

## EVALUATOR COMPETENCIES AND PROFESSIONALIZING THE FIELD: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the question “What is happening around the globe in terms of evaluator competencies, and in what ways has this influenced the professionalization of evaluation?” Using a Development Evaluation framework to address this question, the article examines the five case narratives provided in this issue. Several common themes are identified and the arguments for and against evaluator competency lists are discussed. The article then grapples with the next steps related to identifying core competencies and conducting related research, and suggests a potential way forward.

**Résumé :** Cet article aborde la question « Qu’est-ce qui se passe dans le monde en termes de compétences des évaluateurs, et quel impact en a subi la professionnalisation de l’évaluation? » Se servant d’un cadre d’évaluation de développement pour répondre à cette question, l’article examine les cinq récits de cas présentés dans ce numéro. Plusieurs thèmes communs sont identifiés et les arguments pour et contre les listes de compétences d’évaluateur sont discutées. L’article s’attaque ensuite aux prochaines étapes relatives à l’identification des compétences de base et la recherche connexe, et propose une perspective d’avenir.

The articles in this issue explore the concept of evaluator competencies and professionalizing evaluation. The research question used to guide this journal’s structure was “What is happening around the globe in terms of evaluator competencies, and in what ways has this influenced professionalizing evaluation?” To track developments and surface issues, we first provided intellectual grounding, then selected five case narratives that illustrated different contexts and perspectives and had key actors who were willing to share those stories. The case narratives each brought their own context, nuances, and—for most—a list of competencies. What can

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be learned from these experiences? How do these findings influence further development, refinement, and use of evaluator competencies, and ultimately contribute to the professionalization of the field? We draw on the case narratives to explore these questions and concepts. Our intention was to document what is currently unfolding in the field, to provide initial analysis, and, with that, to encourage learning. We also acknowledge two realities that bring their own inherent biases. First, we recognize that there are likely to be voices that are not heard in these stories (as nearly all the authors acknowledge) who may have brought different perspectives and insights. Second, we bring our own biases regarding the development of evaluator competencies and professionalizing the field, which unavoidably influence our analysis.

The framing process of *Developmental Evaluation* (Patton, 2011) shaped an exploration of the cases in an initial effort to answer our central question. Developmental evaluation (DE) provides a process to engage with challenging problems that exist in complex, dynamic environments (Hargreaves & Podems, 2012). In this case, we grapple with the complex nature of developing evaluator competencies that, in turn, plays into the larger issue of how, and if, we can actively work to professionalize evaluation. DE is further relevant as it acknowledges the complications brought about when there is little agreement on how to achieve a goal, in this case further complicated by disagreement on the goal itself. Patton suggests that DE provides a useful and pragmatic alternative for five specific types of complex situations, two of which directly apply to our situation: (a) supporting ongoing adaptation and development of a program (in this case the evaluator competencies) as it responds to changing conditions, and (b) implementing a multilevel, multisectoral (cross-scale) system-change initiative (Hargreaves & Podems, 2012). DE encourages the framing of concepts, tracking developments and surfacing issues, which we attempted to do with this special issue.

## BROAD ANALYSIS OF THE FIVE CASE NARRATIVES

A broad analysis of the five case narratives provides several themes. First, they illustrate the various motivations that exist for developing evaluator competencies. These lists derive from evaluation societies, governments, and multilateral organizations. Second, they show that the process is not always started, continued, and implemented by the same stakeholder groups. Although the movement was often initiated by one key group, it was sometimes implemented by another

and, throughout the process, influenced by many. For example, in South Africa, while the initial momentum originated with the local evaluation society, the actual process and eventual development of the competencies came from government and included a wide variety of influences. Third, these case narratives explicitly mentioned the importance of their process. Regardless of where the impetus for evaluator competencies came from, all processes to develop an initial competency set included some kind of engagement in various levels of research and consultation. Finally, the case narratives revealed the varying length of engagement needed to develop a competency list. The length of the process to develop an initial list varied considerably, with some processes taking a few months and others years, including one that is still ongoing.

Table 1 compares the impetus for the development of each competency set, the process for establishing competencies, and the time period for their development.

## THE INTENDED USE OF EVALUATOR COMPETENCIES

Each case narrative provides evidence regarding how evaluator competencies are intended to be used. The Aotearoa New Zealand competencies are broad and intended for evaluators, commissioners of evaluation, employers, trainers, and teachers of evaluation and tertiary education. UNAIDS' competencies are aimed at staff recruitment and evaluation capacity development, while South Africa's DPME primarily intends that their list will be used to commission evaluators, build internal capacity, and develop government job descriptions. The South African case narrative also uniquely identified and explicitly stated that poor-quality evaluations are an issue, and one use for the competencies was to address that problem. The Canadian case narrative describes their competency list and subsequent credentialing system as one that is intended to explicitly promote the professional practice of evaluation. The Russian case narrative suggested the potential for multiple lists to be developed and implied varying uses for their impending competencies. While the explicitly stated uses vary, there appear to be common advantages and challenges for all lists.

*Advantages of having established evaluator competencies.* Several perspectives inform a discussion regarding the potential advantages of having established evaluator competencies. First, there is the perspective of those who will use the evaluator competencies to select

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Key Steps to Develop Evaluator Competencies**

<i>Case narrative</i>	<i>Impetus for development of evaluator competencies</i>	<i>Process for establishing competencies</i>	<i>Time period</i>
Canada (Canadian Evaluation Society: CES)	CES members questioning their professional identity and a desire to better define the nature of their work and examine means of recognizing the skills and knowledge required to do evaluation.	<p>CES developed the Guidelines for Ethical Conduct through extensive consultations. The guidelines address issues of competence, integrity, and accountability for evaluator.</p> <p>CES funded the CBK/Core Body of Knowledge study.</p> <p>CES commissioned a study to examine evaluator credentialing, which resulted in an action plan for professional designations.</p> <p>CES membership participated in an extensive consultation process, and CES decided to develop a Credentialled Evaluator designation.</p> <p>Crosswalk of evaluation competencies to inform the development of the CES Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice.</p> <p>Suggested competencies proposed to CES membership, membership engaged for feedback, and competencies revised.</p> <p>Revised competencies became the foundation for the development of the Canadian Credentialled Evaluator designation and were formally adopted by CES in May 2009.</p>	<p>Initiated in 1988, approved in 1996, reviewed and reaffirmed in 2006 and 2008</p> <p>2002</p> <p>2006–2007</p> <p>2007</p> <p>2007</p> <p>2008</p> <p>2009</p>
New Zealand (Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association: ANZEA)	ANZEA members' need to identify how best to support the learning, development, and accountability needs of their evaluation members and clients.	<p>Established a working group within ANZEA to focus on competencies.</p> <p>ANZEA engaged evaluation community through workshops to inform the competencies</p> <p>A working group within ANZEA developed the competencies</p> <p>Redrafting and release of the competencies list was undertaken (ANZEA)</p>	<p>2009</p> <p>2010</p>

<p>South Africa (Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation: DPME)</p>	<p>Government's need to support institutionalization of M&amp;E. This included strengthening the capacity of government M&amp;E staff and a transparent approach to selecting and vetting evaluators who are not employed by government.</p>	<p>Government tasked CLEAR AA (a regional evaluation and learning centre) to research and write the draft evaluator competency list.</p>	<p>2011</p>
<p>Russia (various stakeholders including government entities, universities, NGOs, consulting companies, and newly established national evaluation association)</p>	<p>Various. Government need to institutionalize regulatory impact assessment. Universities need to have a foundation for developing evaluation curriculums. Practitioners need to better define their services and identify areas for professional development. Evaluation association need to clarify the nature of the evaluation profession and its unique features as compared to other professions.</p>	<p>Government and South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) engaged in the process of vetting draft competencies. Government worked closely with the consultants on writing the competencies, approved the draft competency list, and began testing them in government.</p> <p>Reactive by nature. Not well defined or coordinated. The issue was formally raised and discussed in a systematic way at the regional evaluation conference in Moldova in September 2013.</p>	<p>2012</p> <p>2013</p> <p>2013</p>
<p>The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)</p>	<p>UNAIDS' need for a solid foundation for the selection of their M&amp;E staff, to enable more effective individual and organizational performance assessments, and to support capacity-building for UNAIDS staff and partner organizations.</p>	<p>UNAIDS tasked a small working group to lead the process and develop the competencies.</p>	<p>2009</p>
<p></p>	<p></p>	<p>This group led a consultative process with multiple stakeholders. The competencies were piloted in different regions in the world. The competencies were reviewed and endorsed by the M&amp;E Reference Group.</p> <p>The final competency assessment tool was disseminated.</p>	<p>2009</p> <p>2009</p> <p>2009</p> <p>2010</p>

or commission evaluators. Without the formal guidance that is provided by having an evaluation competency list, these stakeholders may be apprehensive about hiring the “right” evaluator. Providing an “objective” (i.e., externally observable, value-free, transparent decision-making process) reason for selecting a “competent” evaluator would most likely be viewed as useful to this group. For example, the UNAIDS and South African DPME examples provide specific competencies whereby an evaluation commissioner can “score” a potential evaluator against that list and provide an objective reason for hiring that person or her evaluation team.

If the evaluation is then found not to be useful or deemed of poor quality, the person responsible for commissioning that evaluator can demonstrate how he or she transparently used the competencies to select the evaluator, thereby firmly shifting the blame (and, to some extent, the responsibility) for the poor-quality, or unused, evaluation. This logic, however, is somewhat flawed as it does not recognize the role of the commissioner in effectively managing the evaluation process.

This example can be analyzed from a slightly different perspective. Those who commission evaluations want “good” evaluators who can then assist them to make informed decisions about their program, policy, or other management decisions. However, choosing an evaluator is not like buying a car. When people buy a car, they know why they want it and how they intend to use it, and can then assess the car against their chosen criteria, such as the ability to drive on dirt roads, child-safety latches, and air bags. We know what to expect with a car. By contrast, evaluation commissioners do not always know what to expect from an evaluand, yet at the same time they want some criteria for how to select the “best” evaluator. While a competency list would assist in that selection process, it is not empirically demonstrated that an evaluator who can tick off all the boxes would provide the most useful evaluation (even if the process and the evaluator are well managed by the commissioner). At the same time, it does logically make sense that a list vetted by multiple stakeholders may provide some value in helping to make a more informed decision.

Then there is the perspective of those who design evaluation courses, teach evaluation, and provide guidance to novice evaluators. The assumption is that a person having these core skills would be a competent evaluator who would then be more likely to implement feasible, credible, and useful evaluations. This list would then likely

be useful in guiding how to focus learning about evaluation. For practitioners, the list would similarly direct how to continually improve their knowledge and skills. Thus, this group of stakeholders would likely use these lists more as guides (not as requisites) for nurturing the field of evaluation. For instance, the UNAIDS' case narrative talks about the experience of M&E professionals, using the UNAIDS' evaluator competency list as a self-assessment to improve people's knowledge and skills. The CES article notes how their competency list is used to inform the professional development and training programs in Canada. In Aotearoa New Zealand, competencies are aimed at supporting the learning and development (as well as accountability) needs of their evaluation members and clients. South Africa's DPME is using competencies to guide the development of evaluation capacity building courses. This perspective and approach somewhat mitigate the fear that a competency list will only be used to determine who is, and who is not, an evaluator.

*Challenges to having evaluator competency lists.* The literature notes that evaluation is often more art than science. It is also political and context-specific (Stake, 2004; Patton, 2008). In evaluation there is no perfect evaluation design. By default, there is also no perfect evaluator or evaluation team. Therefore an evaluator competency list that is used to vet and select evaluators can be interpreted as a bureaucratic way of understanding evaluation, ignoring the nuances and the reality that often influence and are needed for feasible, useful, and credible evaluation practice.

The political issues surrounding competency lists and their inherent potential for increased control cannot be underestimated. A perceived danger posed by having a competency list is the assumption that these competencies could lead to control over entry into the field of evaluation and therefore determine who is and who is not an evaluator. This could be viewed as positive (e.g., it addresses the challenge of charlatans) or negative (e.g., the competencies can be used to keep out evaluators with different perspectives or approaches to evaluation).

The idea that a list of competencies may limit evaluation practice is raised in several case narratives. The Canadian article specifically emphasizes that evaluation is a generative and evolving field. It points out the danger of having a competency list that does not evolve, as the evaluation context invariably does. In other words, a static list may define who is and who is not an evaluator at a certain

time. The UNAIDS chapter makes a similar point, noting that the competencies developed by UNAIDS are a product of their time. Competencies that would be considered desirable in 1995 will most likely look different in 2014 as evaluation thinking continues to evolve (as will the political, social and economic contexts within which interventions are designed and implemented). For example, systems thinking and feminist evaluation have brought new perspectives to evaluation that were not a prominent part of the evaluation discussion 20 years ago. If a competency list is not updated as the evaluation field grows, it will quickly become outdated and potentially stunt an evaluator's and the profession's growth.

### CONTINGENCY PLANNING—FORKS IN THE ROAD

There is a fundamental challenge that would appear to prevent the development of evaluator competencies: the lack of solid research that links specific competencies to high-quality evaluators and useful, credible evaluation (this fact is also true for other fields). Regardless, evaluator competency lists do exist, new lists are being developed, and these lists are being used around the world. What we still do not know at this point in the journey is how these competencies lists have (or have not) influenced the quality of evaluators and, ultimately, evaluation processes and products.

Further, what are the potential consequences of having different competency lists? Multiple lists may send a signal that our field is unsure what constitutes an evaluator. This signal is most likely accurate given the lack of empirical evidence that clarifies this and the continuing debates in the evaluation field around, for example, what constitutes credible evidence. On the other hand, these multiple lists embrace the plurality that exists within our field and the fact that competencies are contextually driven, which may militate against having agreed-upon competency lists.

This raises the question: Could one core list meet all required needs for all evaluations around the globe? If we want to move toward professional status, it is likely that we need to identify core competencies that would be appropriate in any culture and in any evaluation context. Yet who is best positioned to identify and drive this identification? Academics, evaluation societies, governments, foundations, or multilateral organizations? The case narratives suggest that each would bring its own values, experiences, and needs to determine the core competencies. This, in turn, would strongly influence (some

would say bias) the final list. The conundrum is then, without a core set of competencies, how do we ensure high-quality evaluators and move evaluation from a field to a profession?

## SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

One key criticism that surrounds evaluator competency lists, noted by Andy Rowe and others in this issue, is that they are not rooted in solid research. At the same time, the initiatives described in this journal and the many others that exist (e.g., Japan, IDEAS, DFID, SEVAL) are providing rich sources of data with which this research can be conducted. While DE appears to be an appropriate approach suitable for its ability to address complexity and capture what is happening, grounded-theory research may also provide an alternative or complementary method. For example, data exist and continue to emerge that can be collected and analyzed to further explore evaluator competency initiatives and their influence, complications, effects, and impacts. Yet initiating this research would bring its own challenges. Therefore, in addition to discussing the challenges of who should determine core evaluation competencies, we should perhaps consider who is best placed to conduct the research that underpins that decision.

We would be remiss not to touch on the issue of power with regards to this type of research. There is a danger of powerful groups dominating the research—groups that have money (e.g., donors), groups with political clout (e.g., governments), larger evaluation associations, or those with more access to funding. This is linked to the fear that the powerful will then use their paradigm to determine who is qualified to value policies and programs that are meant to (most often) improve the lives of others who are frequently in a less-powerful position.

Who is in a position to be a global conductor orchestrating systemic collection of these data and their analysis? Evaluation is derived from multiple social science fields, is influenced heavily by practitioners, and can cover anything from child nutrition to biodiversity to community development. Who will (and should) take ownership, and who will (and should) invest in research concerning evaluator competencies, research that has far-reaching implications for every field that touches on the improvement of the social condition?

While evaluators are in a unique position to provide empirical guidance regarding social interventions and policies that aim to improve the lives of human beings and our environment, we lack empirical guidance that determines who is qualified to provide this advice. If we are to move evaluation to a profession, we need to carefully consider our next steps. The momentum is there. We need to keep the discussion moving forward.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Jean King for her influential comments and thoughtful guidance.

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