

Policy, Evaluation and Practice

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Effective social action depends on a complex network of links. This paper is concerned with links and the role of Programme Evaluation in fostering links. Evaluation is presented as a key link between policy and action and as a potent way of linking universities and the communities they serve. These are lofty perhaps even pretentious aims. First it will be necessary to explain exactly what Evaluation, or to give it its full title Programme Evaluation, is as an area of applied social science.

Programme Evaluation is a well-established discipline internationally. In many countries it is a requirement for funding that a social programme is formally evaluated. The programmes to be evaluated include those with educational, health, social, economic, and community safety aims. So what do we mean by evaluation?

Like many terms used in social science, Evaluation has both a common or demotic meaning and a more technical, professional definition. This may be characterised as a contrast between everyday and professional use of the term evaluation.

Everyday evaluation is a characteristic of human cognition and feeling. We are constantly placing a value on people, events, activities and things. It would be unusual to perceive any entity without at the same time placing a value on it. Programme evaluation, on the other hand, is more focused and is concerned with placing a value on a defined programme whether this programme has social, health, educational or regional development aim. The analysis of the programme may be conceived as addressing three main questions; does the programme achieve its stated outcomes; how does it achieve these outcomes; and what do all involved in the programme think of it.

Everyday evaluation is based on implicit standards which are sometimes made explicit but don't have to be. Professional evaluation must be based on explicit standards for outcomes and the process of delivery.

Everyday evaluation is based on liking or not liking; wanting or not wanting and judging something suitable or not suitable on a personal basis. These judgements are essentially emotional with affection underpinning cognition. Professional evaluation, on the other hand, must be grounded in valid and reliable data gathering; it must be evidence-based and open for public scrutiny. In this sense programme evaluation is applied social science.

Everyday evaluation is intuitive and individual. Professional evaluation is rational, evidence based, and public. These differences are important and underpin the validity of programme evaluation as

- Objective and external
- A considered, explicit & transparent judgement
- Comprehensive
- Using triangulated perspectives and
- Leading to recommendations for policy, programme and practice.

Everyday evaluation, on the other hand, is

- Subjective and internal
- An opinion
- Partial

- One perspective and
- The basis for individual action only.

Since programme evaluation is concerned with the objective and public measurement of social and individual phenomena it is closely related both theoretically and methodologically to social science. The questions it poses and the answers it produces have important implications for the programme being evaluated both in its practice and the policy which it is expressing.

Programme Evaluation of Evaluation Research as it is sometimes known has a substantial international presence through professional associations and societies; through university departments and chairs; and through public policy departments. The results of programme evaluations and methodological and theoretical issues are expressed through a number of refereed journals. Programme evaluations are conducted in a number of fields including, particularly,

- Regional Development
- Health
- Social Services
- Education and
- Community Safety

Programme evaluation is, then, a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer questions about projects, policies and programmes. Amongst the questions a programme evaluation will pose regarding a programme are the following.

- Did it work?
- What happened?
- Did it do what it said it would do?
- Did it achieve its predicted outcomes?
- What happened that wasn't expected?
- How did it work?
- What caused what?
- What did it cost?
- Was it cost effective?
- What did people think of it?
- Would it have happened anyway?
- What is it being compared with?

Before a programme evaluation can be undertaken, particularly if there is not a formal requirement for it, there need to be convincing arguments. First of all an external and objective evaluation demonstrates public accountability for the programme. Second the results of the evaluation can contribute to the improvement of the programme both for its practice and for the policy of which it is a part. Third the evaluation can demonstrate that the programme has delivered value for the funds invested in it. Fourth the evaluation report can help to disseminate the lessons learned from the programme. Fifth the evaluation can lead to publicity for the programme and to publications in various professional and academic outlets.

Programme evaluation can be a key partnership activity between the university and the community which it serves. Programme evaluation is an important form of knowledge transfer. The university transfers social science expertise to structure and carry out the

evaluation. The knowledge of the programme gained through doing this transfers back into the university to inform its teaching and research.

I would suggest that the University should address programme evaluation in a number of ways. The discipline should be recognized as a key element in applied social science. You would know better than I the most appropriate home for programme evaluation. Typically it is found in social science or education or psychology departments. You should identify some internal programmes which would benefit from a formal evaluation. This would constitute an important element in what is described in higher education as institutional research. You should look for evaluation projects in the local community. As your capability develops you should look for regional, national and international projects.

I am here representing the Social and Health Evaluation Unit (SHEU) of which I am a Director and which has undertaken more than one hundred externally funded evaluations over a ten year period. The Unit now has branches in United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands and has been renamed as SHEU International.

At this point we could offer free consultation on possible programme evaluations. We would help you to use our proven Trident method which my colleague Elaine Hogard will be describing. We would love to offer support to your developing PE capability through staff training and, for example, joint supervision of undergraduate or post graduate PE projects. We are definitely here to help!