Beyond the Rhetoric: Reaffirming Evidence-Informed Practice Through Rigorous Evaluation

aes25 conference

Canberra

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Acknowledgement of Country

Overview

Background

1. What counts as Research on Evaluation (RoE)?

2. Why should we care about RoE?

3. Accessing RoE

4. Using RoE in practice

5. The future of RoE and how to get involved

Q&A

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RoE needs assessment

Survey participants, total n= 111

	n	%
Country/continent of residence		
Australia	100	90.1
New Zealand	3	2.7
Solomon Islands	2	1.8
Asia	3	2.7
Europe	3	2.7
Industry		
Government (national, state, local)	53	47.8
Private/consultancy firm	23	20.7
University, TAFE, higher education provider	16	14.4
Community or not-for-profit	15	13.5
Other	4	3.6
Main role in evaluation		
Designing or conducting evaluations	56	50.5
Collecting data or performing data analysis for evaluations	14	12.6
Commissioning or contracting evaluation projects	13	11.7
Running programs and projects that get evaluated by others	7	6.3
Teaching and conducting evaluations	6	5.4
Studying evaluation	4	3.6
Contributing data or information to evaluations	4	3.6
Other	7	6.3

Aston, R., Tan, K., Franks, K., White, S. & Morgan, H. (2025). Using Research on Evaluation in Oceania, *New Directions in Evaluation,* Early View

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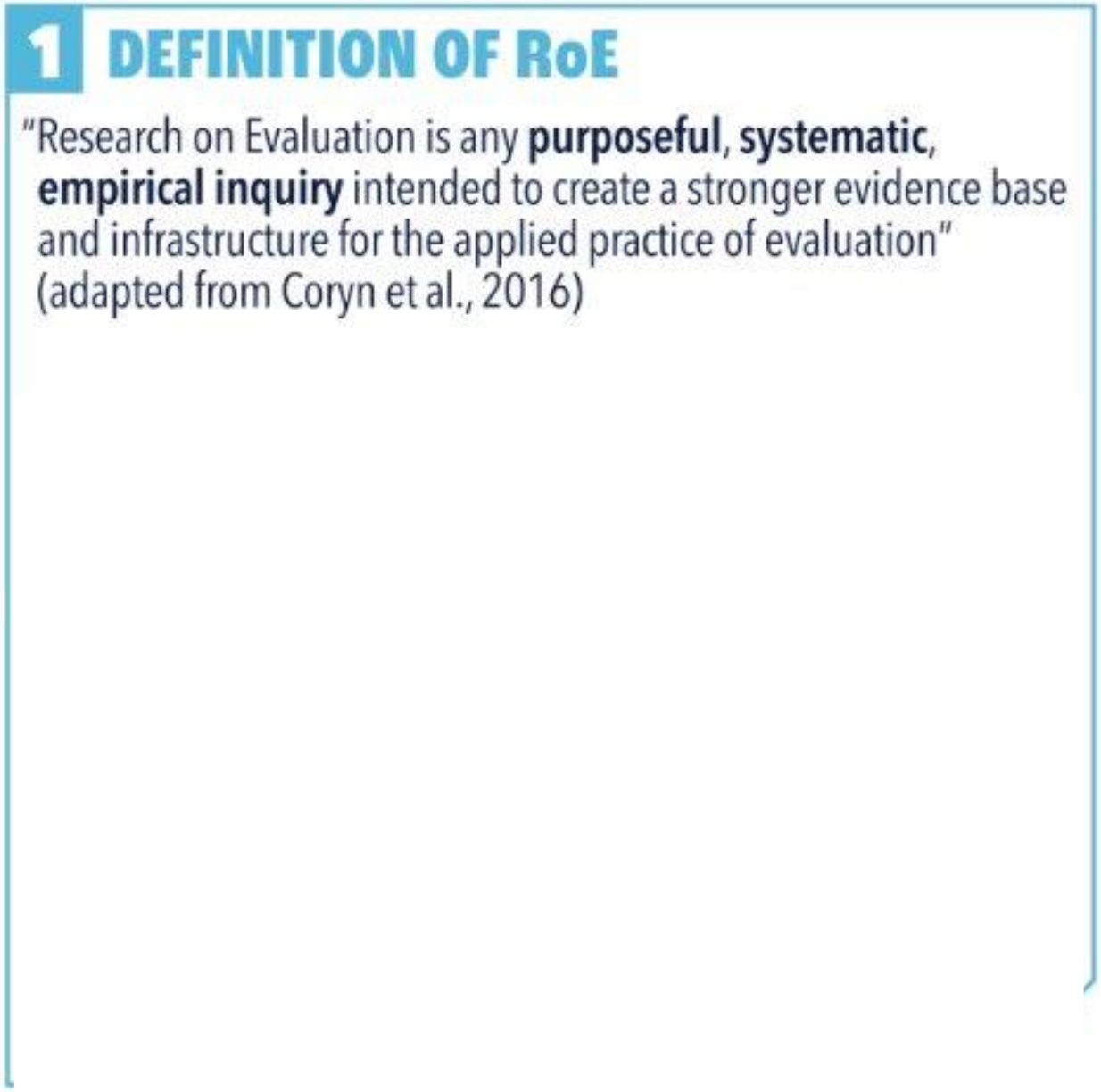
1. What counts as RoE?



RoE definition could be broadened

"…we can have different levels of research and evidence quality……non-empirical research can still have important research value for the discipline in some circumstances. Particularly where new theory or processes may still be emerging."

(Survey respondent, main role is using evaluation processes for institutional strategic learning & effectiveness, based in Australia)

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2. Why should we care about RoE?

2 IMPORTANCE OF RoE

Consistent with Szanyi et al. (2012) needs assessment of AEA members, RoE is considered important for guiding evaluation practice and bringing legitimacy to evaluation as a professional discipline.

"I use research on evaluation for capacity building work (eg papers on studies that assess ECB) and for designing evaluations that are a new method for me (eg research, case studies on how to do participatory evaluation)" (Survey Respondent)

RoE brings legitimacy to our evaluation profession

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3. Accessing RoE

3 ENABLERS & BARRIERS TO USING RoE

Barriers to uptake remain, including access to RoE and applying research findings to evaluation practice.

ENABLERS TO RoE ENGAGEMENT

More time to utilise RoE

Increasing access to RoE

More relevant RoE connected to practice challenges

Access to RoE is an issue

"Applying new learning from the formal academic/evaluation community can be exceedingly challenging when the rest of the house is already on fire and immediate firefighting becomes increasingly urgent."

(Survey respondent, main role is designing or conducting evaluations, based outside of Oceania in France)

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How can we improve access? OpenEval RoE

- Aim is to build a rigorous, evidence-based open access repository of RoE articles & public evaluation knowledge banks

- The repository will include:
  - results of our systematic review of RoE over the last 20 years
  - publications from all 15 evaluation journals
  - tagged open access articles
  - links to other repositories and knowledge banks

- **OpenEval RoE will be publicly available**

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How much RoE is there from 2005 – 2025 (so far)?

	Articles published 2005-2014			Articles published 2015-2021			Articles published 2022-2025*		
	Total Articles (n)	RoE articles (n)	RoE articles (%)	Total Articles (n)	RoE articles (n)	RoE articles (%)	Total Articles (n)	RoE articles (n)	RoE articles (%)
African Evaluation Journal (AEJ)	14	6	42.9%	78	38	48.7%	28	15	53.6%
American Journal of Evaluation (AJE)	355	63	17.8%	234	111	47.4%	105	52	49.5%
Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation (CJPE)	192	25	13.0%	138	28	20.3%	99	25	25.4%
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (EEPA)	201	2	1.0%	194	10	5.2%	97	-	-
Evaluation & the Health Professions (EHP)	268	9	3.4%	187	16	8.6%	110	-	-
Evaluation: The International Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice (EIJTRP)	254	19	7.5%	198	60	30.3%	85	32	37.7%
Evaluation Journal of Australasia (EJA)	106	6	5.7%	103	56	54.4%	52	14	26.9%
Evaluation and Program Planning (EPP)	540	44	8.2%	728	159	21.8%	374	44	11.8%
Evaluation Review (ER)	247	5	2.0%	93	22	23.7%	109	12	11.0%
Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation (JMDE)	171	21	12.3%	82	32	39.0%	78	23	29.5%
New Directions for Evaluation (NDE)	319	25	7.8%	224	58	25.9%	112	26	23.2%
Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation (PARE)	160	9	5.6%	114	7	6.1%	55	-	-
Research Evaluation (RE)	310	5	1.6%	254	57	22.4%	142	11	7.8%
Studies in Educational Evaluation (SEE)	253	18	7.1%	472	54	11.4%	240	2	0.9%
	3390	**257**	**7.6%**	**3099**	**708**	**22.9%**	**1686**	**256**	**15.1%**

*Note: Cut-off date for 2025 is 30 Apr 2025

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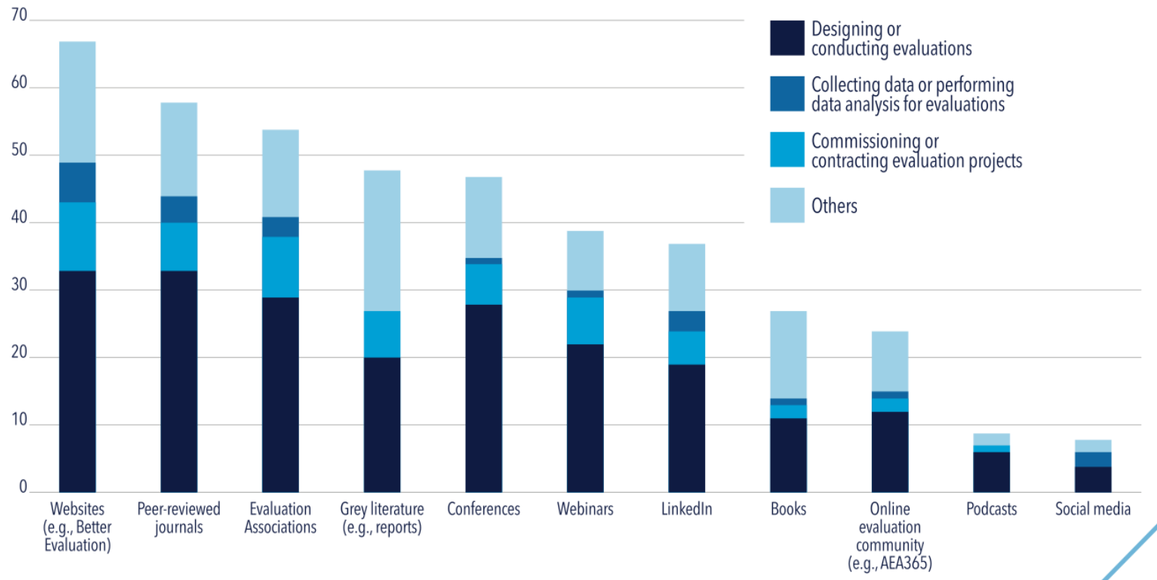
4. Using RoE in practice

4 ENGAGEMENT AND USE OF RoE

72% engage with RoE, using RoE to inform their practice of conducting evaluations and knowledge building.

Most accessed RoE through websites, peer-reviewed journals, and evaluation associations.



The positive impact of RoE on practice is only realised IF it is used

"[an example of how I have used RoE is to] understand which methods are empirically supported to deliver evaluations that best support the needs of intervention stakeholders including practitioners and clients."

(Survey respondent, main role is designing or conducting evaluations, NSW)

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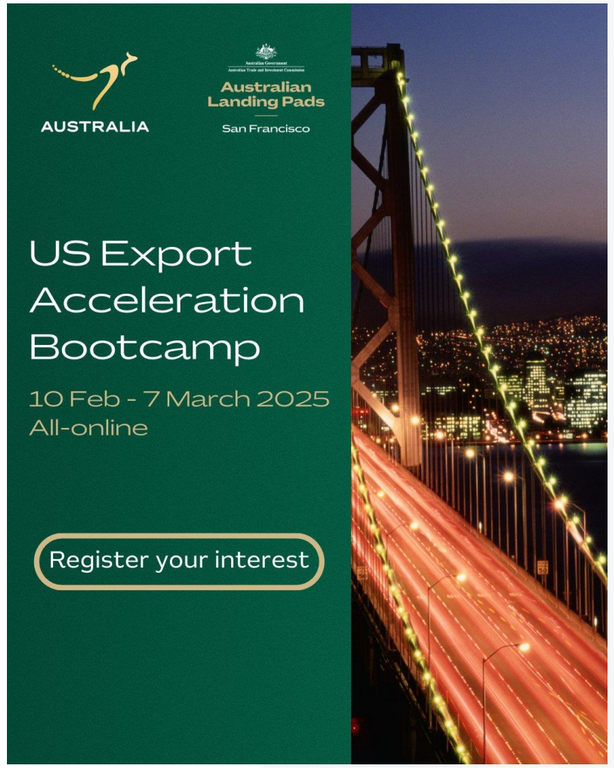
Case Example A: Austrade Landing Pads Program Review

launchvic

- Independent Program Review
- **Objective**: to understand the impact and value of support provided from launch in 2016 to participants
- **Primary purpose**: assessment against outcomes
- **Review Timeframe**: Short
- **Primary Data**: Alumni Consultations (interviews)



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Case Example A: Austrade Landing Pads Program Review

- **How many interviews are enough?**
- **Impact of using RoE**
  - Provided knowledge
  - Informed Methodology
    - ✓ Tender Proposal
    - ✓ Consultation Plan
  - Supported credibility and legitimacy

Check for updates

Practice Article

EJA | EVALUATION Journal of Australasia

How many interviews or focus groups are enough?

Evaluation Journal of Australasia
2024, Vol. 24(3) 211–223

DOI: 10.1177/1035719X241266964
journals.sagepub.com/home/evj
Sage

Kizzy Gandy
Verian, Australia

Abstract
When it comes to qualitative evaluation data, is more always better and what determines value for money? This article proposes two steps for evaluators and those responsible for procuring evaluations to answer the question 'how many interviews or focus groups are enough?' Step 1 is to consider the nature of the evaluation question to determine the sampling goal, importance of thematic saturation, and an appropriate sampling strategy. The article provides guidance on how many interviews and focus groups are needed to achieve different levels of thematic saturation based on empirical tests in the published literature. Step 2 is to check the skills of the evaluator, including whether they integrate behavioural science into their discussion guide and analysis to mitigate bias. This will determine – regardless of the number of interviews and focus groups – whether they will be able to generate useful insights for decision-making from the data. The article concludes that it is not sufficient to assess an evaluation plan's value for money by sample size alone and consideration also must be given to the characteristics of the evaluation design and the skills of the evaluators undertaking the project.

Keywords
qualitative sample size, focus groups, interviews, value for money, thematic saturation

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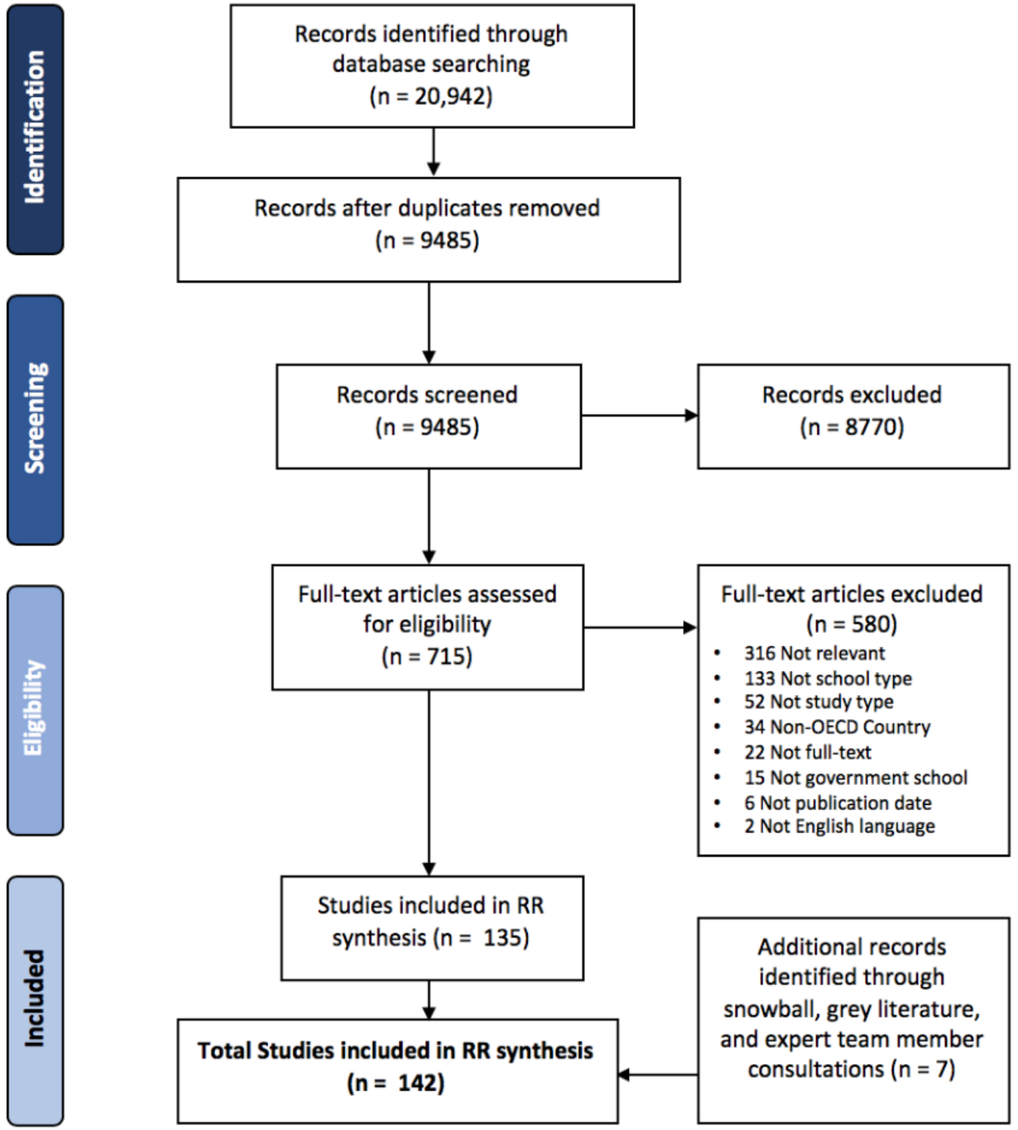
Case Example B: Victorian Department of Education Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Evaluation

- Independent External Evaluation
- **Objective**: testing the PLC initiative's theory of change and generating information about the impact of the PLC initiative at scale
- **Primary purpose**: in-depth understanding of effective PLCs within different contextual conditions (e.g. how many participants is ideal? how frequent should meetings be etc.)
- **Program:** Highly Complex
- **Evaluation methods**: included realist synthesis of PLC evaluation literature
- **Evidence Review timeframe**: Short (1-2 months)

Case Example B: Victorian Department of Education Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Evaluation

Impact of using RoE

- Provided knowledge about the evaluand
- Informed Methodology (including sampling approach)
  - Case study selection criteria
  - Case study analysis & reporting
- Enhanced utility of evaluation findings - during the evaluation



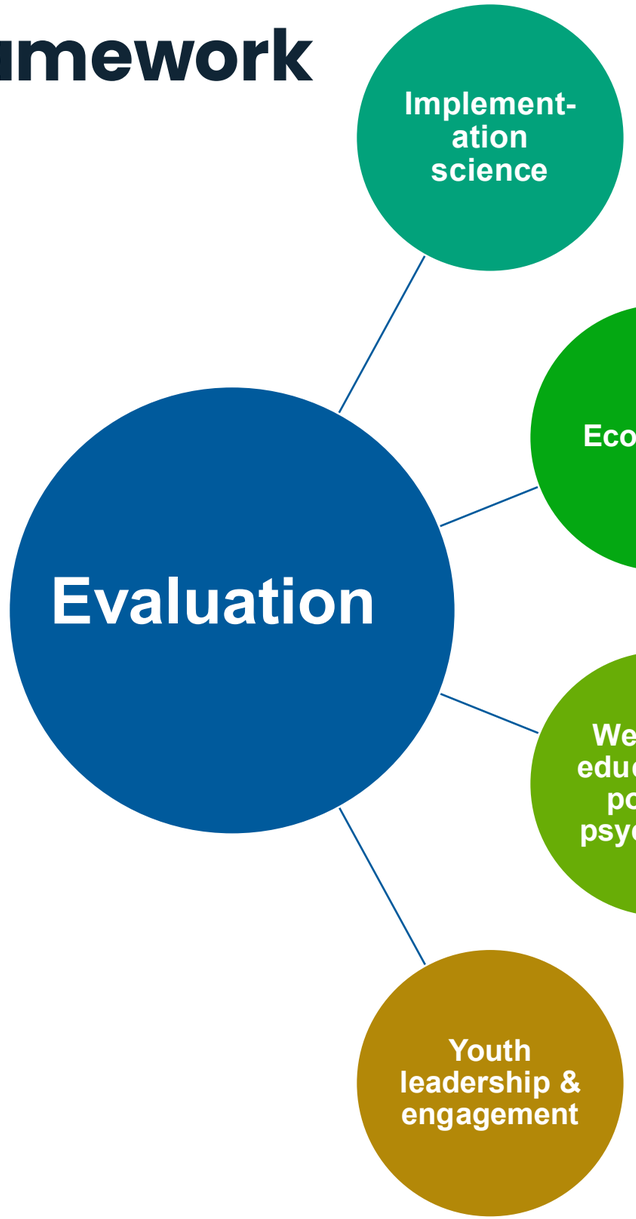
Clinton, J., Aston, R., Keamy K., Selkrig, M., Paproth, H., (2020). *Evaluation of the Professional Learning Communities Initiative: Rapid Realist Synthesis.* Prepared for the Department of Education and Training, University of Melbourne

Case example C: The Youth Impact Foundation Evaluation Framework

- **Project**: Evaluation partnership to build a framework to monitor the collective impact of multiple programs, reaching over 160, 000 young people in Australia and NZ
- All programs have shared outcomes, and theory of change for each program all contribute to organisations' theory of change
- Foundation wanted framework to include value for money component, where wellbeing outcomes are monetised in more strengths-based way
- **Methods**: documentary analysis, stakeholder workshops, multidisciplinary literature review

Foundation's Impact Report Piloting the Framework is available here:

Case Example C : The Youth Impact Foundation Evaluation Framework



- Schools as complex settings for implementation
- Understanding contribution of program design, delivery (i.e. fidelity, adaptability etc) and standardisation of implementation strategies (Cook et al., 2019; Damschroder et al, 2020)

- Return on investment
- Monetising outcomes using WELLBY (Fritjers, 2024)

- Expected wellbeing outcomes
- Characteristics of quality wellbeing promotion programs with young people

- Expected youth leadership & skill development outcomes
- Characteristics of quality youth engagement programs

$$average\ increase\ in\ life\ satisfaction \times number\ of\ participants \times duration\ of\ benefit = WELLBY$$

$$\frac{Total\ WELLBYs\ generated}{\$\ total\ costs} = \text{Effectiveness cost ratio}$$

Impact Measurement Framework for the Youth Impact Foundation (Aston & Button, 2024)

Case Example C : The Youth Impact Foundation Evaluation Framework

Impact of the TYIF RoE example

- Designed an evaluation framework guide – included WELLBY metric as part of synthesis + combined with evaluative reasoning
- TYIF reported the framework to be useful AND incorporation of RoE bringing legitimacy to their evaluation work
- Subsequent success in grant applications AND funding contributions from donors (before extensive evaluation data was available)

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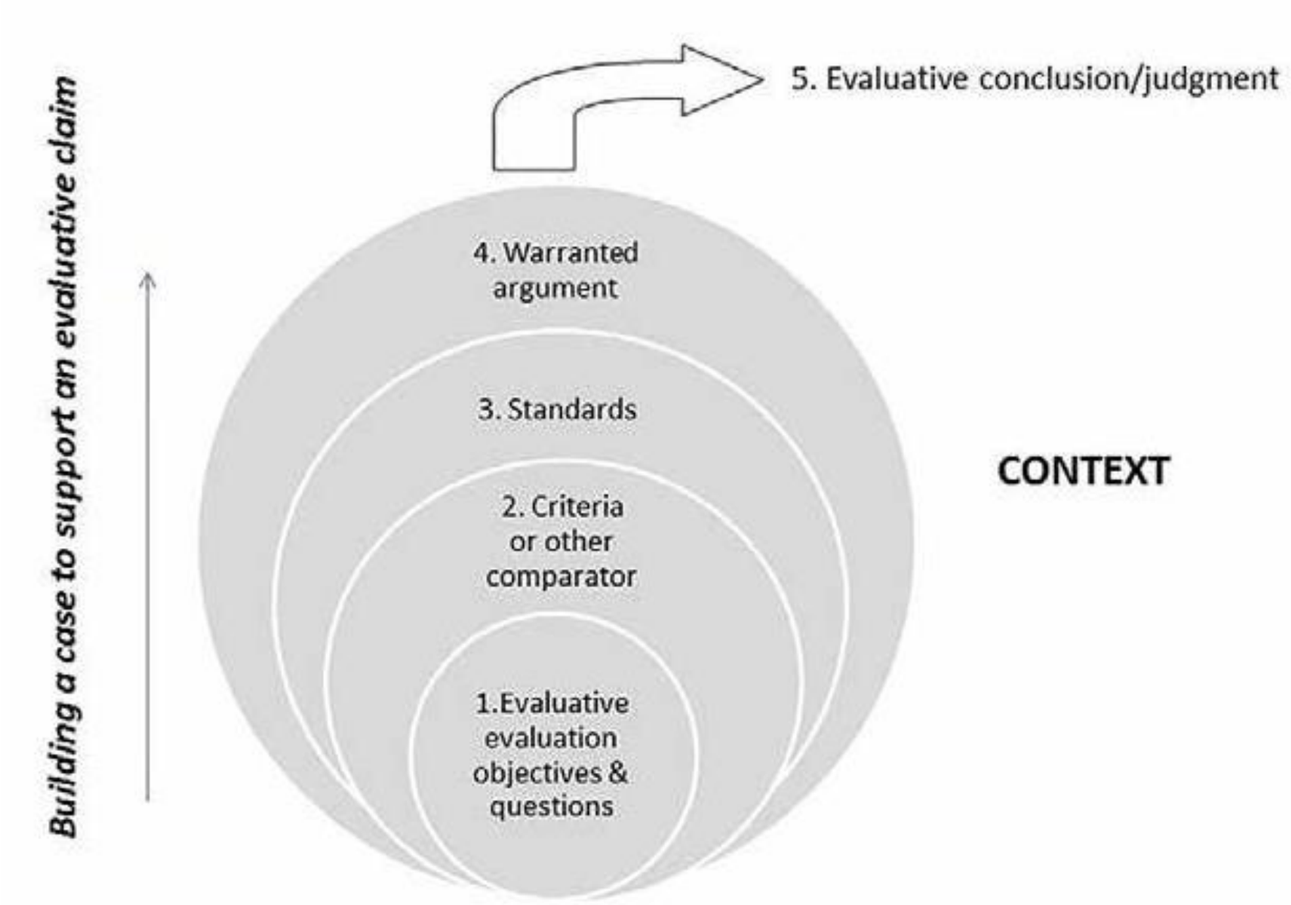
Impact of RoE: a reinforcing cycle for enhancing practice AND evaluation impact



ROE enhancing evaluation

- Rigour
- Research about evaluand

RoE use in evaluation enhancing impact

- Legitimacy
- Trust in the judgement

Nunns, Peace & Witten, (2015). Evaluative reasoning in the public sector in Aotearoa New Zealand: How are we doing? *Evaluation Matters – He Take Tō Te Aromatawai*, DOI:10.18296/em.0007

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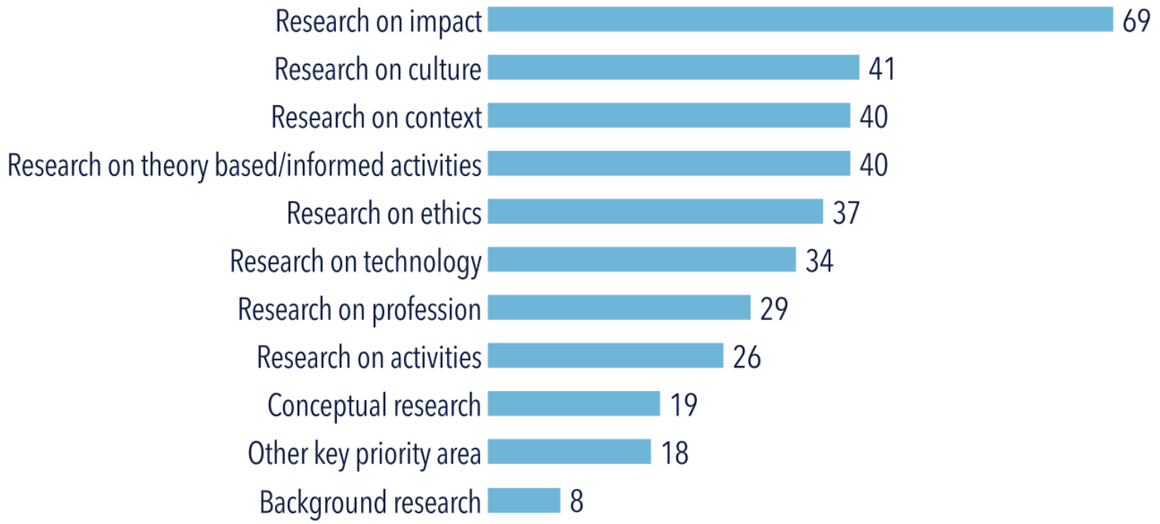
5. The future of RoE

5 PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RoE

Similar to Szanyi et al. (2012) research on evaluation impact is overwhelmingly considered the most important area of RoE.



More organisational support and funding are necessary to support evaluators who want to conduct RoE.

More RoE on evaluation impact, followed by culture, context and theory based/informed activities

"Evaluation that is culturally appropriate – research on how we make our worldviews explicit in our work as well as our positionality."

(Survey respondent, main role is designing or conducting evaluations, based in Australia)

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5. Acting on the priorities to Move RoE forward… six recommendations from the latest New Directions on Evaluation Special Issue

01

1. Use powerful explanatory designs in RoE (e.g. meta-analysis; causal analysis)

02

2. Increase RoE about evaluation theory

03

3. Adopt RoE reporting standards

04

4. Increase involvement of community & evaluators in RoE

05

5. Increase international collaboration in RoE

06

6. Incorporate RoE into evaluation training

Aston, R., Linnell, D. & Westine, C. (2025). Editors' Notes: Moving Research on Evaluation Forward. *New Directions in Evaluation*, https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.70003

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5. How to get involved

Conduct RoE / RiE

Consider publishing

Connect with us!

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Thank you

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Q&A

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