding interventions may harm participants. Randomised controlled trials, by their nature and design, require a control group to receive no intervention or an alternative to that being tested. This raises ethical concerns if withholding an intervention could harm participants, particularly in a social policy space. Evaluations involving vulnerable groups (for example, children, low-income individuals or those with disabilities) requires added ethical scrutiny to prevent exploitation and to ensure their needs are prioritised.

12 Impact evaluation https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/impact-evaluation
13 https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/myth-busting-experimental-evaluations-with-virginia

Addressing these ethical considerations is essential for conducting responsible and respectful experimental evaluations. It ensures that research contributes positively to knowledge and practice while protecting the rights and welfare of participants.

Impacts versus outcomes

The distinction between outcomes and impacts is a key consideration in evaluation, and different perspectives exist on their definitions and significance.

A recent LinkedIn discussion prompted by the ACE explored various considerations, with a view to landing on a position about standard definitions for outcomes and impacts[14]. There are many and varied views about this, with 3 commonly cited positions:

- View 1: Impact evaluation is longer term and broader in scope than outcome evaluation (with the broader scope focused on system-wide impacts and/or broader changes to a person's wellbeing beyond the program itself).
- View 2: Impact evaluation is counterfactual-based, whereas outcome evaluation isn't always.
- View 3: Impact evaluation and outcome evaluation are essentially the same thing. (Or a softer version of this view is: Impact and outcome evaluation are often used interchangeably, so it is unhelpful to refer to them as being different from one another.)

While different perspectives may persist for some time to come, there is a general acceptance that the terminology is used interchangeably. However, it is important when using either outcomes or impacts in evaluations that the terminology is described or defined for clarity and transparency.

The *ACE evaluation toolkit* will be kept up to date to provide relevant definitions and guidance to the Australian evaluation community.

Participatory approaches to evaluation

Participatory evaluation is an approach that actively involves stakeholders (program participants, community members, staff) in the evaluation process. This approach emphasises the importance of collaboration and building trust, allowing those affected by a program to contribute to the evaluation design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. The goal is to create a more inclusive and contextually relevant understanding of a program's effectiveness. Some of the common features of a participatory evaluation approach, underpinned by evaluative thinking throughout, include:

- collaboration: stakeholders are involved throughout the evaluation process
- empowerment: it aims to empower participants by listening, learning and valuing their insights and experiences
- contextualisation: findings are more reflective of the community's needs and realities
- capacity building: participants often gain skills in evaluation methods, which can be beneficial for future initiatives
- reflection: it allows for ongoing reflection and adaptive learning from emerging insights and testing of concepts.

14 Williams E (2024). *A question for the die-hard evaluation theory lovers: Do you have standard definitions that you use for outcomes and impacts?* https://www.linkedin.com/posts/eleanor-williams-07065719_a-question-for-the-die-hard-evaluation-theory-lovers-activity-7247039268710166531-9uDg?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_ios.

Emerging trends in participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation has gained traction, particularly in the social policy and social services sectors. The increasing focus on equity, inclusion and social justice has made participatory methods more appealing, and much needed. It is also becoming more readily used in response to calls for greater transparency and accountability in program evaluation. There is a recognition that involving stakeholders from the outset leads to richer insights and more actionable recommendations. Importantly, it allows stakeholders to have a role in identifying the key objectives and intended outcomes that would make a meaningful difference to people's lives. This is a shift from the past, where program designers or policymakers may have made assumptions about what participant outcomes should be; there can sometimes be a disconnect with what participants may actually want to achieve. Its popularity is also growing in response to calls for greater transparency and accountability in program evaluation.

Considerations and challenges

In conducting participatory evaluation approaches, be mindful of the following:

- Time and resources: Participatory approaches take time, and this needs to be understood and respected. It is integral to building trust and collaboration.
- Facilitation of meaningful and safe engagement: It is not straightforward, peoples' experiences are different, sometimes involving trauma experiences, so user-centred and trauma-informed approaches are paramount.
- Reflection and feedback loops are important: Understanding the results of an evaluation is critically important to those who invest their time in the participatory process.
- Power dynamics: Effective participatory evaluation requires managing power dynamics, setting clear roles and maintaining open communication to ensure meaningful engagement.

User-centred design

User-centred design in evaluation focuses on involving end-users (program participants, stakeholders, community members) in the evaluation process to ensure the evaluation meets their needs and priorities.

User-centred design emphasises understanding the experiences, preferences and needs of users at every stage of the evaluation process. This approach aims to create evaluations that are relevant, accessible and actionable for those directly affected by the programs being evaluated. It involves many of the principles of good evaluative thinking and concepts of participatory evaluation including the following:

- Involvement of users: Actively engaging users in the design, implementation and interpretation of evaluations ensures their perspectives shape the process.
- Iterative process: User-centred design is typically iterative, involving cycles of feedback and refinement based on user input. This helps to continuously improve the evaluation design.
- Empathy and understanding: A strong emphasis on understanding users' contexts, challenges and experiences leads to more meaningful evaluations.
- Trauma-informed evaluation approaches: These help to understand the potential impact of trauma, enhance participant safety, build trusted relationships, empower participants and respect individual experiences and diverse needs.

Relational evaluation considerations

Traditional approaches to evaluation in years gone by have been somewhat transactional, whereby the commissioning of evaluations tend to be a one-off exchange to complete a set of predefined evaluation activities. However, the evolving landscape is requiring a greater emphasis on the relational aspects, which need to consider the relationship dynamics between not only those funding and conducting evaluations but all those who play a role in the populations or communities in which programs or policies are aiming to support.

Relational evaluation typically refers to assessing relationships, which involves examining and understanding how different entities (individuals, groups, organisations) interact with each other. Relational evaluation approaches might focus on the dynamics of partnerships, community relationships or collaborative efforts, considering factors like communication, trust, power dynamics and mutual benefits.

Participatory evaluation approaches (discussed above) foster a relational approach by emphasising collaboration and engagement among stakeholders throughout the evaluation process.

Emerging trends in relational evaluation

Current trends in relational evaluation reflect a growing recognition of the importance of relationships in various contexts such as social programs, community initiatives and organisational settings. Important elements include the following:

- Emphasis on equity and inclusion: There's an increasing focus on ensuring diverse voices are represented in the evaluation process, especially those of marginalised or underrepresented groups. This trend aligns with participatory evaluation principles and aims to address power imbalances.
- Network and systems approaches: Evaluators are increasingly using network analysis and systems thinking to understand complex interrelationships among stakeholders. This helps in assessing how these relationships influence program outcomes and sustainability.
- Real-time and adaptive evaluation: Many evaluations are moving towards real-time feedback mechanisms, allowing stakeholders to adjust programs and strategies based on ongoing assessment. This emphasises responsiveness to relational dynamics as they evolve.
- Focus on relational data: There's a growing interest in collecting qualitative data that captures the nuances of relationships such as trust, communication and collaboration. Techniques like storytelling and ethnographic methods are being employed to provide richer insights.
- Technology integration: Using digital tools and platforms for data collection, analysis and stakeholder engagement is on the rise. These technologies can facilitate more dynamic and interactive evaluations, making relational assessment more accessible.
- Capacity building: This is about focusing not just on evaluating relationships but also building the capacity of stakeholders to understand and improve their own relational dynamics. Training and workshops are often part of the evaluation process to enhance skills and knowledge.
- Cross-sector collaboration: Evaluations are increasingly recognising the importance of collaboration across different sectors (public, private, nonprofit), emphasising how these intersectoral relationships affect outcomes.

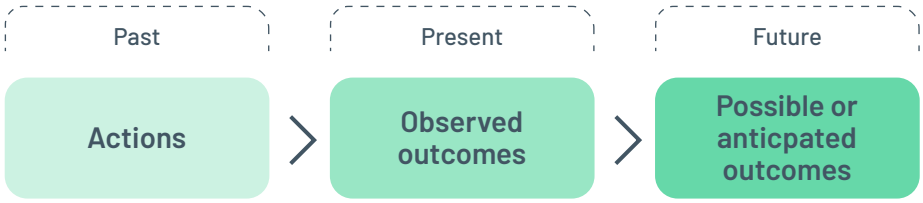
Considerations and challenges

There are also challenges to be considered in a relational evaluation approach. These include the following:

- Complexity of relationships: Relationships can be intricate and multifaceted, making it difficult to assess their quality and impact accurately.
- Balancing power dynamics: Addressing power imbalances among stakeholders is crucial for a successful evaluation, but it can be difficult. If some voices dominate the process, the evaluation may not fully capture the relational dynamics at play.
- Stakeholder engagement: Ensuring meaningful participation from all relevant stakeholders can be challenging. Differences in interest, power and capacity among stakeholders may lead to uneven engagement, potentially skewing results.
- Time and resource-intensiveness: Relational evaluation can require significant time and resources for data collection. Gathering relational data can be complex, particularly when using methods like network analysis or participatory techniques.
- Cultural context: Different cultural backgrounds may influence how relationships are formed and understood. Evaluators must be culturally competent and sensitive to these differences to ensure their assessments are valid and respectful.

Anticipating the future

Moving from transactional evaluations that have typically focused on determining 'what caused what' in the past, the concept of anticipatory evaluation moves beyond 'what worked' to 'what next', from activity-outcome links in the past to scenario-action possibilities in the future[15]. Anticipatory evaluation thinking is more forward looking, which starts with the end in mind, thinking about anticipated outcomes and drawing on imagination about the future. From there, back casting can help focus analysis, inspire more radical action and complement scenario planning. Causal analysis is a means for making connections to anticipated outcomes, and causal mapping allows researchers to visualise complex, interconnected narratives[16].



15 Copesake J (2024). *What next? From evaluating to anticipating.* [Conference plenary] AES Conference 2024, Melbourne, Australia
16 Powell S, Copestake J, Remnant F (2024). Causal mapping for evaluators. *Evaluation,* 30(1), 100–119. https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890231196601

Top tips to evaluative thinking

Everyone can be an evaluative thinker; it's a mindset that fosters curiosity, critical thinking and learning from evidence about what works (and what doesn't) and where improvements may be needed.

Our top tips to implement evaluative thinking leading to successful evaluation activities are:

- Evaluative thinking is for everyone, not just evaluators. With the right foundational understanding, anyone can do it. Everyone plays a role, thinking evaluatively for themselves and contributing to a culture of evaluative thinking.
- R-E-F-L-E-C-T: Adopt these core principles to support a strong foundation for evaluative thinking.
- Plan the foundations for evaluation from the outset with clear objectives, logic modelling and theory of change.
- Maintain a user-centred focus. This is incredibly important and can be embedded in each of the R-E-F-L-E-C-T principles.
- Enjoy the ride. Evaluative thinking is not scary but quite the opposite. It can be fun and incredibly rewarding.

Useful resources

Useful evaluation tools and templates

Australian Evaluation Society Evaluation resources: https://www.aes.asn.au/evaluation-resources

Australian Centre for Evaluation templates, tools and resources: https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/templates-tools-and-resources

Better evaluation tools and resources: https://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources

Australian Institute of Family Studies resources: https://aifs.gov.au/resources

American Evaluation Association – what is evaluation? https://www.eval.org/Portals/0/What%20is%20evaluation%20Document.pdf

Logic models and theory of change

Australian Centre for Evaluation theory of change and program logic templates: https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/templates-tools-and-resources

Australian Institute of Family Studies How to develop a program logic for planning and evaluation | Australian Institute of Family Studies (aifs.gov.au)

Australian Institute of Family Studies – what is a theory of change https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/what-theory-change

Better evaluation – W.K. Kellogg Foundation logic model guide https://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-guide

Better evaluation – describe the theory of change https://www.betterevaluation.org/frameworks-guides/managers-guide-evaluation/scope-evaluation/describe-theory-change

Better evaluation – develop theory of change / programme theory https://www.betterevaluation.org/frameworks-guides/rainbow-framework/define/develop-programme-theory-theory-change

Better evaluation – theory of change software https://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/theory-change-software

Theories of Change and Logic Models: Telling Them Apart https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/TOCs_and_Logic_Models_forAEA.pdf

University of Wisconsin-Madison Creating a Logic Model https://logicmodel.extension.wisc.edu/introduction-overview/section-5-how-do-i-draw-a-logic-model/5-6-creating-a-logic-model-for-a-new-program/

Impact evaluation

Australian Centre for Evaluation – impact evaluation https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/impact-evaluation

Paul Ramsay Foundation – Myth busting experimental evaluations https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/myth-busting-experimental-evaluations-with-virginia