



The State of Evaluation in Australia

A study of current evaluation volume, drivers, approaches, and trends in Australia

Australian Evaluation Society | March 2023



Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands in which we conduct our business. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. We are committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

State of Evaluation

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About the State of Evaluation

The Australian Evaluation Society (AES) is pleased to share this piece of research about the evaluation field. The study was originally conceived as a way of better understanding the promise and practice of evaluation across Australia.

This project was led by the AES Relationships Committee, drawing on support and input from many AES members, including a dedicated State of Evaluation working group. KPMG is acknowledged for its contribution to the project. The data collection was completed in mid-2022.

This being the first study of its kind in Australia, it is likely to be repeated periodically. The AES Board recognise the report as a starting point for further exploration and discussion. Any interesting and emerging trends may be further or more deeply investigated. In the meantime, the report findings are helpful for the AES in setting its strategic directions beyond 2023 and in tailoring support for members who work in the evolving field of evaluation.

Broadly, the study findings suggest that evaluation will continue to play a significant role in policy development and refinement, with a particular focus on helping to understand complex datasets and service outcomes. Organisations will continue to build their internal capacity in evaluation, recognising culturally-safe evaluation being essential. The ambition of developing a 'culture of evaluation', including among staff who do not play traditional evaluation roles is encouraged.

Doing evaluation well is critical to supporting all phases of the policy cycle, including planning, implementation, and review. Good policies and programs are not possible without a focus on learning and continuous improvement. Evaluation needs to be built-in from the start, not bolted-on at the conclusion of programs.

While recognising the limited scope of the study, the AES is happy to share this report. It is hoped that members and other readers can better understand their position in the field and the critical role they play in delivering public outcomes that benefit those in greatest need.

For evaluators reading this report, you are encouraged to continue developing and sharing your knowledge and skills in areas of the field where you feel best suited. In doing so, keep an eye on the trends flagged in the study. We hope you enjoy reading this report and contributing to further discussion about the state of evaluation in Australia.

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Kiri Parata, President

on behalf of the AES Board

Executive Summary

Purpose

Various reviews have identified the need to build an evaluation culture across government and other sectors. This prompted the Australian Evaluation Society (AES) to undertake a study, via the AES Relationships Committee, into the ‘state of evaluation’ in Australia. This first-of-its-kind study aimed to:

- Generate an evidence-based report regarding the practice of evaluation across Australia; and
- Better understand the perception of evaluation among those who commission or use evaluation.

This study also aims to support the AES in its conversations about the role and value of evaluation, with a focus on how evaluation practice can be further developed.

Scope and methods

The study considered four key focus areas regarding the practice of evaluation in Australia: volume; drivers; approaches; and trends. The study did not specifically consider the quality of evaluations, nor their effectiveness and impact, though stakeholders raised these issues naturally in conversation. This report does not reflect several evolving directions that are not yet settled, such as the suggested creation of a national Evaluator-General function.

The study involved a desktop review, a survey of AES members, and targeted consultation with a variety of organisations from different sectors.

Key findings

The key findings of the study in each of the four focus areas are summarised below.

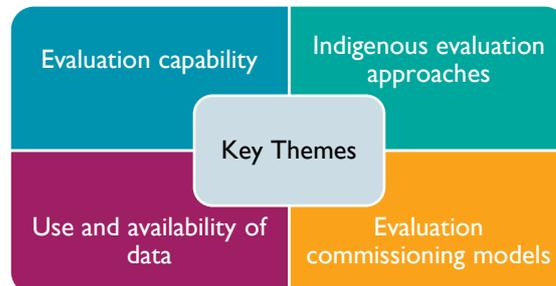
<p>1. Evaluation Volume</p>	<p>1.1 It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the volume of evaluations being commissioned by governments and other organisations across Australia. The limited data available suggests evaluations are commissioned across a range of sectors, departments and levels of governments.</p> <p>1.2 As not all commissioned evaluations can be identified, it is not possible to accurately assess evaluation volumes through such sources, with the available data likely to substantially under-estimate evaluation volumes.</p>
<p>2. Evaluation Drivers</p>	<p>2.1 Survey responses suggested that assessing impact and informing continuous improvements are the key reasons for evaluations to be conducted, followed by ensuring accountability and supporting funding decisions. Stakeholders reported that evaluation helps to assess whether programs are meeting their policy intent.</p> <p>2.2 Study participants reflected both pressure and scrutiny on organisations to meet community needs and to demonstrate the effective use of resources, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>2.3 Data, capability and organisational culture were highlighted as key enablers of evaluation practice.</p> <p>2.4 Barriers to evaluation included a lack of funding, capability, data availability and analytical skills, which could impact the timing, design, and utility of evaluation findings.</p>

<p>3. Evaluation Approaches</p>	<p>3.1 Non-experimental approaches, such as theory-based methods, are dominant in Australian evaluation practice, with experimental designs relatively uncommon. Co-design, developmental and systems evaluations are also frequently used approaches. Study participants felt that approaches and methods were largely driven by the evaluation purpose and data availability.</p> <p>3.2 Stakeholders observed an increase in the use of, and demand for, ‘rapid’ evaluations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>3.3 Evaluations are conducted through both internal evaluation units and externally commissioned evaluators, with a trend toward organisations building their internal evaluation team capability and capacity.</p>
<p>4. Evaluation Trends</p>	<p>4.1 The most commonly referenced current or anticipated future trends for evaluation were to build evaluation capability, work with big datasets and linked datasets, to advance Indigenous evaluation approaches, and to change evaluation commissioning models. These trends are discussed further below.</p>

Discussion of evaluation trends

The key trends in evaluation practice in Australia warrant further explanation:

- **Evaluation capability** influences the evaluation designs and approaches selected, as well as evaluation commissioning decisions. Some stakeholders referenced recent debates about professionalisation of evaluation in Australia¹.
- **Data** trends include improving the accessibility of, and ability to use, ‘big’ data, potentially based on improved digital technologies which may improve the timeliness of evaluation reporting.
- **Indigenous evaluation approaches** and Indigenous-led evaluation were recognised by study participants as essential to ensure culturally safe evaluation.
- **Evaluation commissioning models** are changing, with many organisations seeking to invest in their internal capability and capacity to conduct evaluations, rather than outsourcing evaluation activity. While organisations differed in their ability to meet the levels of demand for evaluation internally, many were working towards scaling their internal capability and capacity.



Next steps

This study is the first of its kind in Australia. It may serve as a first review of further issues that could be targeted in follow-up targeted studies of this nature. It sets the scene for robust discussion among the evaluation and policy community. In particular, it calls for continuation to evaluation capability and capacity building at individual, organisational and evaluation-sector levels.

¹ For an example of a recent report on this topic, see G Peersman & P Rogers (2017), Pathways to advance professionalisation within the context of the Australasian Evaluation Society, Melbourne: ANZSOG/BetterEvaluation.

I. Introduction

I.1 Background to the study

The Australian Evaluation Society (AES) is a member-based organisation that exists to improve the theory, practice and use of evaluation for evaluation practitioners, managers, teachers, students and other interested individuals. The AES led a study into the ‘state of evaluation’ in Australia. The purpose of the *State of Evaluation* study was two-fold:

- 1 To generate an evidence-based report regarding the practice of evaluation across Australia.
- 2 To better understand the perception of evaluation among those who commission or use evaluation outputs.

A further intent was for the study to assist the AES when having conversations about the role and value of evaluation in Australia, with a focus on how evaluation practice can be further developed.

The study was led by the AES Relationship Committee. Emerging findings were presented at the 2022 AES International Evaluation Conference. This report reflects the final findings of the study.

I.2 Focus of the study

The study considered four focus areas to understand evaluation practice in Australia: volume, drivers, approaches and trends. There were several issues that, while relevant, were out of scope, including: the quality of evaluations delivered in Australia; the effectiveness and impact of evaluations; or comparison of Australia’s evaluation practice to other countries. This report does not reflect several evolving directions that are not yet settled, such as the suggested creation of a national Evaluator-General function.

Each of the four focus areas were oriented around several sub-questions, as shown in Table I.

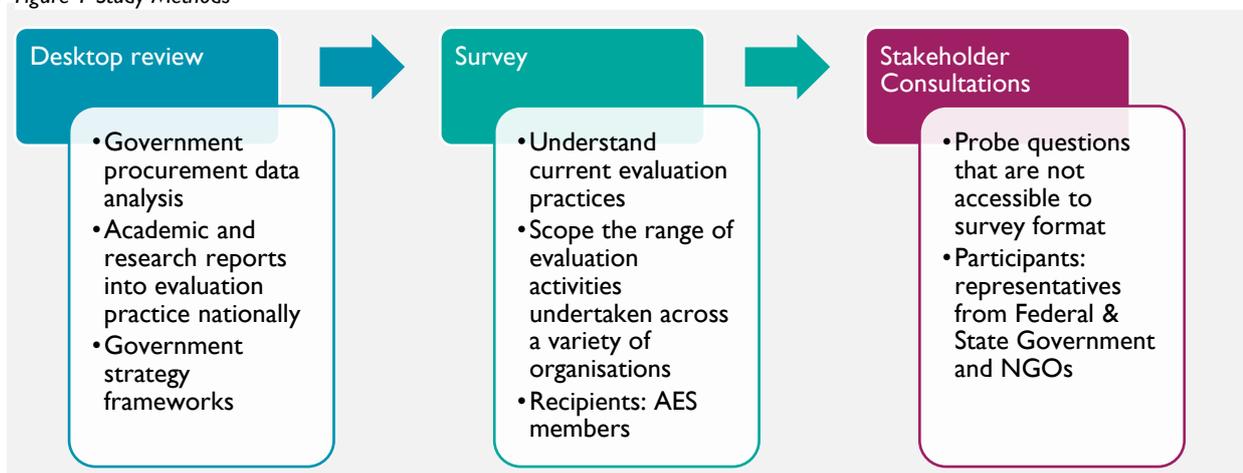
Table I Key questions

Focus area	Key questions
1. Evaluation volume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many evaluations are occurring across Australia annually? • How frequently are organisations evaluating? • How much money do organisations spend on evaluation?
2. Evaluation drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are evaluations commissioned? • What are the barriers and enablers to evaluation? • When are evaluators engaged?
3. Evaluation approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What evaluation approaches are used in Australia? • What share of evaluations are conducted internally versus externally?
4. Evaluation trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What capabilities are most valuable to organisations when evaluating? • Where is evaluation practice heading in Australia?

1.3 Method for the study

Three key methods of data collection and analysis were used: desktop analysis; a survey of AES members; and stakeholder consultations, as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Study Methods



Desktop Review

The study commenced with a desktop review and literature scan of policy papers and reviews of evaluation practice in Australia, including a review of publicly available evaluation tenders and contract information. This revealed a noticeable gap in academic and peer reviewed papers on this topic, confirming the value in a study of this kind. The following reports were reviewed, and helped to inform the survey frame and key questions:

- Government evaluation strategies and frameworks;
- Academic and research institution reports into evaluation practice and use nationally and internationally;
- Examples from evaluation and other sectors of similar ‘state of evaluation’ studies.

Government procurement portals were accessed to analyse publicly available data related to the contracting of evaluation projects. A sample of Commonwealth and State procurement portals were searched using the following parameters:

- All awarded contracts which included the word ‘evaluation’ or ‘evaluate.’
- Results for the time period from 1 July 2021 through 30 June 2022, reflective of the most recently completed financial year.
- Manually filtered results to exclude contracts that did not reflect the meaning of evaluation as intended for this report and analysis.²

² For example, evaluation of clinical research on drug efficacy, clinical products or other consumables, tender evaluations and market research were excluded from the results for the purposes of the analysis.

Survey of AES members

Building on the desktop analysis, an online survey was developed and circulated to understand perceptions about:

- Evaluation approaches in use;
- Drivers to evaluation
- Trends.

The survey included 14 questions with a combination of multiple choice, multi-select and open-ended question formats. The full list of questions and answer options is included in Table 4 of the Appendix.

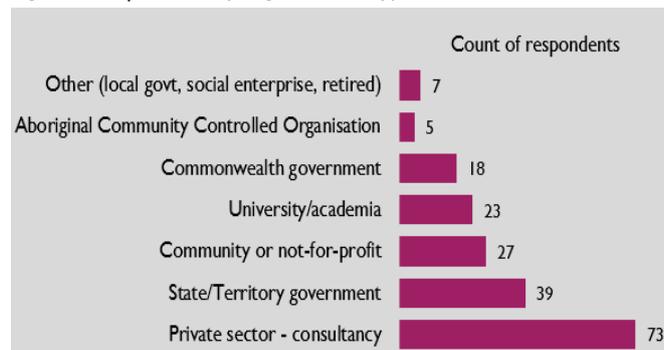
The survey was distributed to the AES member database as was one reminder email. Two reminder emails were sent to Government representatives upon review of interim responses. An overview of survey participation is provided below.



Figure 3 Respondents by organisation size



Figure 2 Respondents by organisation type



Participants from a variety of organisation types and sizes responded to the survey. Survey respondents' profile largely reflect the profile of AES members in terms of organisation type and size.

Consultations with evaluation leads

To gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of evaluation practice in select government and non-government organisations from different sectors, the survey was complemented by stakeholder consultations: The following groups were engaged in the consultation process:



Consultation participants were identified through agreement with the AES Relationships Committee. Three distinct states and/or territories were represented through the consultations, with the remaining participants representing organisations with a national focus. The organisations covered four sectors: health, human services, education, and Indigenous services.

In addition to the survey and consultations, additional insights were gathered through a findings workshop with the AES Fellows and through a presentation and discussion session at the 2022 AES International Evaluation Conference (attended by approximately 70 people). In each session, participants were asked for their reflections on the results of the data presented, as well as commentary on what may have been missing from the analysis or results.

1.4 Scope and limitations of the study design

This study is the first of its kind for the AES, and involved a significant amount of planning and consideration to execute a feasible approach within a small budget. The study however faced several limitations.

In relation to research design and execution, a primary limitation was that the survey was only sent to AES members. As a consequence, the survey results reflect only the views of AES members, which may underplay important contributions from those who are not currently members of the AES, including those in more general policy or decision-making roles. This may also have resulted in limited responses from people whose engagement in AES activities is not as an individual member, but as an AES organisational member. While the study sought to mitigate this limitation through the stakeholder consultation process, future studies of this kind should consider ways to better capture insights from those who sit outside the AES membership, but are critical to evaluation conduct or authorisation.

A further limitation was the difficulty capturing meaningful evaluation volume data. Results from publicly available procurement portals do not reliably capture all the externally commissioned evaluations, and do not include internally-conducted evaluations. The data from government portals was not independently validated as part of this project.

Some other notes on scope are: the study focuses on evaluation only, rather than other evidence-related activities such as monitoring, outcomes frameworks or reporting for public accountability; and geographically, the study focuses on evaluations commissioned and conducted in Australia (and not, for example, evaluations commissioned by Australian organisations but conducted overseas).

1.5 Context of evaluation practice in Australia

COVID-19 pandemic

The study was conducted in 2022, roughly two years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period which demanded significant service adaptation and placed increasing pressure and scrutiny on organisations to meet community needs and to demonstrate the effective use of resources. COVID-19 impacted the practice of evaluation by increasing the use of 'rapid' evaluations, changing budgets, and contributing to public demand for evidence-based decision making. At the time of this study, organisations across sectors and types had adjusted to a 'new normal' of work, budgets, and priorities, with many study participants commenting on the role COVID-19 played in recent trends in evaluation practice.

Government reviews

With government and not-for-profit sector organisations under increasing pressure to demonstrate results and ensure the appropriate and efficient use of resources, the effective design and delivery of programs is a key area of focus. Organisations are finding that evaluation is a key mechanism to support this objective and to gather and share evidence that supports improvement and aids decision-making. There is also increasing pressure on non-government organisations to measure and report on outcomes.

Multiple reviews at the Commonwealth and state/territory levels have identified the need to build a culture of evaluation, across all levels of government. For example, the *Independent Review of the Australian Public Service* (APS review) identified that evaluation is a foundational element of rigorous and innovative advice in complex and challenging policy-making environments³. Recommendation 26 sought ‘to embed a culture of evaluation and learning from experience to underpin evidence-based policy and delivery’.

At the state/territory level, numerous jurisdictions have renewed their focus on evaluation capability and practice. For example, the review of the Tasmanian State Service identified that evaluation activity is approached inconsistently where it is currently done, and not linked to a defined system, process or network.

Evaluation policies, strategies and toolkits

Evaluation practice in Australia is guided by a range of Commonwealth and state/territory government policies, strategies, guidelines, frameworks and toolkits (see Table 2). Collectively, these documents highlight that improving the practice of evaluation is a continuing focus for governments in Australia.

Table 2 Examples of Commonwealth and state/territory evaluation policies, strategies, guidelines, frameworks and toolkits

Focus area	Evaluation policies
1. Commonwealth government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and Toolkit • Indigenous Evaluation Strategy • Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework
2. State/territory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New South Wales (NSW) Evaluation Policy and Guidelines • Queensland (QLD) Government Program Evaluation Guidelines • Tasmania (TAS) Government Evaluation Framework (under development) • Northern Territory (NT) Government Program Evaluation Framework and Toolkit • Western Australia (WA) Government Evaluation Guide • Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government Evaluation Policy and Guidelines

³ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2019), *Independent review of the Australian Public Service*.

2. Evaluation volumes

Key Points

- It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the volume of evaluations being commissioned by governments and other organisations across Australia. The limited data available suggests evaluations are commissioned across a range of sectors, departments and levels of governments.
- As not all commissioned evaluations can be identified, it is not possible to accurately assess evaluation volumes through such sources, with the available data likely to substantially underestimate evaluation volumes.

The results of publicly available procurement data were analysed in an attempt to identify the volume of externally commissioned evaluations in the Commonwealth and state/territory governments. The data included in this analysis was for the financial year commencing 1 July 2021 and ending 30 June 2022.

A key limitation of this analysis is that not all evaluation-related activity is listed on government contract portals. Furthermore, analysis of government contract data relies on reliable and clear project titles and categorisations. The variability in the data suggests that there are opportunities for greater transparency of evaluation work, which could have a flow-on effect that findings are more openly shared.

While this form of quantitative analysis has not previously been undertaken by the AES, it is consistent with previous reviews which identified variability in the quantum of evaluation in different jurisdictions.

Table 3: Publicly available data regarding procurement of evaluation services (contract count, total value, FY21-22)*

Government	Contracts	Value
Commonwealth	224	\$52m
NSW	15	\$5.4m
VIC	12	\$4.2m
WA	6	\$1.1m
ACT	4	\$680,000
TAS	3	\$600,000
NT	4	\$330,000

*South Australia (SA) and QLD Government contract portals did not provide information to allow identification and consolidation of evaluation procurement activity.

3. Evaluation Drivers

Key Points

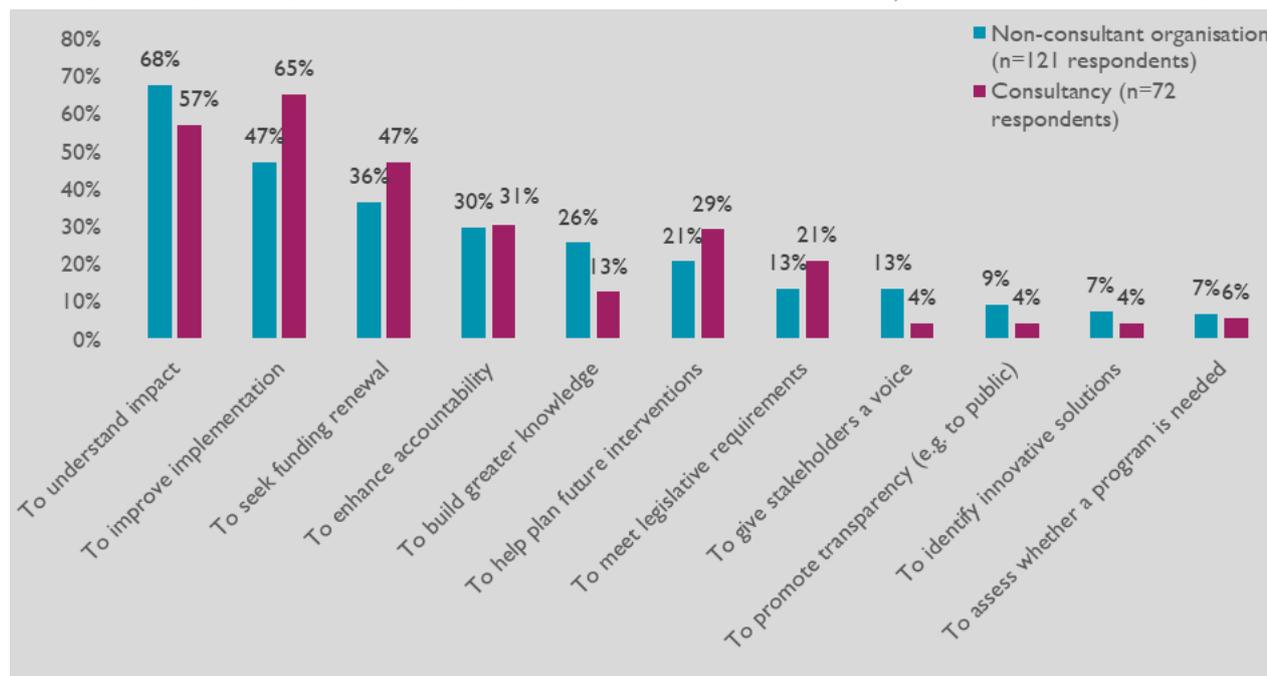
- Survey responses suggested that assessing impact and informing continuous improvements are the key reasons for evaluations to be conducted, followed by ensuring accountability and supporting funding decisions. Stakeholders reported that evaluation helps to assess whether programs are meeting their policy intent.
- Study participants reflected both pressure and scrutiny on organisations to meet community needs and to demonstrate the effective use of resources, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Data, capability and organisational culture were highlighted as key enablers of evaluation practice.
- Barriers to evaluation included a lack of funding, capability, data availability and analytical skills, which could impact the timing, design, and utility of evaluation findings.

A primary focus of this study was to understand why evaluations are commissioned and to identify the key enablers and barriers. Academic research highlights the importance of organisational culture and leadership as the foundation required to develop the evaluation capabilities that enable evidence-based decision making⁴.

Survey respondents identified assessing impact and informing continuous improvements as key reasons for conducting evaluations, followed by ensuring accountability and informing funding decisions. While consultancy and non-consultancy respondents both identified the same top four drivers of evaluation, consultants more commonly reported continuous improvement and informing funding decisions as the main drivers of evaluation. A detailed breakdown of responses by all organisation types in the non-consultancy grouping is provided in Figure 12 of the Appendix.

⁴ J Schwarzman, A Bauman, B Gabbe, C Rissel, T Shilton, B J Smith (2018), Organizational determinants of evaluation practice in Australian prevention agencies, *Health Education Research*, Volume 33, Issue 3, Pages 243–255, <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyy015>

FIGURE 4 SURVEY RESULTS: TOP THREE MOTIVATIONS FOR EVALUATION, BY ORGANISATION TYPE



*Note: Percentages shown represent share of respondents from each group who selected the field. Each respondent could select up to three fields.

Consultations identified the role of evidence-based decision making and accountability as primary drivers of evaluation. Other motivations for commissioning evaluations included reviewing election commitments, increasing organisational knowledge, securing funding, engaging stakeholders, and advocating for change. Strong leadership support for evaluation was consistently identified as a key enabler, with the absence of support identified as a critical barrier.

'Where evaluation is working well, there is strong leadership support at a senior level that drives demand.'

Consultation participant

Consultation participants also spoke to a recent increase in the demand for evidence-based decision making, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated tightened budget positions.

3.1 Enablers

With respect to evaluation enablers, stakeholders consistently referenced data and capability as the most significant factors impacting their ability to evaluate effectively. Participants discussed the role of evaluation timing as an enabler of evaluation, noting that without proper planning and effort at the outset of a program's lifecycle, evaluations can be significantly hindered. Study participants concluded that an organisational culture and understanding of evaluation, across all levels, supports planning and implementation at the appropriate time, and with adequate data and information.

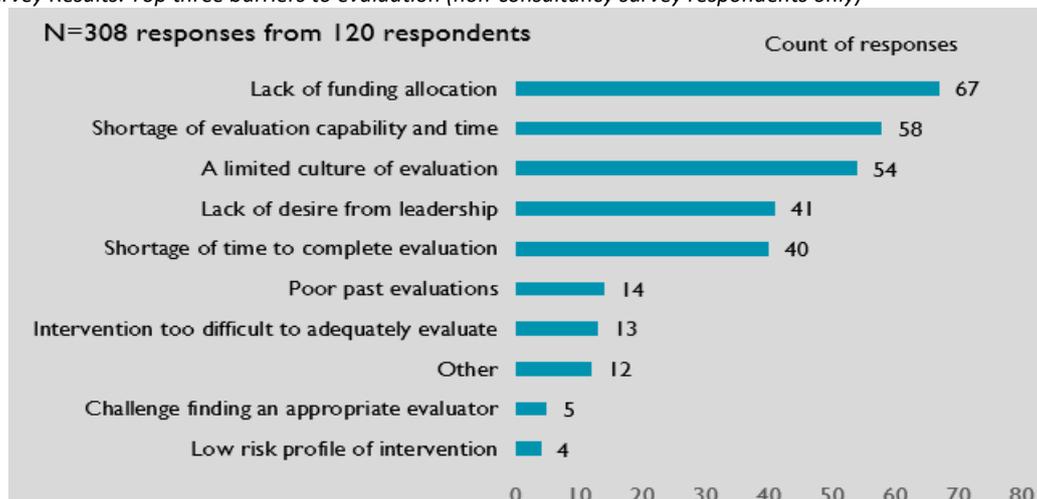
'With fiscal limitations in the coming years from Government departments, there will be more emphasis (i.e. decision-making) on evaluations and their findings in deciding whether a program/initiative gets ongoing funding.'

Survey respondent

3.2 Barriers

Survey respondents were asked to select up to three of the major barriers to evaluation. The results shown in Figure 5 demonstrate the responses from non-consultancy respondents, who highlighted funding, capability and culture as the top three barriers. The detailed breakdown of evaluation barriers reported by organisation type and size is provided in Figure 14 and 15 in the Appendix.

Figure 5 Survey Results: Top three barriers to evaluation (non-consultancy survey respondents only)



These survey results are consistent with findings from government reviews, including the review of evaluation in the Australian Public Service (APS)⁵, which identified a need to build a culture of evaluation and found capability and technical skills to be barriers to evaluation practice in the Commonwealth Government. The report called for further technical training and internal capacity building within the APS.

Generally, consultation participants identified similar barriers to those who responded to the survey. A lack of funding for evaluation was consistently identified as a key barrier. Funding was also seen as impacting the timing and/or design of evaluation activities.

Survey respondents and consultation participants each reported a tension between using resources (such as people and funding) to evaluate a program, and delivering more within a constrained funding environment. A range of mechanisms were reported as helpful in navigating this tension. Solutions included quarantining funding for evaluation as part of the business case for program funding, taking a proportion of program funding across program areas to fund evaluation activity, and prioritising evaluation activity towards high risk/high value programs.

Participants also discussed the critical role that evaluation capability plays, and how a lack of capability can negatively impact the delivery of evaluation work. For example, stakeholders reported challenges finding internal and external evaluators with the right capabilities. They said a lack of formal qualifications or training is a barrier to hiring the right people and attracting individuals into evaluation more broadly.

‘Evaluation skillsets do not exist outside of the evaluation unit – many know about evaluation, know they should be doing it, but don’t have the skills to do evaluation design or a program logic.’

Consultation participant

⁵ Gray, M and Bray, J R (2019), *Evaluation in the Australian Public Service: current state of play, some issues and future directions*: Appendix B – Evaluation in the Australian Public Service: current state of play, some issues and future directions (apsreview.gov.au)

These capability gaps were noted to be exacerbated by staff turnover, especially in the context of complex programs and data environments, which require high levels of technical skills and understanding.

Consultation participants also discussed how there must be a baseline evaluation capability across all staff in the organisation for evaluation results to be used appropriately and for the greatest benefit. Where there are gaps in evaluation skillsets across the organisation, this can leave programs without the critical foundations for evaluation work (e.g. program logics, regular data collection, and funding for evaluation work as part of program budgets).

Further to funding and capability, study participants in both the survey and consultations noted that data availability and quality is frequently a barrier to evaluation. This can stem from data access issues, data governance arrangements, or a lack of linked data. It was also highlighted that the people who understand the technical aspects of large administrative datasets, and those who understand the legal considerations associated with the use of data, are typically not the same people. This can be a barrier to meaningful data linkage for the purpose of evaluation.

‘There is a desire for impact measurement, but rarely the data or feasible methodology to reliably attribute any observed changes in outcomes to the program itself. There is a push towards data linkage to show the relationship between program participation and long-term outcomes; however, there is limited understanding of the time and cost investment required up front to link data sets.’

Survey respondent

The commissioning process was also mentioned as a barrier that can impact the quality of evaluations due to unclear or unachievable expectations set for external evaluators. This challenge impacts the later stages of the evaluation process as well, with stakeholders commenting on how organisations with a limited understanding of evaluation practices have difficulty interpreting and responding to evaluation findings.

Non-government and government organisations alike noted how the shift to virtual work during the pandemic impacted their ability to conduct evaluations. The transition to virtual evaluation practices was seen as beneficial for participation. However, it was also identified as a barrier, with survey fatigue being at an all-time high.

Finally, timing can be a limiting factor, if not an actual barrier, to evaluation conduct. Evaluation is often seen as an endeavour that is conducted towards the end of the policy cycle to assess the effectiveness of a policy or program, or to determine whether any unpredicted effects resulted. However, by limiting evaluation to the end of the policy cycle, there are limits in the types of evaluation approaches that can be conducted. This can impact on the ability of evaluation to inform decision-making throughout the rollout of a policy or program. Better practice suggests that evaluation conduct could usefully be integrated into policy design, planning and early implementation phases, including to prevent later data-related gaps and issues from arising.

As is explored in the next section, the barriers identified above often influence the selected evaluation approach, in particular the evaluation methodology.

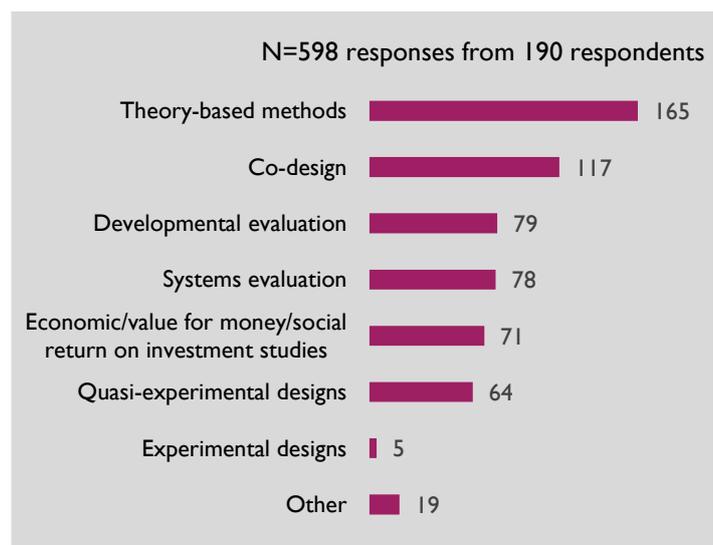
4. Evaluation Approaches

Key Points

- Non-experimental approaches, such as theory-based methods, are dominant in Australian evaluation practice, with experimental designs relatively uncommon. Co-design, developmental and systems evaluations are also frequently used approaches. Study participants felt that approaches and methods were largely driven by the evaluation purpose and data availability.
- Stakeholders observed an increase in the use of, and demand for, ‘rapid’ evaluations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Evaluations are conducted through both internal evaluation units and externally commissioned evaluators, with a trend toward organisations building their internal evaluation team capability and capacity.

Survey respondents were asked to identify which approaches had been used for evaluations they had been part of over the past 12 months. Participants could select as many responses as were applicable. Theory-based methods were most frequently cited by the survey respondents, with co-design identified as the next most frequently used evaluation approach. Experimental designs were the least frequently used evaluation approach.

Figure 6 Survey Results: Evaluation approaches used in the past 12 months



Unlike the survey, there was no clear theme in the specific type of evaluation approaches used by consultation participants. Rather, participants discussed the considerations for why certain approaches may be used in some settings but not others. Participants emphasised the importance of tailoring evaluation approaches to the program and evaluation questions, rather than prescribing a standardised approach. In a small

number of cases, participants said their organisation’s leadership preferred a particular evaluation approach.

The appetite for evidence-based decision making in the context of Covid-19 helped to give rise to ‘rapid evaluations’, which became common practice in certain jurisdictions, such as the Victorian Government⁶. These offered the ability for evaluations to inform nimble policy and program changes in uncertain environments. However, consultation participants felt this was not possible or appropriate in all evaluation contexts and expectations about the feasibility of providing rapid and meaningful evaluation results need to be managed.

⁶ Williams E, Gaway M and Terrill D (2022), Rapid evaluation of COVID-19 related service and practice changes in health and human services using tailored methods. *Front. Sociol.* 7:959095. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2022.959095

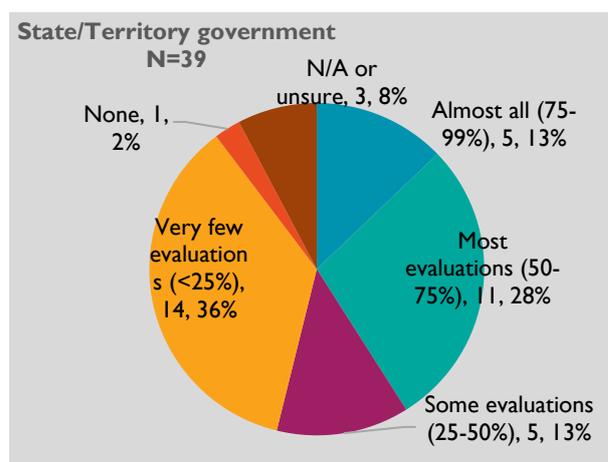
4.1 Internal compared to external and hybrid delivery

Another key aspect of the evaluation approach is whether evaluations are conducted internally or through externally commissioned evaluators. The APS review identified a decline in APS in-house research and evaluation capabilities and processes⁷, which led to the Australia Government’s 2021 APS Reform Agenda, including a Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and supporting Toolkit⁸.

The State of Evaluation study identified a renewed focus on embedding specialist evaluation expertise across all levels of government and non-government organisations in Australia.

Figure 16 in the Appendix identifies how organisations differ with respect to conducting evaluations internally versus externally. As shown in Figure 7, State/Territory respondents to the survey provided mixed results to this question, suggesting that approaches may vary by jurisdiction, sector, and evaluation needs. However, these results need to be considered carefully based on their circulation only to AES members.

Figure 7 Survey Question: How much evaluation work is conducted by evaluators outside your organisation?



Consultation participants suggested that decisions to use internal versus external evaluators were driven by a variety of factors. For example, leadership could mandate an external evaluation for the purpose of independence. However, stakeholders identified this trend had shifted over time, and many organisational leaders valued having an internal team capable of conducting evaluations on an ongoing basis. Several organisations consulted had set up internal evaluation units. However, the capacity within these units, and the extent to which they were the default evaluation provider for the organisation, varied based on organisational size, unit size and maturity.

⁷ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2019), *Independent review of the Australian Public Service*.

⁸ Department of Finance (2021), *Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and Toolkit*, <https://www.finance.gov.au/about-us/news/2021/commonwealth-evaluation-policy-and-toolkit>

5. Evaluation Trends and Future Directions

Key Points

- The most commonly referenced current or anticipated future trends for evaluation were to build evaluation capability, work with big datasets and linked datasets, to advance Indigenous evaluation approaches, and to change evaluation commissioning models. These trends are discussed further below.

5.1 Workforce capability impacts all aspects of evaluation

As noted in Section 3, the need to build evaluation capability within organisations was a clear theme that emerged during this review. A broad set of evaluation capabilities are needed to enable good evaluation practice. Stakeholders desired the capability to conduct more evaluations internally, but struggled to fill gaps by attracting suitable staff to the field, which for some organisations, had caused delays in their organisational transition.

'It is not easy to fill evaluation vacancies. There are no clear qualifications. We are still learning what extra resourcing is needed to support the internal evaluation function over time.'

Consultation participant

In any case, there is an ongoing need to grow the skills and awareness for individuals, teams and whole organisations to 'think evaluatively' and to build a culture where evidence is highly valued.

Some consultations touched on the potential for evaluation to be professionalised or for training to be credentialled so that evaluators can

demonstrate their skills and training experience. It was considered by some that this could help to attract additional people into the evaluation field, which could make it easier for organisations to find individuals with the skills they desire, or to embark on a structured program of training to reach a base level understanding.

We note that the topic of evaluation professionalisation has been studied by the AES before, such as in the 2017 ANZSOG study on pathways to advance evaluation professionalisation, so is not discussed further in this review.⁹

5.2 Data and analytics will unlock new opportunities for evaluation in Australia

While many study participants described how there are continued barriers to their evaluation work due to limited data access and an inability to link key administrative datasets, many stakeholders maintained a positive outlook for the years ahead.

Participants spoke to the role of artificial intelligence and improved digital technologies to improve the sophistication of evaluation methods. For example, it was expected that improved technology will support improved real-time monitoring, analysis and data visualisation. These advances are expected to support

'The use of digital technologies in evaluation will continue to grow and become more innovative. We are likely to see greater convergence in the use of advanced data analytics (e.g. predictive models, artificial intelligence) and evaluation, although these projects will not always be referred to as "evaluations".'

Survey respondent

⁹ Peersman G, Rogers P (2017), Pathways to advance professionalisation within the context of the Australasian Evaluation Society, Melbourne: ANZSOG/BetterEvaluation.

evaluation's purpose of supporting evidence-based decision-making in a timely manner. It was anticipated that these analytical approaches will also enable large public datasets to be used in new and innovative ways.

5.3 Indigenous evaluation and cultural safety are a priority

Another key theme emerging from this study was the importance of cultural safety, and increasing the ability of evaluators to conduct work in a culturally safe manner. Many of the study participants discussed how cultural safety is a priority in their organisations, noting the importance of, and future trend towards,

'My hope is that there will be a greater focus on providing opportunities for communities to be involved in their own data collection and sense and meaning making processes and less reliance on external experts.'

Survey respondent

ensuring evaluations are co-designed with Indigenous people and communities.

Participants share a vision of participatory evaluation, with the ability to conduct culturally safe evaluation, as a critical core competency of all evaluators.

The AES Cultural Safety Framework¹⁰ (*the Framework*) articulates principles for culturally safe evaluation, and describes how critical self-reflection in relation to evaluators, evaluation roles and responsibilities, and evaluation practices can contribute to culturally safe evaluation. The Framework serves as an important resource for all evaluators.

The Productivity Commission's *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*¹¹ (*the Strategy*) was also referenced on multiple occasions as an important resource and key driver of improved approaches to evaluating programs and policies impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Similar to the Framework, the Strategy explores the guiding principles for undertaking evaluations involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and offers recommendations to guide organisations when they are planning, conducting, reporting and using evaluations.

While it was noted at the time of this study that the Strategy had not received a formal response from Government, it was expected that the Strategy would play a critical role in future. For example, stakeholders expected that there would be a heightened focus on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in evaluations, as well as an increased volume of Indigenous evaluators and tailored approaches to evaluations.

One participant noted that there is an inherent tension between technically secure data and the concept of culturally secure data; this as an area that may benefit from further exploration.

5.4 Evaluation commissioning and delivery models are changing

Consultation participants from across different organisations discussed their models for completing evaluations, noting a trend in building internal capacity, either as a way to complement or replace externally commissioned evaluations. The trend to build evaluation capability within organisations is either occurring through

'When commissioning evaluations, training and support for staff should be a part of the engagement as capacity building for the organisation.'

Consultation participant

¹⁰ Gollan, S & Stacey, K (2021), *Australian Evaluation Society First Nations Cultural Safety Framework*, Australian Evaluation Society, Melbourne.

¹¹ Productivity Commission (2020), *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy \(pc.gov.au\)](https://www.pc.gov.au).

the work of internal evaluations units or as a capacity building component of contracted evaluation work.

A journal article by Conley-Tyler previously considered the strengths and weaknesses of internal versus external evaluations, noting similar factors raised by consultation participants, such as contextual knowledge, timing, flexibility and perceived objectivity.¹² In both the journal article and through consultation in the current study, the evaluation purpose stood out as the primary driver of decisions to use either internal or external evaluators. Second, the complexity of the program content plays a key role, as the time (and, therefore, cost) required to upskill external evaluators on the content area can often discourage the use of external evaluators.

Consultation participants spoke to the strengths of the trend toward using internal evaluations units to conduct their evaluation work. For example, having an internal evaluation unit ensures an ongoing evaluation presence in the organisation. This centralised function can help identify barriers, and develop solutions to eliminate these issues, such as many of the barriers mentioned throughout the study (data access, evaluation timing, etc).

Despite the referenced strengths, stakeholders also mentioned the challenges of transitioning to an internal evaluation unit model. These challenges differed between small and large organisations. For example, small organisations noted challenges in securing ongoing funding to enable the hiring of qualified evaluators. Large organisations described how building internal capacity to meet the evaluation demand of their programs can take years to complete, and in the meantime, they must prioritise which evaluation initiatives are performed in-house, not conducted at all due to capacity constraints, or externally commissioned. For these large organisations, internal units are focused on capability building across program areas to improve the ability to appropriately and effectively commission evaluation work. The internal units also often serve as a hub for reviewing evaluation proposals and findings, assisting their colleagues to interpret and utilise evaluation results.

¹² Conley-Tyler, M (2005), *A fundamental choice: internal or external evaluation?* Evaluation Journal of Australasia, Vol 4 (new series), Nos 1&2. Pp3-11.

6. Conclusions

While the results of this study may not be surprising to those who work in the field of evaluation, the findings provide a baseline of information about the demand for evaluation and the critical barriers impacting evaluation practice in Australia. These lessons can be used by a variety of audiences to improve the utility of evaluation over time.

6.1 For commissioners of evaluation

For commissioners of evaluation activity, a key conclusion is that organisational culture and a good understanding of evaluation practice are critical building blocks to the success of evaluations, regardless of whether they are conducted internally or externally. Study participants noted that, to support this, there must be additional advocacy for evaluation at leadership levels to improve culture and build the case and budget for evaluation work. While this advocacy has been successful in some organisations and sectors, it was identified throughout the study that critical gaps remain with respect to the prioritisation of evaluation within organisations.

6.2 For evaluators

For evaluators, the study highlights the importance of ongoing capability building, especially as data environments change and culturally safe evaluation practices are normalised. Evaluators can also play a role in upskilling colleagues who are new to the field. They will also need to continue developing skills in data analytics in order to bring insights to their practice.

6.3 For the AES

For the AES, this study helps to build a rounded understanding of the evaluation landscape in Australia. It provides an evidence base for the AES to continue playing a role in strengthening and promoting evaluation practice, theory and use. It confirms the centrality of the Cultural Safety Framework, while helping the AES to keep promoting opportunities for new entrants and contributors to the evaluation field.

This report provides the AES with a document to share in discussions with various stakeholders across the evaluation and policy community. It also provides helpful context for the AES in setting its strategic directions beyond 2023.

6.4 Implications for future studies

This current study was the first of its kind for the AES and builds a strong foundation of information and learnings from which future studies can be designed. A different scope of work could be targeted, or specific topics could be further investigated.

Appendices

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Survey questions

Table 4 Survey Questions and Answer Options

#	Survey Question	Answer options	Format
1	In which jurisdiction are you primarily located?	ACT; NSW; NT; QLD; SA; TAS; VIC; WA; International (outside Australia); Other: Please specify	multiple choice
2	What type of organisation do you work in?	Commonwealth government; State/Territory government; Local government; Community or not-for-profit; Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation; Private sector – consultancy; Private sector – other; University/academia; Retired/not in workforce; Other: Please specify	multiple choice
3	Are you an AES member?	Yes, I am an individual AES member; No, but my organisation is a member; No; I am unsure	multiple choice
4	What size is the organisation in which you work?	Sole trader; Small organisation (less than 10 employees); Small to medium (11-200 employees); Large (201+ employees); I don't work in an organisation / not in workforce	multiple choice
5	What roles do you commonly play in evaluation?	I oversee evaluation teams and projects; I manage evaluation projects; I support evaluation projects; I provide training in evaluation; I am a researcher in evaluation practice; I plan or commission evaluation work; I oversee program(s) that are evaluated; I am a decision-maker who uses evaluation findings; Other: please specify	multi-select
6	In which sectors have you been part of evaluation activities in the last 12 months?	Agriculture/environment/water/land; Justice/law and order/home affairs/public safety; Education; Health and ageing; Treasury/finance/economics/regional development; Infrastructure/transport/ communications technology; Defence and veterans affairs; Social services; International development/foreign affairs/trade; First Nations policy and services; Other: please specify	multi-select
7	How many evaluation projects have you been involved in during the past 12 months?	None; 1-5; 6-20; More than 20	multiple choice
8	Over the past 12 months, which approaches have been used for evaluations you have been part of? (select all that apply)	Co-design; Developmental evaluation; Systems evaluation; Experimental designs (e.g. randomised controlled trials); Quasi-experimental designs (e.g. non-equivalent group designs, difference-in-differences, regression discontinuity); Economic/value for money/social return on investment studies; Theory-based methods (e.g. objectives achievement, realist evaluation, program logic); Other: Please specify	multi-select

#	Survey Question	Answer options	Format
9	When do the evaluations you are involved in most commonly commence?	Early in the program lifecycle; During implementation; Towards the conclusion of the program lifecycle; After the program has finished; All of the above	multiple choice
10	In your experience, how much evaluation work is conducted by evaluators outside your organisation (e.g. consultant evaluators) <i>(non-consultants only)</i>	None; Very few evaluations (<25%); Some evaluations (25-50%); Most evaluations (50-75%); Almost all (75-99%); All; N/A or unsure	multiple choice
11a	What do you see as the main motivations for evaluation within your organisation/agency? Please select up to three. <i>(non-consultants only)</i>	To build greater knowledge; To enhance accountability; To promote transparency (e.g. to public); To improve implementation; To seek funding renewal; To help plan future interventions; To reduce waste; To meet legislative requirements; To give stakeholders a voice; To assess whether a program is needed; To understand the impact of an intervention; To identify innovative solutions; To consider service expansion; N/A or unsure; Other: Please specify	multi-select
11b	What do you see as the main motivations for evaluation among your clients? Please select up to three. <i>(consultants only)</i>	To build greater knowledge; To enhance accountability; To promote transparency (e.g. to public); To improve implementation; To seek funding renewal; To help plan future interventions; To reduce waste; To meet legislative requirements; To give stakeholders a voice; To assess whether a program is needed; To understand the impact of an intervention; To identify innovative solutions; To consider service expansion; N/A or unsure; Other: Please specify	multi-select
12	What are the major barriers to evaluation (e.g. what are the reasons why evaluation may NOT occur)? Please select up to three.	Lack of funding allocation; Shortage of time to complete evaluation; Shortage of evaluation capability and time; Lack of desire from leadership; Low risk profile of intervention; Challenge finding an appropriate evaluator; A limited culture of evaluation; Poor past evaluations; Intervention too difficult to adequately evaluate; Other: Please specify	multi-select
13	What key trends are you observing in relation to evaluation in Australia?	open ended	open ended
14	How do you think the practice of evaluation will change in Australia over the next five years?	open ended	open ended

Additional survey results

Figure 8 Survey Question: Are you an AES member?

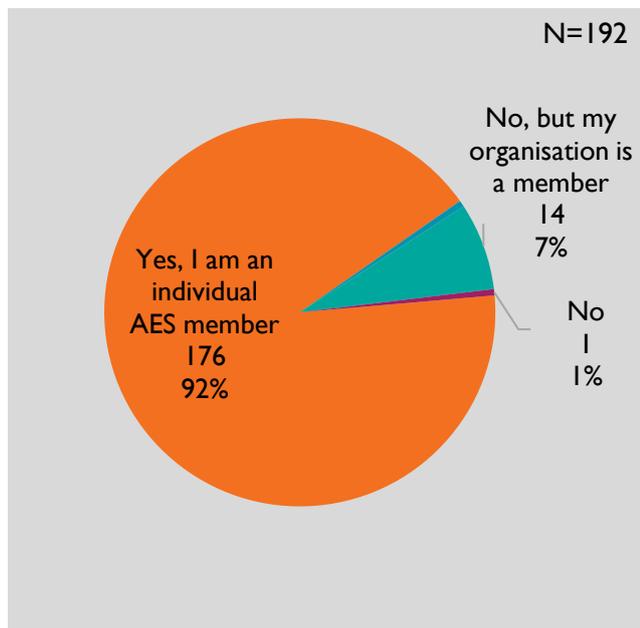


Figure 9 Survey Question: In what jurisdiction are you primarily located?

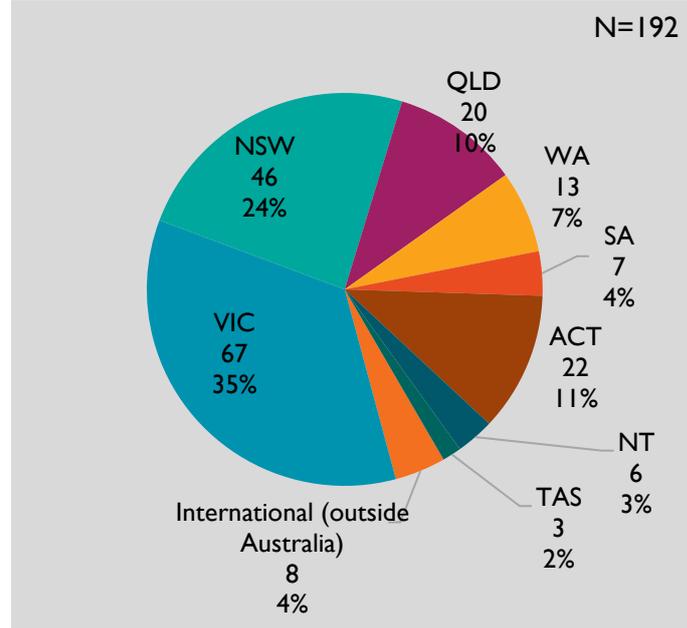


Figure 10 Survey Question: What roles do you commonly play in evaluation?

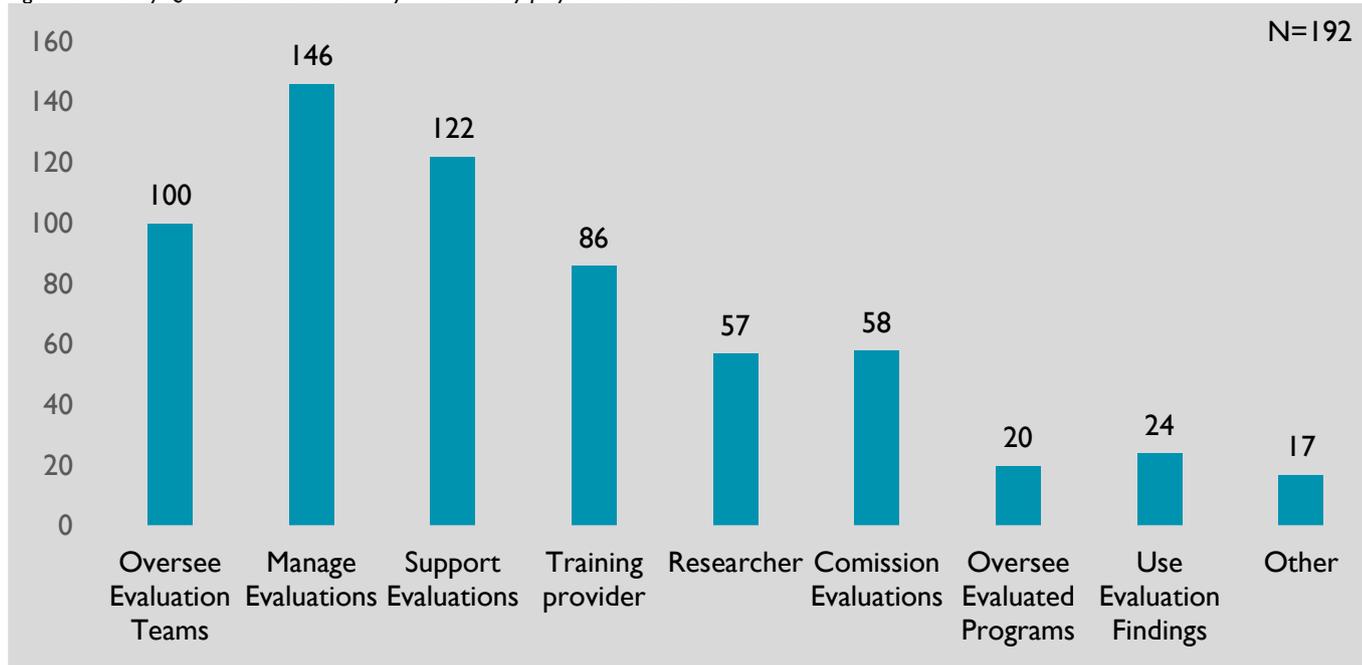


Figure 11 Survey Question: In which sectors have you been part of evaluation activities in the last 12 months?

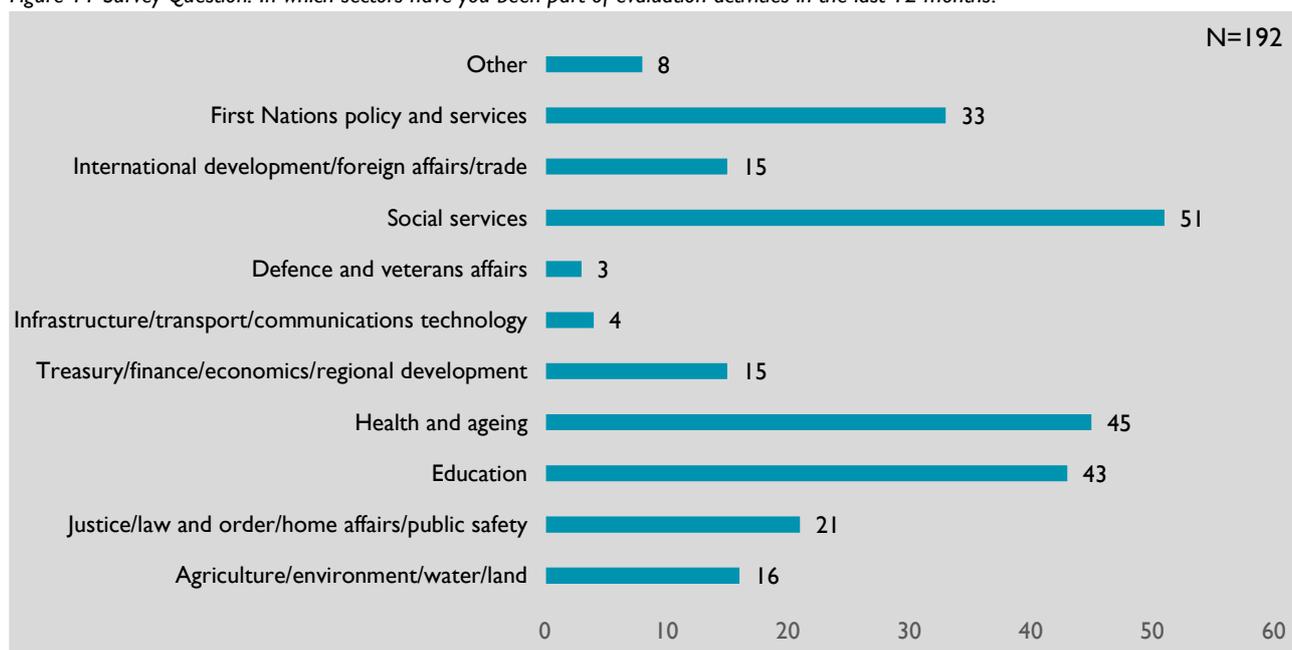


Figure 12 Survey Question: What are the main motivations for evaluation? (Respondents could select up to three)

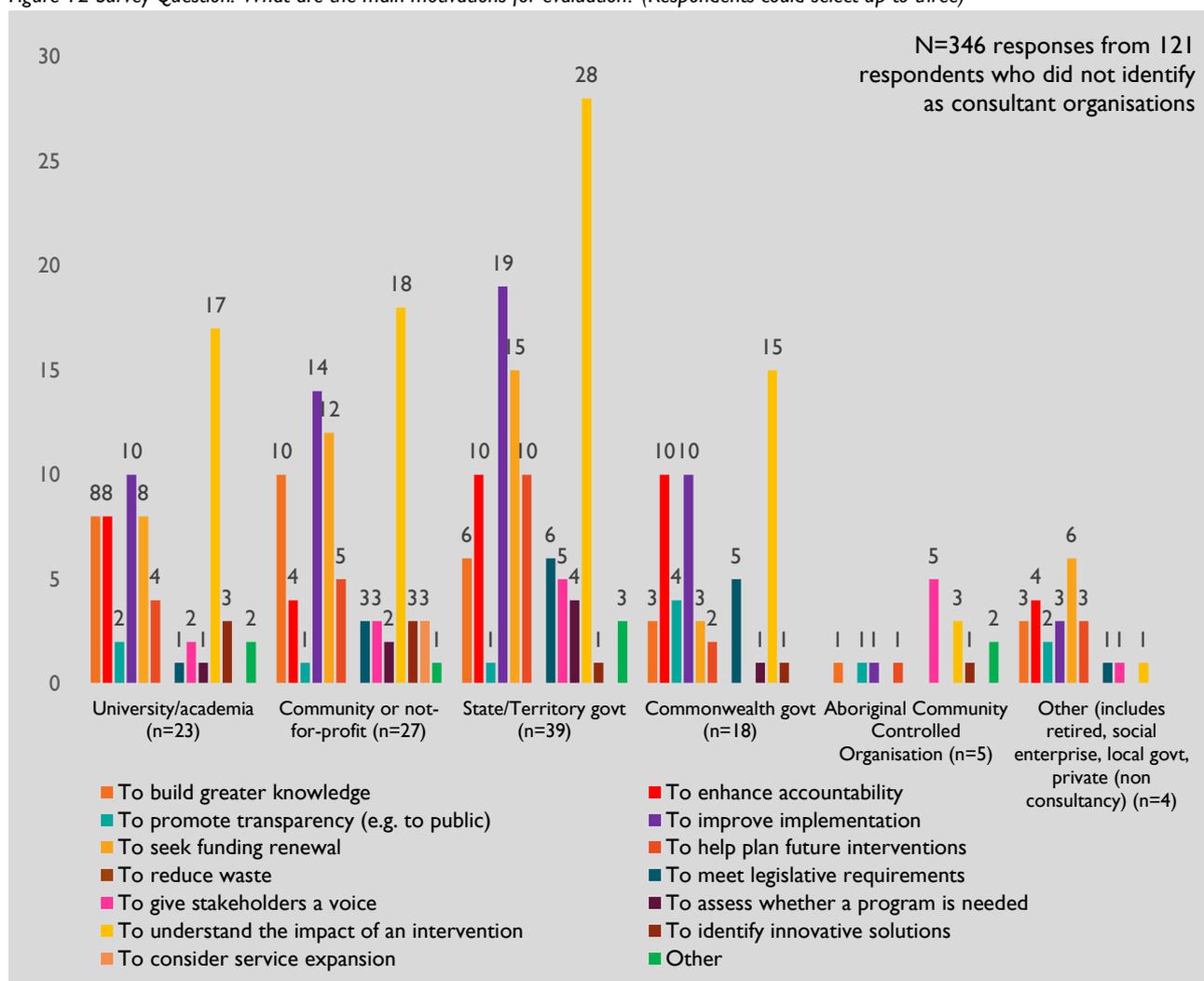


Figure 13 Survey Question: When do the evaluations you are involved in most commonly commence?

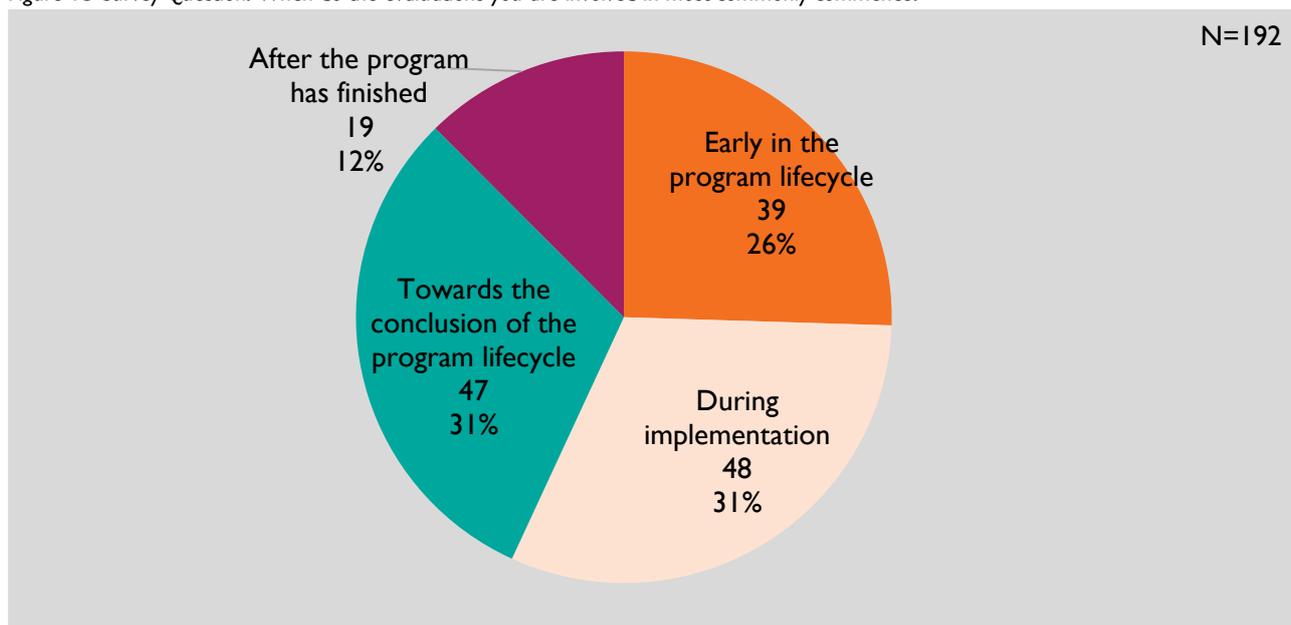


Figure 14 Survey Question: What are the major barriers to evaluation? (Up to three) - By organisation size

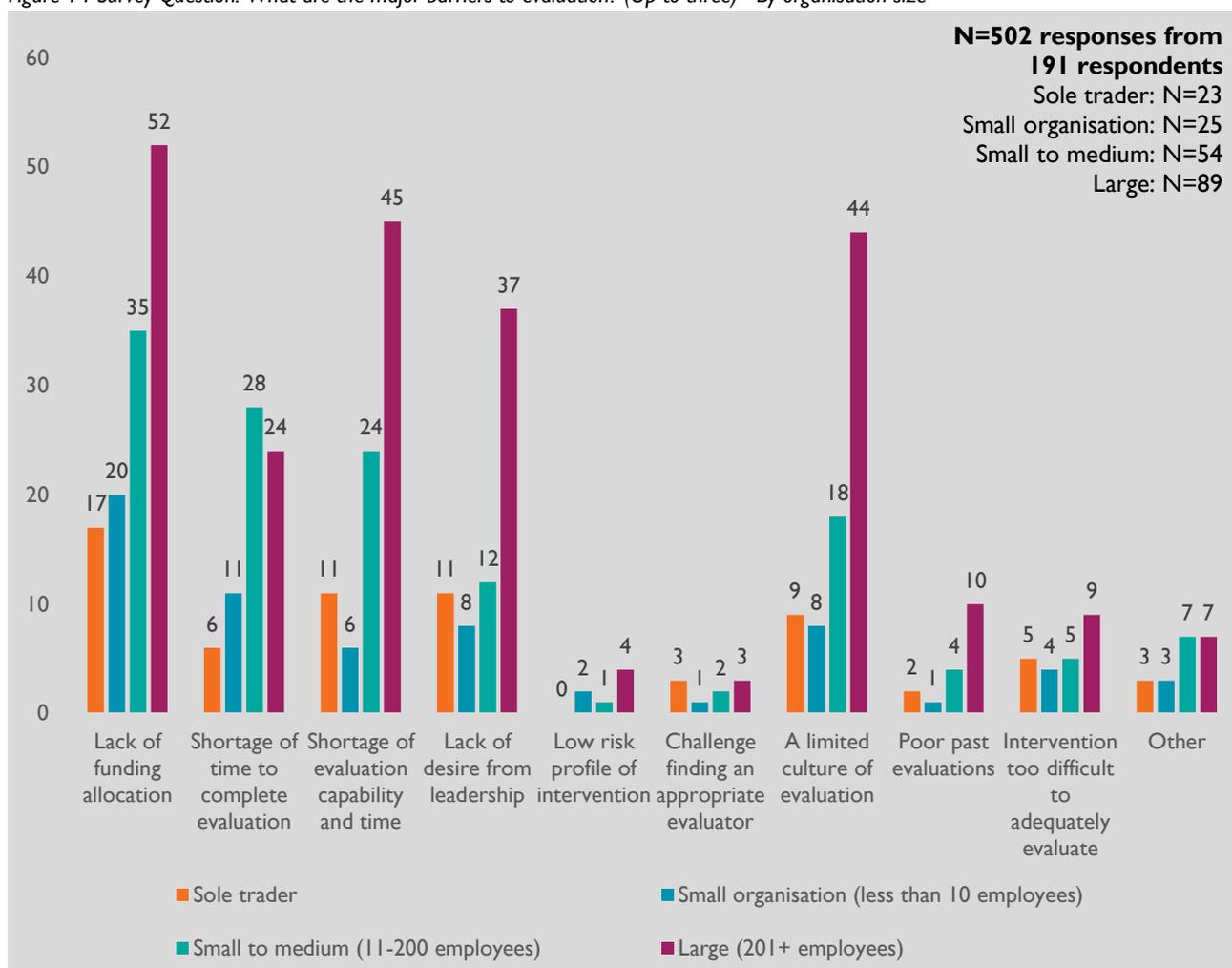


Figure 15 Survey Question: What are the major barriers to evaluation? (Up to three) - By organisation type

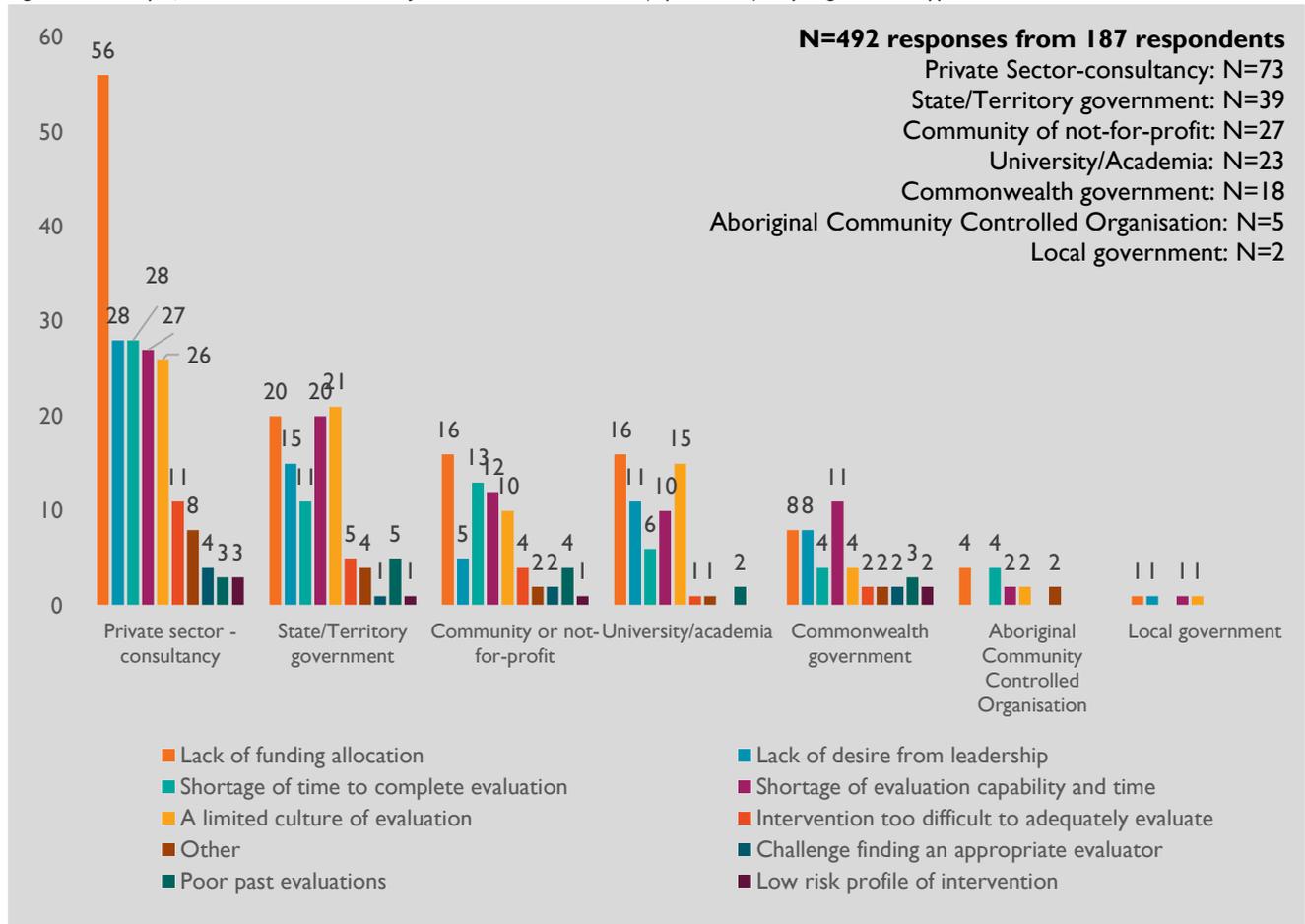
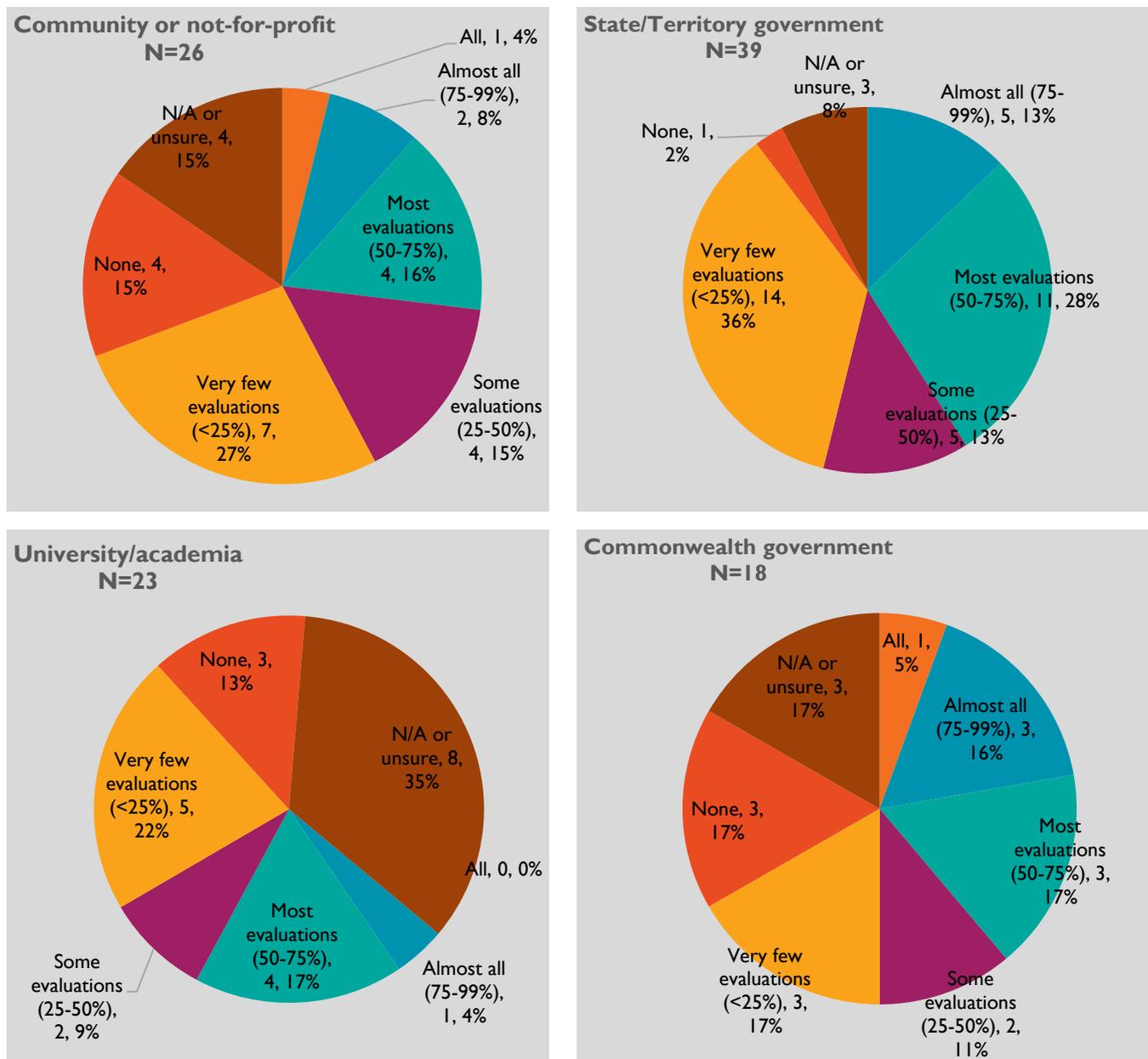


Figure 16 Survey Question: How much evaluation work is conducted by evaluators outside your organisation?



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