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The Development and Implementation of a Structured Model for the Conduct of Program Evaluations in The NSW Department of School Education

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Introduction
The 1990s have been a time of extensive debate and discussion of quality assurance and quality management principles, first in the general management literature and business, and relatively recently, in educational contexts.
This paper is not an attempt to evaluate the range of approaches to quality management and quality assurance that are appropriate to school systems. Such an evaluation is provided in a recent article by Cuttance (1994). In recent times, state school systems in many countries are considering or establishing mechanisms for managing and assuring the quality of their outcomes.
In addition to providing an external assessment of the performance of

schools, the NSW quality assurance process explicitly seeks to evaluate the link between the school's development strategies and the outcomes achieved. The Quality Assurance Directorate is independent of the operational functions of the department. It contributes to the standards and improvement of student learning outcomes through its impact on school and program development. According to Cuttance (1994) it also contributes to accountability in the system by providing key performance information to hold schools, programs, regions and other parts of the system accountable for the standard of their performance and advising on possible improvements through external evaluations of the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of programs.

the nsw department of school education-context

The NSW Department of School Education is the largest school education

system in Australasia and one of the largest in the world. The NSW government school system is the fourth largest employer in Australia (60 000 staff),and ranks fifth in terms of revenue. There are over 755 000 students in almost 2250 schools. There is only one school district in the USA, New York, which has a larger student population than the NSW government school system.

The administration and management of the NSW Department of School Education is divided into ten regions. Each region serves a diverse community and has different contingencies impinging upon its delivery of education services. Although the department has a single strategic plan and common annual priorities, each region is confronted by different issues which determine its ability to respond to the provision of education.

Program evaluation

School reviews and program evaluations undertaken by the Quality Assurance Directorate employ strategies which focus on both quality assurance and quality management outcomes (Highett, 1994). The evaluation processes have an accountability and development focus with maximum stakeholder involvement in all stages.

Prior to Schools Renewal, system wide program evaluation was tied to the curriculum implementation process. A curriculum was introduced and at a fixed time within the ten year cycle it was evaluated. The program of evaluations also included reviews of policies and practices, such as the evaluation of Kindergarten enrolment procedures. Program evaluations were conducted by evaluation teams led by Inspectors of Schools. Each team was composed of representative members of the teaching service and included a skilled evaluator. The committee did not include any members of stakeholder groups outside the Department of School Education. A report was written and presented to the Director-General through the program evaluation coordinating committee chaired by the Assistant Director-General (NSW Department of School Education, 1986).

The contingencies which impinge upon the department post Schools Renewal have required the provision of information which is accurate, informative and timely. Regions and state office need to be responsive

to changing circumstances and channel resources appropriately, the Director-General and the Minister require feedback on priorities to give account of resources used and to better tune the planning process. This sense of urgency has required a re-engineering of the program evaluation model employed in the NSW Department of School Education.

theoretical contructs

No attempt is made in this paper to extensively review the evolution of the practice of program evaluation as a discipline and profession in its own right. Owen (1993) provides an excellent overview of forms and approaches to program evaluation.

Program evaluation has been characterised by the formulation of standards of practice (Stufflebeam, 1980) and the growth of associations, such as the Australasian Evaluation Society established in 1982. Over time a range of evaluation 'models' has developed from practice in a variety of contexts (Owen, 1993). The quest for accountability of resource use and the introduction of quality assurance and quality management has resulted in a resurgence of interest in the Tylerian objectives based approach to program evaluation first defined by Ralph Tyler in the Eight-Year Study (1950). The trend towards outcomes based evaluation in education is in keeping with the strong focus in the public sector. Program evaluation is a mandatory requirement of all public sector bodies in NSW and is regulated by the Office of Public Management.

Cuttance (1993, 1994) views school reviews, with a focus on accountability and development, as a type of program evaluation. Reviews of schools in NSW provide the mechanism to collect data for regional and statewide program evaluations.

management of program evaluation

The challenge confronting all program evaluators is not only undertaking successful evaluations but also ensuring that change occurs as a result of the findings. Managers responsible for the programs or services evaluated and those with a part in the overall resource management need to see the relevance of the findings and recommendations (Highett, 1994).

Quality Assurance Directorate has a commitment to maximum stakeholder involvement and openness in its program evaluations. To this end, the management of each program evaluation has high stakeholder involvement through an advisory committee and a reference group of practitioners. Each evaluation is managed by a Director (Quality Assurance) and is supported by a Project Officer and the Quality Assurance Directorate program evaluation team.

There are four phases in the evaluation process:
1. Initiation
2. Planning
3. Data Gathering and Analysis
4. Reporting

These four phases are an extension of the conceptualisation of evaluation utilisation proposed by Owen (Owen, 1993: 70).

Figure 1 Conceptualising evaluation utilisation (after Owen, 1993)
evaluation–>transmission –> enlightenment–>accountability–>behaviour
of findings–>justification–>prof. dev.
–>refinement–>program logic
–>development–>structures
–>policy
1 initiation phase
Program evaluations may arise from five main sources. They can be
commissioned by
●the Minister
●the Director–General or through the Director–General from State
Executive
●the Assistant Director–General (Regions)
●analysis of school review reports, school review framework data and
the annual system priorities; and
●acceptance of a contract with other sections of the department or an
external body or agency.
Commissioning Document
Every program evaluation is initiated by a commissioning document in
the form of a letter or memorandum from the Minister, Director–General,
Assistant Director–General or Director requesting that an evaluation be
conducted.
The commissioning document usually indicates an area of inquiry, the
title of evaluation, commencement and reporting dates and budget. The
commissioning document provides a basis for the development of project
terms of reference. Some commissioning documents are highly specific in
identifying what information is to be sought.
The commissioning document provides the basis for the briefing of the
project manager responsible for the management of the evaluation. The
commencement and final reporting dates, proposed date for the
submission of an evaluation plan, project budget allocations and QA
human resources available are outlined at the initial briefing.
Once briefed, the evaluation manager has the responsibility of
convening and involving the Advisory Committee and Reference Group in
the preparation of an evaluation proposal.
2 planning phase
Generally, one third of the resources for the evaluation are used in
the planning phase, one third in the data gathering and analysis phase
and one third in the reporting phase. Quality assurance processes are
built into each phase and each of the phases are subject to critical

reflection from a panel of peers.

Evaluation Proposal
Evaluation proposals are submitted by the Director, Program Evaluation
to the Assistant Director–General (Quality Assurance) for approval and
contain:
●a statement of scope and purpose

- terms of reference
- the composition of the advisory committee
- the composition of the reference group
- the design framework of the evaluation, including
- sources of data
- data gathering techniques
- data processing methods
- data analysis and interpretation methods
- the reporting model to be used.
- a timeline indicating key milestones and interim reporting dates
- a budget outline describing fiscal and personnel resources
- a process for reviewing the evaluation.

Prior to submitting the evaluation proposal to the advisory committee for discussion or to the Assistant Director–General (Quality Assurance) for approval, a discussion paper is submitted to the Manager, Program Evaluation for critical evaluation. This critical discussion is in the form of a forum and is a process of peer review. The project manager of the evaluation presents the proposed evaluation plan and defends the professional decisions made. It is a quality assurance process to assure the quality of the proposed evaluation. Once approved by the Assistant Director–General (Quality Assurance) the proposal becomes the evaluation plan. This plan is a public document and all progress reporting is done against it. A file is kept on the progress of all evaluations against stated timelines and key milestone reporting dates.

Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee chaired by the Director (Program Evaluation) or the Assistant Director–General (Quality Assurance), is a small group of the key stakeholders who operate at a senior level. The roles of the committee are as follows:

- to react to and give advice to the Project Manager about the proposed terms of reference and to ensure that the needs of stakeholders will be addressed in the evaluation;
- to provide advice about the membership of the proposed Reference Group; and
- to react to and provide advice concerning the findings of the evaluation and give suggestions about possible recommendations and policy options to pursue as a result of the findings.

The Advisory Committee usually meets two or three times during the evaluation.

Advice to Regions: Initiation

The Evaluation Plan is sent to each Assistant Director–General (Region) and approval for the participation of regional personnel in the Reference Group is sought.

Data Collection Requirements

If data are to be collected during school reviews, briefing sessions in each Quality Assurance Unit with team leaders and members must be held. Quality Assurance Unit staff may also participate in the trialing process.

If questionnaires are to be used, then a sampling framework will be devised to be representative of the strata of relevant stakeholders and

schools.
Data Analysis
The analysis of data will have been planned in considerable detail
during selection of methodology and the design of instruments. Data
analysis and interpretation methods are included in the Evaluation

Plan. All evaluations include an analysis of program costs and student
outcomes.
3 data gathering and analysis phase
Literature Review
All evaluations will have a review of recent research and previous
evaluations. The scope and extent of the literature review is
determined by the budget and the nature of the program evaluation.
Development of Instruments
Data Gathering instruments are developed and trialed.
Advice to Regions: Implementation
The Project Manager will advise the Assistant Directors-General(Region)
of the participating schools.
Call for Submissions
Statewide program evaluations normally involve a call for submissions
from interested parties. Advertisements are placed in the appropriate
media.
Reference Group
Each program evaluation has a reference group comprised of
practitioners, stakeholders at the operational level and
representatives of groups with a key interest in the evaluation. These
may include clients of the program, promoters and managers of the
program, those with an interest in the program , and those who are
affected by the program.
It is important to involve stakeholders early in the project to:
●ensure a sound grasp of the issues from their perspective
●set the stage for enlisting their co-operation
●gain an understanding of the needs of decision makers and the
expectations of stakeholders in relation to the evaluation results
●start the consultative process on a sound basis, thereby ensuring
later acceptance and ownership of the findings.
The key roles of the reference group are as follows:
●Provide advice about the proposed evaluation plan including the:
- sources of data
- techniques for data gathering
- timeline for the evaluation.
●ensure adequate, balanced representation of the views of the various
groups of stakeholders;
●assist with dissemination of information about the conduct of the
evaluation;
●assist with access to key sources of data;
●provide date for the evaluation;
●react to the analysis of data and provide suggestions about
implications for practice; and

•assist with dissemination of information about the evaluation's findings.

The reference group usually meets three to four times during the evaluation.

Data Collection Process

Project Managers ensure that schools and other participants are fully informed and their cooperation secured. The Project Manager will ensure that data collectors are briefed. This briefing will include:

- a discussion of ethical issues related to data collection
- issues to be canvassed
- synthesis of the data
- debriefing arrangements

Data Analysis

The data analysis strategies set out in the Evaluation Plan will be implemented.

4 Reporting phase

Report

A report in written detailing findings according to the terms of reference for the evaluation. Feedback from the Advisory Committee and

Reference Group are considered when writing up the findings and proposed recommendations.

External Colloquium

Scriven (1993) in his thirty one theses on program evaluation indicated that all program officers are biased towards favourable findings. Given this, the Quality Assurance Directorate makes a serious attempt to enhance the degree of objectivity in the evaluation recommendations by conducting a colloquium for each evaluation (Highett, 1994).

Prior to the final report being presented to the Advisory Committee the colloquium is held. The colloquium of six to eight persons uses the services of persons external to the evaluation process. Committee members are a mixture of departmental officers with policy experience, university personnel with expertise in the area of evaluation, and university personnel or other public sector officers with policy expertise. The colloquium members receive a copy of the draft report minus recommendations two weeks prior to the colloquium.

The objective of the colloquium is to explore possible scenarios, internal and external to the Department of School Education, that will impact upon the release of the report and therefore the type of recommendations that will have the most impact in resolving issues identified during the evaluation. Schwartz (1991) provided insight into the role of scenario forecasting as a say of providing background for the consideration of policy options. Given the timeline associated with action flowing through to resourcing decisions, as a result of the report, recommendations need to be strategic in nature and be relevant for at least a two year time frame.

Summary

The Quality Assurance Directorate within the Department of School Education has established a comprehensive range of integrated processes

aimed at ensuring and improving the quality of our operations so that they impact positively on the quality of students outcomes. A philosophy of accountability, development and above all openness underpins all that is done. Review processes across a large and complex organisation need to be integrated into directorate and system wide development and planning, if change is to occur in the quality of what is done.

Parallel to the school review program is a range of regional and statewide program evaluations. They are undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the services and programs delivered to schools. The evaluations are conducted in a way that maximises policy and managerial involvement while ensuring that the view of stakeholders and program participants are central to the evaluation process. To guard against an inward looking culture a colloquium is held for each evaluation.

Reports from each of the review activities are analysed and synthesised to produce an annual report for the system and for each region. The information contained is vital for the decision makers and feeds into the development of system wide strategic priorities.

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