

Innovative Practices in the Youth Allowance Evaluation

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This paper will outline the strategy and methodology of the Youth Allowance evaluation. Youth Allowance is an income support scheme for students aged 16-24 and job seekers aged 16-21 and was introduced in July 1998. One of the primary objectives of Youth Allowance was to encourage young people to participate in full time study and training, particularly those who historically have low levels of participation. The Australian Government has implemented a comprehensive three year evaluation of Youth Allowance and its impacts on recipients. A Final Evaluation Report will be presented to Ministers in December 2001.

This paper will concentrate on the learnings already gained from the evaluation process with particular attention to: evaluation management, the use of multiple data sources including longitudinal research and the compiling of a relevant and user friendly evaluation report.

Youth Allowance, Evaluation, Methodology, Longitudinal, Data

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will present the innovative and complex strategy and methodology used in the Australian Department of Family and Community Services' (FaCS) comprehensive three year evaluation of Youth Allowance. The aspects of the strategy to be discussed are:

- the management of the evaluation and the use of reference committees;
- a program logic framework to ensure the evaluation achieves its objectives;
- the use of multiple data sources including longitudinal data and combining qualitative and quantitative data; and
- the approach adopted for compiling a relevant and user friendly evaluation report and the associated research reports.

1.1 Background- Youth Allowance

Youth Allowance (YA) provides income support for students aged 16-24 and job seekers aged 16-21. YA was introduced in July 1998. It replaced a number of other payments including the previous AUSTUDY and Youth Training Allowance.

One of the primary objectives of Youth Allowance is to encourage young people to participate in full time study and training, particularly those who historically have low levels of participation. It was generally perceived that the income support system prior to YA acted as a disincentive for young people to study. Several measures were introduced as part of YA to encourage participation in education and training including: the requirement that young people under 18 years generally be in full time education or training to receive payment; the extension of Rent Assistance to students living away from home; the introduction of an income bank for full time students; the extension of parental means testing to 18-20 year old jobseekers; and changes to YA eligibility criteria to broaden the coverage of payment among students.

YA aims to encourage young people to undertake a range of activities that would increase their job readiness and promote entry into employment. YA also enhances ease of transition between activities such as study and employment for young people as the same payment is maintained across activities, unlike the previous system.

2. EVALUATION STRATEGY

FaCS developed an evaluation strategy for YA in 1998 in consultation with other government departments, education institutions, service providers, peak bodies and student organisations.

In the design of the strategy careful consideration had to be given to the linkages with other evaluations and research being conducted within and external to the Department of Family and Community Services. Of particular importance were the evaluations undertaken by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs on Full Service Schools (FSS) and Job Placement, Employment and Training Programme (JPET). The YA evaluation relies on input from these evaluations with the FSS

Evaluation being the major information source for the level of responsiveness of education systems to the needs of all students and especially under eighteen year olds. There were similar linkages with the Evaluation of the Activity Test conducted by FaCS and the research project in rural and remote locations was designed to inform both evaluations.

The Terms of Reference for the YA evaluation are to: examine and report on the transitional effects of YA and to examine how well the program objectives have been met in the medium and longer term, particularly in respect to education, employment and training outcomes for customers. These terms of reference necessitated a focus on the effects of changes to individual measures that were changed with the introduction of YA as well as the overall impact of YA.

The objectives of the evaluation are to assess: how effectively YA encourages young people to remain in or return to, education or training, thereby increasing their opportunities in the labour market; the impact of YA on young people and their families (including the extent to which YA results in parents accepting greater responsibility for their children until they reach financial dependence); whether amalgamation of different payments into YA produces significant benefits such as greater responsiveness to young people's changes in circumstances.

Findings gained during the Evaluation have been used to guide formative change. For example, problems for families were identified during the evaluation around the application of the Family Assets Test and the Government responded by increasing the discount applied to the value of family businesses, including farms.

Within the client group of YA customers are diverse sub-groups ranging from tertiary students to homeless young people. The strategy of the evaluation had to encompass the impact of YA on the customer group as a whole, while also gathering some information on the differing impacts on more specific sub-groups. The interest in some sub-groups had to be balanced with the information requirements on other sub-groups and the whole YA population.

An Interim Evaluation Report was produced in December 1999 and a Final Evaluation Report is due for submission to Ministers in December 2001.

3. EVALUATION MANAGEMENT

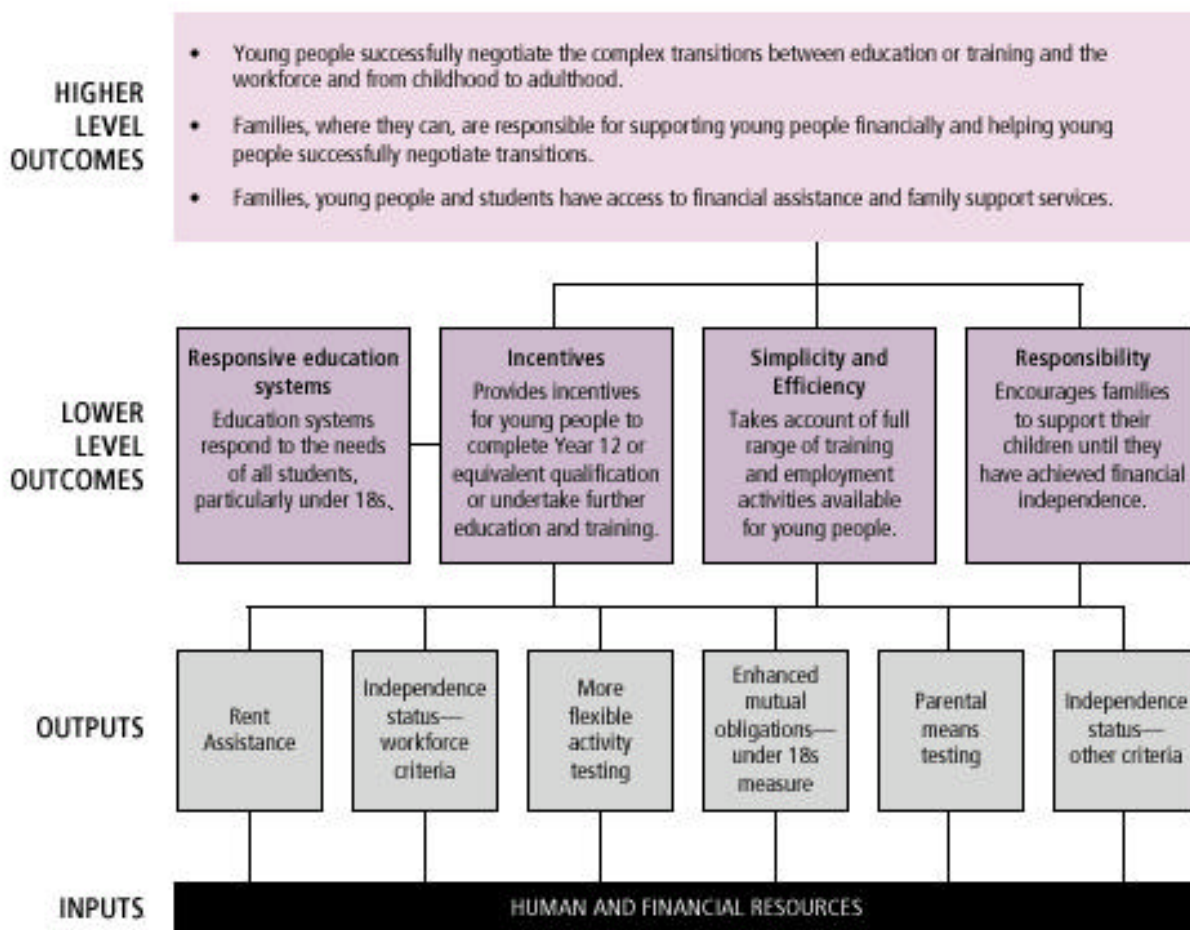
Given the complexity of the YA system and the wide-ranging objectives of the evaluation, it was necessary to use a series of different committees to inform the development of a framework that would ensure that the objectives were met by the planned research. A steering committee consisting of primary government stakeholders, a community reference group composed of State Government and community representatives, and a technical reference group of Departmental experts in evaluation and research were formed and provided invaluable guidance to the evaluation.

FaCS found it highly beneficial to use program logic as a tool for planning purposes. Program logic helps to clarify the program objectives, and provides a clear picture of

the complex and multi-layered outcomes. It was used to identify and describe the major program elements (inputs > processes > outputs > outcomes), the expected cause-effect relationships between program processes and the outcomes they are meant to produce and the external factors likely to affect achievement of the outcomes (Dept of Finance, 1994).

As a foundation to the Evaluation, the program logic was developed in consultation with the Evaluation Steering Committee, the Community Reference group and the Technical Reference group. Program Logic proved to be a useful framework on which to base research questions and methodologies and to ensure that the evaluation was comprehensive and well focussed. Figure 1 provides a diagram of the program logic used in the evaluation. (Department of Family and Community Services, 2000)

Figure 1



4. MULTIPLE DATA SOURCES

The Evaluation was a large and complex task and a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources were required. As is evident from the program logic

diagram a number of research projects would be required to measure all the outcomes and the majority of research projects would provide information on more than one outcome.

A number of research projects were chosen based on how effectively they would address the outcomes and research questions associated with these outcomes. These projects included the following:

- A three year longitudinal survey of YA customers examining their participation in education, training and employment and the impact of YA on this participation;
- A comparative analysis of data from the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) that provided information on the differences between those receiving YA and those not on YA;
- Two cross-sectional family response surveys of parents and young people on their attitudes and behaviour towards the provision of financial support by families to young people;
- A qualitative research project conducted in eight communities (three of which were indigenous) on the impact of YA in rural and remote areas;
- Three rounds of community consultations focused on the impact of YA;
- Analysis of Centrelink administrative data including some longitudinal analyses;
- An analysis of YA customer data on a sample of young people who were assessed as independent due to being classified as 'Unreasonable to live at home'; and
- A cross sectional survey on the impact of Rent Assistance on the Study and Housing Choices of Youth Allowance and Austudy Payment customers.
- Analysis of relevant time series data such as Australian Bureau of Statistics.

4.1 Longitudinal Analysis

Longitudinal analysis provides information on the dynamics of people's behaviours and measures change in activities and status over time. The management and data analysis involved with longitudinal surveys is complex but delivers more relevant and comprehensive information than a series of cross-sectional surveys. Similarly the longitudinal analysis of administrative data provides much greater insights than a traditional time series analysis of aggregated data. Longitudinal analysis provides information on flow as well as stock. The use of longitudinal research is relatively new in the context of government research around income support.

The three year Longitudinal Survey of YA Customers and the LSAY are both longitudinal surveys. The LSAY is jointly managed by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the Australian Council for Educational Research. These surveys provided detailed information on the dynamics of young people's participation and the impact of YA on this participation. Together with the analysis of administrative data these survey data were the major quantitative sources for the evaluation and were the sources that provided data from which the strongest inferences could be drawn.

4.2 Other Projects using quantitative research methodologies

Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected for the two cross sectional Family Responses Surveys that involved interviewing by telephone 1000 young people and 1000 parents. These surveys collected data on attitudes to parental financial support

for young people as well as data on actual levels of support. While focus groups were used in the preliminary stages of this research, the telephone interviews and case studies used in the data collection stage facilitated the capturing of detailed views of a wide range of young people and their parents, and ensured that the findings would be more reliable than would have been the case if focus groups were the primary data collection mechanism.

The Survey on Rent Assistance used telephone and mail surveys to ensure comprehensive coverage and to increase data reliability.

4.3 Projects using qualitative research methodologies

Three rounds of national community consultations were conducted. The first round was in late 1998 (soon after the implementation), the second round was in mid 1999 and the third round was in mid 2000. Consultations were held in all capital cities and a selection of regional, rural and remote areas. Participants included Centrelink staff, peak agencies, regional youth networks, service providers, State government departments and young people. Most feedback was received on a face to face basis. People unable to attend meetings were invited to attend written submissions.

The Effectiveness and Appropriateness of Youth Allowance and Activity Testing Measures in rural and remote communities study used focus groups and in-depth interviews to examine the level of customer and community awareness, understanding and support for current youth allowance arrangements and activity testing in eight rural and remote communities, including three indigenous communities. The data collected provides a summary of the issues that affect Youth Allowance recipients in rural and remote communities. It also contributes to a more comprehensive evaluation of activity testing which is also being undertaken by FaCS.

4.4 Combining Data from different sources

The theory of triangulation suggests that evaluation results are more likely to be accurate when different data sources are used. Where different data sources are used and results are consistent- there can be more surety that the results are accurate as opposed to research reliant on a single data source.

For some issues of relevance to this Evaluation, data from different sources were inconsistent. Some concerns highlighted in the community consultations and focus groups differed from findings from the longitudinal data analyses and other quantitative data sources. One such example was the appropriateness of the YA parental means testing arrangements for blended families. This was raised as a problem in the Community Consultations. However, the Family Responses Surveys did not find evidence of the parental means testing under YA having a different impact on blended families compared to other families. Combining data from different sources ensures a more balanced reporting of issues.

From each project a summary of findings were compiled and these summaries provide information for relevant analyses groups as well as aggregated total population levels. These documents then become the research source documents for evaluation. For the

evaluation report a decision was taken to combine data from all the sources and present data by themes and research questions rather than by data source.

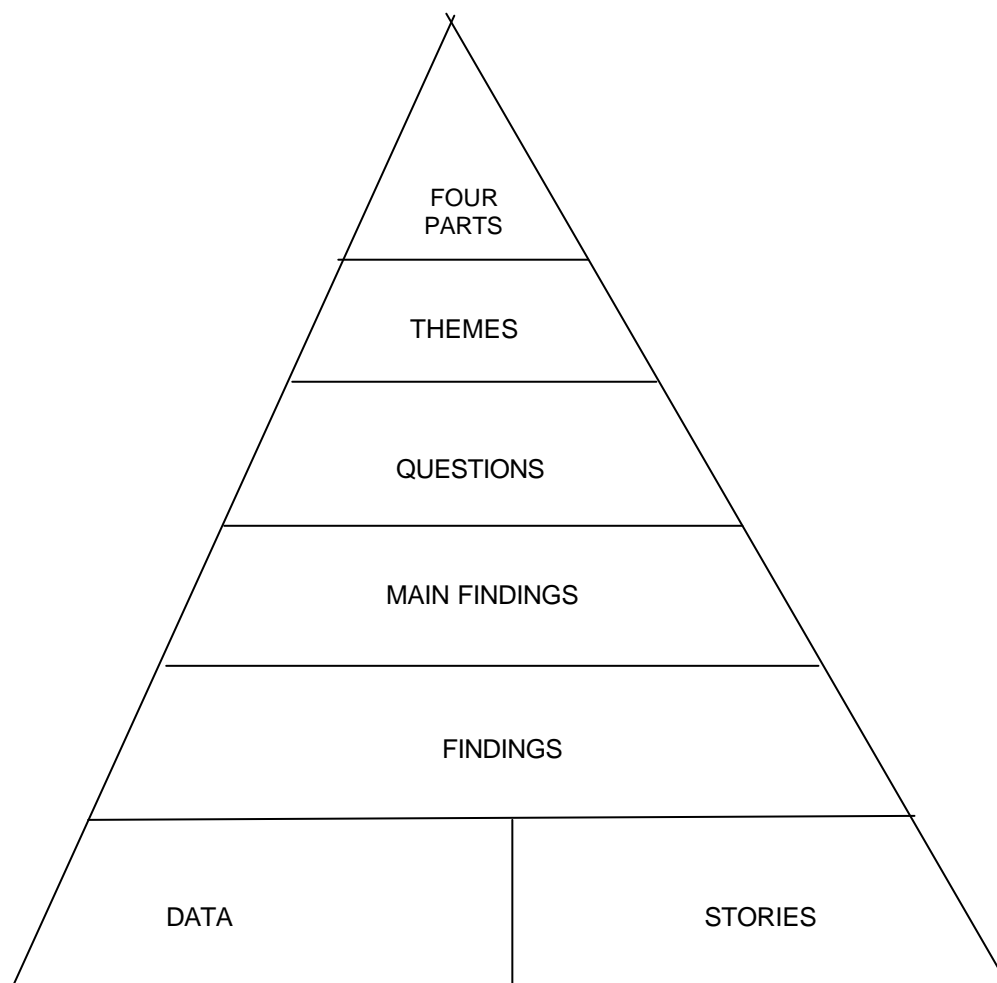
5. COMPILING A RELEVANT AND USER FRIENDLY EVALUATION REPORT

The final Report of the Youth Allowance Evaluation is to be completed in December 2001 and the summary research reports will be released as they become available. The first three summary research reports will be available soon.

The Interim Evaluation report of December 1999 has provided a useful background to guide the structure of the Final Report.

The structure of the Final Report was planned carefully from early 2000. The format of many varied reports were studied and compared. The YA Evaluation Steering Committee contributed to the selection of a suitable format. The chosen format draws close links between the questions that the research set out to answer and the findings. The research questions and themes of the research are used as headings which contribute to a more readable and accessible report. Figure 2 provides a diagram of the model used to plan the report.

Figure 2



The use of multiple data sources provides a large volume of source material. The process of compiling the final report requires a careful process of selecting and summarising the data to produce a concise and readable product. A narrative approach that was tied to the research questions was adopted for parts of the report. The Final Report has also attempted to make balanced use of both qualitative information such as quotes gained in community consultations and quantitative information such as graphs and tables.

6. CONCLUSION

We have adopted a wide range of methodologies - some innovative and some good practice, that should deliver an evaluation report of Youth Allowance which is accessible, accurate and comprehensive.

REFERENCES

Department of Family and Community Services (2000), **Youth Allowance Evaluation Interim Report**

Department of Finance (1994), **Doing Evaluations – A Practical Guide**

