

# Promoting evaluation culture

## The development and implementation of an evaluation strategy in the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts

This article describes the development and implementation of a comprehensive Program Evaluation Strategy by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA). It discusses the key stages adopted in this change management strategy by drawing upon characterisations of effective innovations.

The Program Evaluation Strategy adopted by DETA was based on a change management model rather than a compliance approach. The evaluation strategy incorporated a number of elements: the overall strategy, an evaluation manual providing supporting materials and templates, evaluation training for staff, and specific provision of advice and assistance in evaluation. The article argues that this multifaceted approach has fostered an evaluative culture within the agency and been critical in supporting the influence and use of evaluation.

### Introduction

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) adopted a comprehensive Program Evaluation Strategy in August 2005. The strategy is part of the agency's corporate governance framework and outlines the requirements for the planning, conducting and reporting of program evaluations. Evaluation of large-scale education policy initiatives and reforms is coordinated by DETA's research area—Strategic Research, Strategic Policy and Performance. The primary responsibility for managing the program evaluation strategy lies with the Governance, Strategy and Planning Branch (GSP), which also has responsibility for the agency's Annual Report, the Ministerial Portfolio Statement (budget statements), Corporate Business Reporting and the Strategic Plan.

The aim of the Program Evaluation Strategy is to deliver a robust and inclusive evaluation framework based on a rolling three-year schedule. The strategy includes supporting documentation, advisory and governance mechanisms, and an integrated evaluation-training package. The governance arrangements and communication strategy ensure that all staff are aware of the need for program evaluation as an integral part of project management. This article will focus on evaluation of major programs and discuss the various approaches that have been used to increase the knowledge available to DETA to enhance policy design and program delivery.

**John Hanwright**

**Sharnie Makinson**



*John Hanwright is Manager Performance Reviews in the Performance Systems Audits division of the Queensland Audit Office, Brisbane. Email: <john.hanwright@qao.qld.gov.au>*

*Sharnie Makinson is a Principal Policy Officer in the Governance, Strategy and Planning Branch of the Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Queensland. Email: <Sharnie.Makinson@deta.qld.gov.au>*

The development of an evaluation strategy within and across any organisation or agency requires organisational change. Establishing a culture of evaluation through a comprehensive strategy requires an assessment of the existing characteristics of the organisation, acceptance by the staff, and the utility of the strategy in informing work practices and outcomes.

### The strategy as an innovation

The work undertaken to establish the strategy and promote a culture of evaluation among staff can be discussed with reference to the key characteristics of an innovation. Rogers (2003) identified five important characteristics to consider and understand when reflecting on an innovation. These are: relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability and complexity. Although a number of frameworks may be appropriate to review the development and implementation of the DETA Program Evaluation Strategy, the characteristics developed by Rogers align closely with both the stages in the development process and the order in which they occurred within DETA. The core elements of Rogers' framework are outlined briefly below:

- *Relative advantage* is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being better than the idea it supersedes. Rogers stressed that this is often described in economic profitability, but also includes savings in time, effort and improved program delivery.
- *Compatibility* is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with an organisation's existing values, past experiences and the needs of clients. Rogers found that if the innovation is inconsistent with the existing social system it will not be adopted as rapidly.
- *Trialability* is the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. Rogers tells us that new ideas that can be tried out first will be adopted more rapidly.
- *Observability* is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. Rogers found innovations that had observable results that could be communicated were more likely to be accepted.
- *Complexity* is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as relatively difficult to understand and use. Rogers suggest that the complexity of innovation, as perceived by the members of a social system, is negatively related to its rate of adoption.

### Characteristics of the DETA Program Evaluation Strategy

The first stage of development of the DETA Program Evaluation Strategy can be discussed with reference to the first of Rogers' innovation characteristics—'relative advantage'. In 2004, a discussion paper was written for the Executive Management Team (EMT), the key audience for major program evaluations. This paper identified the specific benefits to the agency of adopting a systemic approach to program evaluation:

- better information to support program decision-making
- greater capacity to evaluate the merit, cost-effectiveness and cost capacity of programs
- delivery of programs that are relevant and focused on delivery of outcomes to the community
- increased capability to reprioritise in a climate of static funding
- production of data to verify results that can be used for public relations and promoting services.

The discussion paper also addressed Rogers' second key characteristic of 'compatibility'. The paper described proposed evaluation processes in terms of their alignment with existing agency values and systems. Generally staff across the agency are seen to be committed to delivering the highest quality services and products to Queensland's students. Staff in the education arm of the agency, in particular, also have a strong need for recognition of the value of their work, which is often long-term with more diffuse outcomes, which are challenging to measure. The EMT decided to promote a participative approach to evaluation, as that was most likely to align with existing agency values and meet the needs of program/project staff.

In 2005, the agency developed a Program Evaluation Strategy and an annual rolling Program Evaluation Schedule based on the following evaluation principles:

- *Utility*: Evaluations should be informative, timely and influential. They must provide the agency with practical information that is capable of informing decision-making about the impact of particular programs. Evaluation of agency programs is fundamentally an improvement process.
- *A focus on clients and outcomes*: The focus of evaluations is to assess the impact of programs for clients rather than act as an accountability process to evaluate the performance of program staff.

- *Feasibility*: The practical aspects of conducting the evaluation must be considered in the planning phase. Feasibility requirements ensure that evaluations are able to identify and collect the necessary data to produce meaningful findings and recommendations.
- *Participation*: Multidisciplinary teams reporting to the program manager will conduct most program evaluations, assisted by external resources where appropriate. Teams will include program staff, appropriate representatives from across the agency and external members if required.
- *Capacity building*: Acquisition and building of internal evaluation skills and ways of thinking will have a longer term positive impact for the agency as opposed to using external evaluation sources. Ownership of the evaluation by program staff ensures that it becomes a reflective learning process where findings lead to improved service delivery and outcomes for clients.
- *Propriety*: The rights of the people influenced by the program must be protected throughout the evaluation. All agency evaluations will take into account legal and ethical issues, including the welfare of program participants and those affected by the evaluation results.
- *Fair and balanced*: Agency evaluations are complete, fair and balanced in their presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of the program being evaluated, so that the strengths can be built on and weaknesses addressed.
- *Accuracy*: Agency evaluations produce valid and reliable corporate knowledge. Careful data management ensures that the key evaluation issues are addressed and that information gathered is technically sound with evidence-based recommendations stemming from sound data analysis and interpretation.

In late 2005, the agency began the next stage of implementation, which can be discussed using Rogers' third and fourth key characteristics of 'trialability' and 'observability'. DETA selected a small group of discreet but highly visible programs to trial the evaluation process. This enabled the GSP branch to work closely in supporting evaluation teams and observe the process in order to identify what additional structures, processes and materials were needed to support staff undertaking evaluations. By doing this, we have been able to develop 'champions' across the agency who share with colleagues in their immediate work units the value of evaluation. As a result, whole work units now incorporate evaluation into the planning of new major projects from their inception.

To understand the various elements of this innovation, Rogers' last key characteristic of 'complexity' can be used to discuss the development of supporting documentation and processes. These materials and processes are important to allay staff fears and anxieties about the challenges involved in conducting an evaluation and to support good practice.

### Managing the change process

As part of the change management process, the following six key activities have been undertaken. First, a Program Evaluation Strategy document was published which outlined the purpose, scope and objectives of the strategy including the key deliverables and performance indicators. The document detailed why evaluation is important, the benefits of program evaluation, the elements of a quality evaluation, and the principles of good evaluation.

Second, a Program Evaluation Manual was developed that includes information to guide staff through the stages of an evaluation and a range of simple templates for completing an evaluation proposal, plan, and report; and the terms of reference for the development of an evaluation governance committee. Patton (1997) argued that the clear identification of the primary intended users of the evaluation is critical to ensure a utilisation-focused approach. The development of the templates and governance process ensures that each program team can identify the main audience for the evaluation, and make sure that the information needs of the primary evaluation users are addressed in the final evaluation report. In most cases for the large programs, the primary evaluation audience and users are the EMT.

Acting on staff and management feedback, the GSP Branch has since also developed a number of attachments to the manual on topics such as: 'Developing evaluation questions', 'Developing performance measures', and 'Engaging an external evaluation contractor/consultant'. These additional materials have proven valuable to staff because they are brief and succinct and provide key advice about critical topics related to evaluation.

Third, the GSP Branch implemented a rolling program evaluation schedule that identified programs to be evaluated over the coming three financial years.

Fourth, the agency designed and implemented a logic model process with associated user-friendly templates. Program logic was promoted as part of the agency's program evaluation framework to identify critical program issues, inputs, activities, outputs and three levels of outcomes

(short-, medium and long-term). A second stage of the logic model was also designed to identify performance measures and data sources for each of the outputs and three levels of outcomes. This enabled evaluation teams to clearly identify program measures of success and the availability and reliability of data sources that can be used to answer core evaluation questions.

The introduction of the model reduced staff perception that program evaluation was too complex and time-consuming to be integrated into their core program activities. The model and associated templates provided staff with an effective but simple program planning and evaluation tool that analysed the various program components by breaking them down into smaller, measurable parts, thus reducing the anxiety about evaluation, and providing them with an effective program accountability system. Anxiety about evaluation is often based on a lack of evaluation capacity and knowledge, so that when confronted with an evaluation, staff attempt to evaluate a whole program and lose focus on the key components of the program that require evaluation.

Wandersman et al. (2000) described the framework and implementation of a program accountability system in a statewide initiative—South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness. The framework was titled ‘Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (PIE)’. It incorporated program logic and the evaluation included 10 key questions about a program:

- What are the underlying needs and conditions that need to be addressed?
- What are the goals, target population and objectives?
- What science- or evidence-based models and best-practice programs can be useful in reaching the goals?
- How will the program fit with existing programs already being offered, the organisation’s mission and community values?
- What organisational capacities/resources are needed to implement this program?
- What is the plan for the program?
- How will the program be implemented with quality?
- How well did the program work?
- How will continuous quality improvement strategies be incorporated?
- If the program is successful, how will it be sustained?

Effectively, these types of questions are those asked when the design of a program logic model is developed through a workshop process.

Once the program logic was accepted throughout the agency for the purposes of evaluation, staff started seeing the benefits of using it for program planning and to inform program implementation. They became comfortable building formative and summative evaluation stages into program management from inception. The GSP Branch even started receiving requests to workshop business-planning sessions using the logic model process.

Fifth, the GSP Branch developed and conducts regular two-day evaluation training workshops facilitated by a highly regarded evaluation consultant. We have received extremely positive participant feedback about these workshops. There is now widespread recognition across the agency of the value of attending evaluation training.

Sixth, the branch held lunchtime evaluation forums to encourage skill development in evaluation. These forums are well attended and involve engaging internal and external presenters with expertise in evaluation to speak on a range of topics related to evaluation. In addition to these formal forums, the development of an informal evaluation learning community enables staff across the agency to share evaluation experiences and learning.

### **Organisational features that contributed to the acceptability of the strategy**

The GSP Branch faced two key challenges in 2005. First, the branch proposed the development of an Evaluation Steering Committee (ESC). However, this was not endorsed initially by the EMT because it was considered to be a distraction to the delivery of core business by senior managers. The branch considered it important to establish this committee at this early stage in the implementation of the strategy for several reasons:

- to improve the level of commitment to evaluation across the agency
- to ensure that program evaluations were well organised
- to provide an opportunity for evaluation findings to be shared across the agency.

We saw the ESC’s primary function as overseeing the implementation of the strategy and providing advice where necessary to staff conducting evaluations.

Another of the proposed ESC roles was to ensure that effective governance committees were established for internal evaluations with adequate

external representation from other agencies and from stakeholder groups. This was considered critical to avoid internal evaluations becoming too introspective or captured by the culture within the agency.

Second, there was a strong commitment from the CEO to build evaluation capability within the organisation rather than creating an evaluation ‘branch’ where the evaluation skills and knowledge experts would carry out independent evaluations of programs outside the service delivery area. We agreed with the CEO’s view because our research and experience indicated that internal evaluators find it very difficult to drive cultural change where agency staff are not required to participate in the evaluation process. The GSP Branch chose to position itself as facilitator and consultant to support managers and staff to manage their own evaluations rather than attempt to conduct an independent process.

The CEO also held the strong view that the results of evaluations had to be useful. This had positive cultural implications for the agency. The agency had some experience with external evaluations that had failed to meet the needs of the agency. There was a strong perception within the agency that external evaluators had been brought in to review not only the program but also the performance of the program team itself. Therefore, cooperation from staff in these evaluations was minimal. This is not uncommon. Owen (1999) suggested that project managers, staff and even clients may perceive external evaluators as a threat.

Given the success of the implementation of the strategy across 2005–2006, the branch has continued to take a collaborative, supportive change management approach to further develop the strategy. This has involved engagement with a broader range of staff across the agency, building relationships and offering evaluation support services. This approach has resulted in a significant increase in requests from staff across the agency for assistance with program and strategy evaluations.

Demand for advice related to evaluation has also increased across the agency. Thus, in July 2006 the ESC committee that was originally proposed in August 2005 was endorsed after a significant external evaluation report was rejected by the EMT as unsatisfactory. The ESC consists of senior staff members from across the agency. The EMT endorsed the ESC’s operation according to the following six general principles:

- evaluation activities undertaken by the agency are of high *quality*
- evaluation resources are focused on identified areas of strategic *priority*

- evaluation *capability* of agency staff is *nurtured and shared*
- *future planning* is *informed by evaluation findings*
- the agency maximises its *investment* in educational and cultural programs
- program key performance indicators are *aligned* with program outcomes.

The ESC meets three times per year to review evaluation proposals, monitor progress of evaluations and review the final reports prior to them being submitted to the EMT. The committee meetings exhibit robust discussion and show a considerable level of commitment.

Towards the end of 2006, the branch conducted three focus groups to seek feedback from staff about the progress of the evaluation strategy and to identify potential improvements. The feedback from these groups has been incorporated into planning further activities to support the evaluation strategy and to continue to build the agency’s internal evaluation capacity. The following four questions were asked of each group:

- 1 Having been to the evaluation workshop training, what skills from that training did you find most useful? What other areas would you like included in the training?
- 2 What support from the GSP Branch have you found most useful? What other types of evaluation support from the GSP Branch would be useful?
- 3 Have you had the opportunity to utilise the skills from the training? If not, why not? If you have, what type of skills did you find most useful?
- 4 In your opinion, what type of attitude do staff have towards program-level evaluation, and why? In your opinion, has this attitude changed as a result of the introduction of the Program Evaluation Strategy and if so, why?

In summary, the feedback indicated that the logic model framework and the Program Evaluation Manual templates had been very effective in allaying staff anxiety about evaluation, because they provided a valuable information guide together with effective user-friendly tools. In addition, there is now evidence that evaluation is becoming embedded at the program and middle-manager levels, but some resistance remains at the Director/Senior Manager level in relation to the time required to build evaluation into program planning. The focus groups have yielded valuable information that has been now been incorporated into planning the next phase of the strategy.

## Conclusion

In implementing an evaluation strategy for the Department of Education, Training and the Arts we have adopted a change management rather than a compliance model.

The model aims to boost the evaluation planning and management skills of internal agency staff, but at the same time, encourage staff to acknowledge where external skills need to be engaged to manage key components of an evaluation; for example, survey design, analysis and interpretation of complex datasets.

There is strong evidence of growth in evaluative culture within DETA. Managers and program staff are initiating evaluations and requesting support to use the agency's approved processes, structures and materials to undertake enquiries into issues of strategic importance to the agency. Although there is still more work to be done to be confident that managers and senior executives have as complete as possible an understanding of the ultimate effects and outcomes of major public policy initiatives, the evaluations currently underway have considerable potential.

The use of Rogers' characteristics of relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability and complexity shows that the development of evaluation capacity in DETA involved more than just training. These characteristics have proved useful in describing what became not just a capacity-building exercise but also a cultural change: a change from 'evaluation is too hard' to 'evaluation is how things are done here'. If the strategy had not considered the social change required to make it a success then it was likely to go the same way as other strategies—on the bookcase gathering dust.

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