Valuing Evaluation through Synthesis

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this presentation are those of the presenters and do not necessarily represent the position of HRSDC. Comments should be sent directly to the presenters.
Overview

- Current Context and Evaluation Practice
- Introduction to Evaluation Synthesis
  - What is evaluation synthesis
  - Evaluation synthesis purpose
  - Types of synthesis, levels of analysis, and methodologies
  - Realist Synthesis (one approach to synthesis)
- HRSDC Experience
  - History of synthesis within HRSDC
  - New generation of synthesis
  - Challenges and opportunities
Setting the Context

- **What is evidence-based policy (EBP)?**
  - Assessing & applying evidence from a variety of sources, such as evaluation, when developing / modifying interventions

- **Why is evaluation important to EBP?**
  - Provides an evidence-based assessment of relevance, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions

- **For evaluation to play a role in this, it needs to:**
  - Be broader than one specific program and address cross-cutting issues
  - Identify what works, for whom, how, why, in which circumstances
  - Must provide relevant information before the intervention
The Current Practice of Evaluation

Evidence-Based Policy/Program Development and Implementation

Policy/Program Issues:
Does it work; How does it work; Why does it work; Will it work here; Will it work better than the existing programs; How best to implement it, at what cost?

Thematic Evaluations/Synthesis:
- Population-based (e.g. Aboriginal peoples)
- Outcome-based (e.g. employability)
- Instrument/intervention-based (e.g. Gs&Cs)
- Resource-based (e.g. cost variation)
- Etc.

Individual Program Evaluations
What is Evaluation Synthesis?

- An approach for addressing questions that can be satisfactorily answered without conducting primary data collection.
- Brings together existing evaluation findings, assesses them, and uses them as a database for answering specific policy and/or program questions.
Purpose of Evaluation Synthesis

- Serves 3 basic purposes:
  - Accountability / progress reporting on achieving objectives
  - Management decision-making on policy / program design & implementation
  - Evaluation / performance measurement planning & framing

- Decision makers have an interest in (and a need for) understanding how an intervention works and how it can be made to work more effectively when planning and implementing future interventions (or modifying existing ones)
Types of Synthesis, Level of Analysis and Methodologies

- Different types of evaluation synthesis, include:
  - Outcome / goal-based synthesis (e.g., employability)
  - Population group-based synthesis (e.g., Aboriginal peoples)
  - Instrument / intervention-based synthesis (e.g., Grants & Contributions)
  - Resources use synthesis (e.g., cost variation)

- Different levels of analysis / learning:
  - Descriptive synthesis: what works for whom?
  - Explanatory synthesis: how, why, when, so what?
  - Rapid synthesis: less comprehensive, limited in scope (pressing decision)

- Can use both quantitative & qualitative evidence
Realist Synthesis

- Uses systematic review to try to answer the question why or how an intervention works in the given context / circumstances
- Uses a generative approach to causation to produce a tailored transferable theory
- Context, mechanism, outcome configurations

Source: Pawson, 2006
History of Synthesis within HRSDC

- 1997 to 2003 – Lessons Learned Series
  - Reviewed national and international research as well as evaluations on the effectiveness of policy / program interventions related to various human resources issues (e.g., youth employment, disability policies, self-employment, programs for Aboriginal peoples, older worker adjustment, adult literacy, student financial assistance, etc.)
  - Deliverables:
    - Background report (unpublished, 50-150 pages)
    - Lessons Learned Package - Final report (20 pages), Brief (20 pages), Video or CD-ROM (12-15 minutes)
  - Used traditional literature review approaches to provide a summary of findings
Rejuvenating Lessons Learned Series

- To further feed program design and policy formulation, needed to look for better way to transfer knowledge of what works and lessons learned from evaluations into the process of organizational decision-making, learning and innovation beyond the concrete case at hand (individual evaluations)
- Initiative to develop new tools and approaches to disseminate findings to influence policy/program development, including through updated and rejuvenated Lessons Learned Series
HRSDC New Generation of Synthesis: Objectives

3 key objectives:

– Assess trends emerging across the interventions with respect to the design, implementation and performance of the cluster of interventions under review
– Identify factors underlying the trends observed above and examining these factors
– Draw lessons to be learned from the experience of the Department and others, as well as implications that could apply to improvement of accountability, intervention design and implementation, and performance measurement
HRSDC New Generation of Synthesis: Approach

- Uses recognized best practices of systematic and transparent reviews of evaluation and/or research:
  - Identify the synthesis question
  - Develop analytical framework for synthesis
  - Computerized literature search
  - Quality rating and selection of evaluation studies
  - Content analysis of individual study reports
  - Conduct interviews and supplementary document analysis
  - Synthesize findings and lessons learned
HRSDC New Generation of Synthesis: Methodology and Outputs

- Three methodologies:
  - Systematic review of HRSDC evaluations relevant to the area of policy under consideration
  - Systematic review of national (other government departments, other levels of government, think tanks, etc.) and international experiences (comparable countries) related to interventions relevant to the area of policy under consideration
  - Interviews with program managers, experts, to validate findings

- Three corresponding, intertwined outputs:
  - Technical Report – National and International practice in the areas of policy under consideration
  - Technical Report – Trends emerging from HRSDC evaluations related to the areas of policy under consideration
  - Synthesis Report – Consolidated roll-up report integrating the results and conclusions of the two technical reports and interviews, identifying what works, how, why, and in what circumstances
HRSDC New Generation Synthesis:
Preliminary (Generic) Research Questions

- What is the profile of the intervention cluster under review, which needs (related to the synthesis) were addressed by these interventions and how?
- What is the overall performance of the interventions in terms of relevance, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness? What are the barriers and facilitators in achieving expected results?
- What are the characteristics of the internal and external interventions that performed well (i.e., what works, how, why, and in what circumstances)?
- What lessons learned from this internal and external review apply to the Departmental context for designing a possible next generation of interventions?
- Are there emerging good practices of monitoring and evaluating interventions?
HRSDC New Generation of Synthesis: Process Map

Summary assessment and synthesis report of emerging trends in the design, implementation and performance of program in terms of: relevance; effectiveness; cost-effectiveness; and barriers and facilitators

1 - Synthesis Report on internal studies
2 - Synthesis Report on national & international studies
3 – Technical Report on key informant interviews

Consolidated roll-up synthesis report integrating the results and conclusions of the 3 preceding reports

Reliable and easy-to-use propositions on what works, for whom, how, why, in which circumstances, and so what for our practice
Project Management

- Internal team (line of production)
- Planning and budgeting
- Procurement and consultant management
- Relationship with potential users
- Reporting and dissemination strategy
Challenges and Opportunities

- Where related individual program evaluations are available, they may not have been framed with synthesis in mind, both in terms of content and quality.

- Data supplementation through review of national and international good practices might be useful but adds complexity related to the replicability of lessons.

- Field investigation may be required to:
  - Address information gaps not covered in existing evaluation reports.
  - Contextualize synthesis lessons learned in order to increase applicability.

- Project management challenges.

- Seems to be a huge appetite for this type of information.
Questions or Comments?
Key Synthesis References

- Pawson, R. (2001). *Evidence based policy: i. in search of a method*. Submitted to ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, Queen Mary, University of London.