

Research and Practice Note

DEFINING THE BENEFITS, OUTPUTS,
AND KNOWLEDGE ELEMENTS OF
PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Abstract: The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) has undertaken a project to explore the benefits that can be attributed to program evaluation, the outputs necessary to achieve those benefits, and the knowledge and skills needed to produce the outputs. Benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements were articulated and confirmed through a number of consultations with CES members and the international evaluation community. The consultation process was also successful in encouraging dialogue about the nature of evaluation and in raising considerations about the definition and promotion of program evaluation. The findings of the project can be used by the CES, and indeed by other evaluation organizations, to support their advocacy and professional development initiatives, and by individual evaluators to guide their own professional development and evaluation practice.

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Résumé: La Société canadienne d'évaluation (SCÉ) a entrepris un projet examinant les avantages qui peuvent être attribués à l'évaluation de programme, les extrants nécessaires pour obtenir ces avantages, ainsi que les connaissances et compétences nécessaires pour produire les extrants. Les avantages, les extrants et les éléments de connaissance ont été énoncés et confirmés par l'entremise d'un certain nombre de consultations auprès des membres de la SCÉ et de la communauté internationale d'évaluation. Le processus de consultation a aussi permis d'encourager le dialogue au sujet de la nature de l'évaluation et de soulever des considérations quant à la définition et à la promotion de l'évaluation de programme. La SCÉ et d'autres organisations d'évaluation peuvent utiliser les conclusions et constatations de ce projet pour appuyer leurs initiatives de promotion et de perfectionnement professionnel, et les évaluateurs peuvent s'en servir pour orienter leur propre perfectionnement professionnel et leur pratique d'évaluation.

■ The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) has undertaken an exciting and progressive project to explore the very essence of program evaluation. The project arose out of a strategic planning process carried out by the CES National Council in 2000 and 2001. During this process, two broad areas were confirmed as priorities: professional development and advocacy on behalf of the evaluation function.

The project was designed to meet both priorities by identifying the benefits of evaluation, the outputs of evaluation that lead to those benefits, and the knowledge and skills that evaluators should possess to competently produce those outputs. The benefits of evaluation were to serve as a major component of the advocacy program. The knowledge and skills were to constitute a Core Body of Knowledge (CBK).

Early on, the CES National Council agreed on the following working definition:

The CBK comprises those theories, skills, and effective practices that people, working largely without supervision, must possess in order to plan, carry out, and report on valid and reliable evaluations of the programs¹ of governments, other public sector agencies and organizations, not-for-profit organizations, and business. (Canadian Evaluation Society, 2001)

Periodically updated with proven new evaluation approaches and techniques, the CBK was to be the basis for the Society's professional development program. It was to serve as:

- a guide to CES members in their self-assessment of their capacity to conduct the various types of evaluation;
- a guide for the Society and its members in the identification of Canadian post-secondary courses, and possibly texts and other publications, that cover each of the knowledge elements contained in the CBK; and
- the basis for the Society's design of its own professional development courses where these are needed to supplement those offered by other institutions.

As in most activity analysis, the outputs were to play a central role. For advocacy, they were to demonstrate that the benefits being claimed for evaluation under the advocacy program were in fact attributable to evaluation. For professional development, they were to serve as the criteria for deciding on the content of the CBK.

Further, in this central role, the outputs would help ensure consistency between the benefits that were being claimed for evaluation and the capacity of most practitioners to produce them. Such consistency, effectively presented, would make an important contribution to the credibility of evaluation and thus to the advocacy program. Moreover, the greater the capacity of most practitioners, the greater the claims that could legitimately be made for evaluation. As a corollary, the more effective the Society's professional development program in improving that capacity, the more forceful could be the advocacy program.

THE UNDERLYING MODEL FOR THE PROJECT

The underlying model for this project assumed that, like the programs we evaluate, program evaluation has inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The model, shown in Figure 1, was deliberately simplified to provide a manageable framework for the project.

As the model shows, evaluation is conducted within a specific *evaluation context*. Social, political, cultural, economic, and other factors influence all aspects of the evaluation.

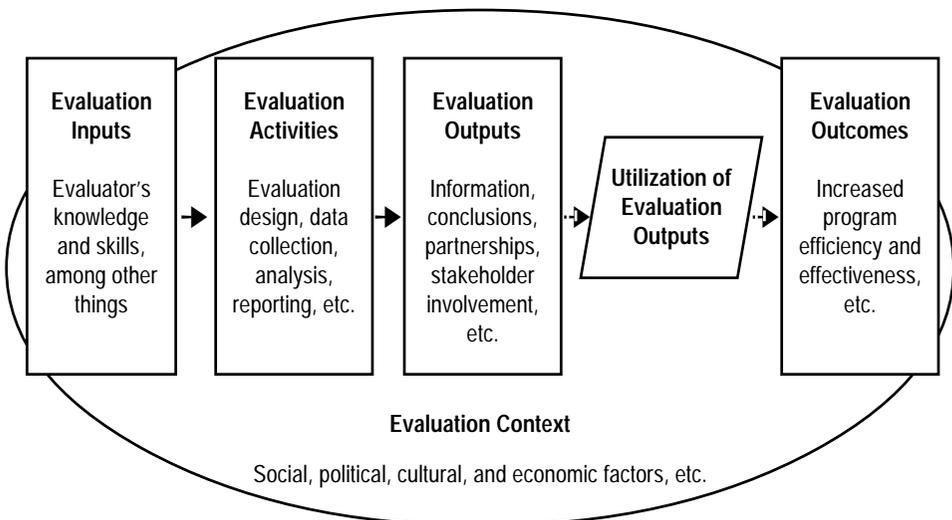
Evaluation inputs include funding, time, and other resources. For this project, we were concerned specifically with the knowledge elements (knowledge and skills) of the person or group of people conducting the evaluation.

Evaluation activities are what happen in the course of the evaluation, and they are manifested in evaluation outputs.

Evaluation outputs are the immediate results of the evaluation process. Typical outputs would include evidence, conclusions, and recommendations. Outputs can also include what is referred to as “process use,” such as manifestations of stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process. The latter warrants specific consideration, because it is thought to affect evaluation utilization and to result in benefits independently of the results of the evaluation (e.g., see Patton, 1997).

Evaluation outcomes are realized when stakeholders use the outputs of an evaluation. The dotted lines in Figure 1 recognize that the links between outputs, utilization, and outcomes are contingent on stakeholder behaviour. Typical outcomes include increased program efficiency or effectiveness. Other outcomes might include in-

Figure 1
Underlying Model for the Project



creased understanding of a problem, empowerment of a marginalized group, and better program managers. Although the focus of this project was on *benefits*, or positive outcomes, evaluation sometimes produces unintended negative outcomes. Such outcomes need to be recognized and the ways of dealing with them included as part of evaluators' training.

METHODS

The process of conducting a project is often as important as the results. We used a broad consultative process with CES members and other evaluators across the world in the hopes that it would:

- ensure that the results represent the diversity of the field;
- bring evaluators together in constructive dialogue about the nature of evaluation;
- increase the credibility of the results; and
- encourage individual evaluators to think more about how to maximize the benefits offered by their evaluations.

Our methods included a literature review, two Internet consultations with the evaluation community, two discussion sessions with delegates at the CES 2002 National Conference, and online discussions among the members of an international expert reference panel.

FINDINGS

One of the most exciting aspects of this project was getting evaluators engaged in discussing the nature of evaluation. The links that were forged among evaluators, and the thinking that was stimulated, were valuable in and of themselves. Through this engagement process, a number of important considerations were raised that relate to the definition of the field of program evaluation and its promotion. It is worth considering how CES can encourage continued discussion of these issues nationally, as well as on a global scale.

The process was successful in articulating the benefits of evaluation. It also identified a number of the evaluation outputs that are needed to produce those benefits. In addition, it specified a large number of knowledge elements that evaluators appear to draw upon in their work, and identified texts and other publications where the elements are described.

Very briefly, the benefits of evaluation identified through the project include:

- accountability for program performance and spending;
- improved decisions about program direction, allocation of resources, program design, implementation, management, efficiency, and evaluation;
- increased understanding of the program and of client needs, and increased capacity for program design, assessment, and improvement;
- social change arising from the promotion of different programs, the shaping of public opinion, or the cultivation of pluralism and democracy; and
- increased cohesion and collaboration among the program team and other stakeholders.

Identified outputs were categorized as follows:

- needs assessment outputs;
- evaluability assessment outputs;
- process evaluation outputs;
- outcome/impact evaluation outputs;
- efficiency assessment outputs;
- outputs of stakeholder involvement; and
- outputs spanning all types of evaluation, such as performance indicators or evaluation tools.

The following categories of knowledge elements were identified:

- ethics (integrity and competence);
- evaluation planning and design;
- data collection;
- data analysis and interpretation;
- communication and interpersonal skills; and
- project management.

The benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements are described more fully in the project report (Zorzi, McGuire, & Perrin, 2002).

We had initially hoped to be able to describe how each output contributes to each benefit, and which knowledge elements are needed to produce which outputs. While the consultations provided important and interesting information about benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements, we were unable to define the relationships between

them. In retrospect, our initial hopes were unrealistic, given the available time and resources. The review of the literature, the consultations, and the discussions of our reference panel all underscored the great diversity and complexity of evaluation practice. They also confirmed our expectation that the relationship would be “many to many,” both between knowledge elements and outputs and between outputs and benefits.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION IN CANADA

This project has implications for the development of evaluation as a field of practice in Canada and elsewhere. To begin with, CES can further explore the considerations raised through the consultative process. Open dialogue on an international level will further thinking in the field and increase understanding of the nature of program evaluation.

The CES Advocacy Committee will be able to use the evaluation benefits in the further development of the Society’s advocacy initiatives. It will also be able to draw on a number of the evaluation outputs in order to demonstrate to the various audiences that the benefits are in fact produced by the evaluation function.

In addition, the CES Professional Development Committee can begin work on the design of a comprehensive program that will facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge and skills evaluators require to competently produce the outputs.

The project also has implications for individual evaluators, who can use the lists of benefits, outputs, and knowledge elements to:

- explore the benefits their clients could gain from a given evaluation;
- identify the outputs required to make those benefits possible;
- assess their ability to produce those outputs (as individuals or as a team); and
- guide their ongoing professional development.

CONCLUSION

This project has identified some important issues for evaluators, and perhaps evaluation clients, to think about. By articulating the ben-

efits, outputs, and knowledge elements associated with program evaluation, it has established a foundation for the Society's future advocacy and professional development initiatives. It has also provided tools that individual evaluators can use in their own practice. Further dialogue and exploration of the issues raised throughout this project will contribute to the development of program evaluation as a field of practice, and will hopefully build collaboration and communication among evaluators internationally.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTE

1. For the purposes of this paper, the term *program* represents programs, policies, and initiatives. Likewise, the term *program evaluation* is intended to be inclusive of program, policy, and initiative evaluation.

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