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# Editorial

Lyn Alderman | Janet Clinton | *Editors*

Welcome everyone to the 2015 Year of Evaluation. These are exciting times for evaluators and the discipline of evaluation. The aim of designating 2015 as the International Year of Evaluation is to advocate and promote evaluation and evidence-based policymaking at local, regional, national and international levels.

This year, there are 20 torch lighting events being held around the world and we will host ours at our annual conference in Melbourne this September. Through the symbolic passing over of the torch and the interaction between participants at the 20 events, the following four themes will be discussed:

**Theme 1:**

Identifying the key future priorities for the global evaluation community to launch the 2016–2020 Global Evaluation Agenda.

**Theme 2:**

Bridging the gap between the evaluation community (supply side) and the policy-makers community (demand side), including parliamentarians, to ensure good quality, equity-focused, and gender-responsive evaluations are demanded and used in policy making.

**Theme 3:**

Mainstreaming equity-focused and gender-responsive evaluations in Sustainable Development Goals at an international level, and in national development strategies at a national level.

**Theme 4:**

Developing equity-focused and gender-responsive national evaluation policies.

This edition of the journal attempts to draw together the themes of the UNESCO Year of Evaluation with the contributions from our authors to highlight how our current practice are supporting the growth and strengthening of evaluation.

The article by Dinh, Keys, and Thomson focuses on an identified gap in the literature pertaining to ‘the implementation of monitoring and evaluation amongst consortia’. The authors (themselves representative of three consortia), have strengthened their program by: incorporating lessons learned from earlier programs; acknowledging the challenges inherent in data collection, that is representative of an international context; and ensuring the data has adequate depth for meaningful results. In many ways, this article aligns closely with Theme 1 within the International Year of Evaluation theme as it draws together past practice, lessons learned, and offers advice to guide future evaluations. The authors conclude with a clear message that when a program is implemented by a consortia rather than a single agency, there is another layer of complexity that needs to be taken into consideration at significant points in the program.

The article by Beck and McPherson makes a significant contribution to the discipline of evaluation. It documents the perspective of entering into evaluation as an emerging evaluator, considers different methods, tools and perspectives of stakeholder buy-in from the literature, and then offers ‘four robust indicators of buy-in’. These



indicators are: (i) timeliness to evaluation team requests; (ii) quality of feedback to evaluation team requests; (iii) interaction with decision-makers; and (iv) investment of in-kind contributions. The authors are commended on their alignment with the philosophy of developmental evaluation and the application of theoretical models of evaluation. The article contributes directly to Theme 1 of the International Year of Evaluation providing solid advice for emerging evaluators.

The article by De Silva Lokuwaduge and Armstrong is firmly focused on Australian higher education looking particularly at how an evaluation of governance mechanisms as determinants of performance was conducted and is a contribution to the literature in this area with respect to the performance of universities in Australia. The authors explore agency theory, stewardship theory and stakeholder theory through their work and while the outcomes were inconclusive, the latter two theories of governance were found within these institutions. This paper is firmly located within Theme 2 of the International Year of Evaluation, connecting evaluation of Australian universities and the government policy environment.

The special feature article by Wright, Liddle and Koop explores cost-benefit analysis for evaluation to determine the worth of the evaluand and support decision-making. The article articulates the use of cost-benefit analysis to determine if the program costs outweigh the benefits. The authors explain how to review the implementation of a policy using cost-benefit analysis through six steps:

(i) establish an appropriate comparison group; (ii) identify all costs and benefits; (iii) compare costs and benefits; (iv) conduct sensitivity testing; (v) articulate other assumptions; and (vi) describe non-quantified benefits. It is interesting that this type of analysis lends itself to looking forward or backwards against what may be considered an appropriate baseline for policy change. This special feature article supports Theme 3 of the Year of Evaluation through articulating the value of using such a method in evaluation practice.

The two book reviews—*Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* and *Interpretive Autoethnography* both focus on methods, these books remind all evaluators of the importance of utilising theory to strength evaluation practice. As editors, we would encourage everyone who is planning to submit to *EJA* to touch base with the theorists who inform our work. Evaluation is ever-present in our society and thus a serious contribution to the literature in the discipline of evaluation will only strengthen and build the potential of the discipline.

Once again, we would encourage all evaluators to write about their practice in a theoretical manner, and share their thoughts and ideas in order to continue to build resources for emerging evaluators, and contribute to evaluation research. To all evaluators, once again, welcome to the Year of Evaluation and we look forward to meeting you at the annual conference in Melbourne in September 2015.





**KATHRYN DINH | TRICIA KEYS | NAOMI THOMSON**

# Finding the common thread

## The charms and challenges of evaluation for a consortium-run international development program

This article explores the opportunities and challenges in designing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for a consortium-run, multi-country international development program.

The East Asia Vision Program (EAVP), a three-year program of the Vision 2020 Australia Global Consortium, aims to improve capacity in the delivery of eye health and vision care services in Vietnam, Cambodia and Timor-Leste. Funded by the Australian Government, the EAVP began in 2013 and consists of five Australian organisations working with government and other stakeholders in each country.

The Consortium members have been working in collaboration to support national government planning, health professional training, treatment of patients, and research capacity through monitoring and evaluation. An M&E reference group helped with initial drafts of an M&E framework. Consultation with Australian and in-country staff was then conducted to ensure availability of data and understanding of the framework. Early drafts of data entered into the framework were shared between the participating organisations and the evaluator in order to detect errors and share good practice examples using online program management software.

Monitoring the program provided an opportunity for Consortium members to improve program implementation and strengthen their capacity for M&E, by sharing examples of evaluation tools and expertise in the monitoring of cross-cutting issues and data collection.

The combined work of the organisations within each country provided a rich dataset of outcomes at a health systems strengthening level. Challenges faced during the evaluation included: aligning the evaluation systems of all organisations (including data that were feasible to collect); monitoring a large range of activities; and developing an evaluation tool that was usable by a diverse range of staff.

This article reports the perspectives of the M&E advisor for EAVP and those of the program implementer to share learnings regarding the M&E for a consortium-run program. Consortia are used globally to implement international development programs and they also present a unique challenge for evaluators. However, these consortia also provide the opportunity to build the monitoring and evaluation capacity of participating organisations, leading to improved data quality and better-informed program implementation.



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## Introduction

Consortia, or ‘forms of collaborative working between two or more organisations’ (The National Federation of Community Organisations 2015) are used worldwide as a model for implementing international development work. Increased efficiency and effectiveness is a key rationale for using a consortium-based approach; participating organisations coordinate the planning and implementation of activities in a country and build upon each other’s comparative areas of strength. Communication and learning within the consortia stimulates continuous quality improvement. Further, the consortium model allows a funding body to disperse funds efficiently to multiple organisations through a single coordinating entity. This increased efficiency and effectiveness theoretically maximises the scope and benefits of the program for the intended recipients (Shepard 2003; Vision 2020 Australia 2011). Whilst monitoring and evaluation (M&E) results from consortia-run programs have been published, there appears to be little in the literature that reflects upon the implementation of M&E amongst consortia.

Consortium-run programs often provide a rich dataset of results. In order to monitor and evaluate international development programs implemented by consortia, a set of indicators that is reflective of the work of the group is identified and used to determine whether the objectives of a program have been met. However, unlike evaluating a

program led by a single organisation, such an evaluation must also take into account the existing internal evaluation practices and data collected by each organisation, as well as the technical capacity of each organisation to be able to contribute to evaluation activities.

This article explores the opportunities and challenges in evaluating one such consortium-led program, the East Asia Vision Program (EAVP) implemented by the Vision 2020 Australia Global Consortium (‘the Consortium’). The participation of both program implementers and evaluators is explored in relation to the design and implementation of the M&E Framework (the Framework) for the program, and the lessons learnt through the process are also articulated. To begin, a description of the consortium model has been provided in order to elicit the opportunities and constraints posed in this particular working context.

## Background

Established in 2009, the Vision 2020 Australia Global Consortium is a partnership of six Australian eye health and vision care organisations that implement eye health programs across Asia and the Pacific.

The Consortium is currently implementing the EAVP (2013–16) which is funded by the Australian Government as part of the East Asia Avoidable Blindness Initiative (ABI). The Program involves five consortium members working together with government and non-government



partners in Vietnam, Timor-Leste and Cambodia to reduce avoidable blindness and low vision. The Consortium members involved in the EAVP are: Brien Holden Vision Institute (BHVI), CBM Australia, Fred Hollows Foundation (FHF), Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS), and Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO). Several activities that were initiated under a previous program have continued under the EAVP.

The EAVP comprises activities in four main areas: strengthening governance and national strategic planning; supporting training for the eye care workforce; providing treatment to patients; and strengthening research and national data collection capability.

In most instances, the EAVP activities form part of a broader range of activities being implemented by the member organisations in each country. Leveraging the comparative advantage of each organisation, the members implement different types of activities within the Program. Each organisation has their own internal M&E system and works closely with national partners who in turn have their own data collection and reporting processes. The competency in evaluation varies between members and partners.

## Methodology

An M&E framework serves as a plan for monitoring and evaluation and should clarify: what is being monitored and evaluated; the activities required to do this; when, how and by whom M&E activities will be carried out; which resources are required (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2009). For Health Systems Strengthening (HSS), the World Health Organisation (WHO) has developed an operational framework to standardise M&E activities and align them with global monitoring systems. This framework has been adapted for HSS from the common M&E framework for health information developed by the International Health Partnership (global partners working in health in developing countries). The WHO stipulates that the application of its framework should: (1) be country-focused; (2) address the M&E needs for different users and purposes; and (3) include core indicators along the results chain, including linking these to data to be collected, and showing how the data will be communicated and inform decision making.

The EAVP takes an HSS approach, and as such, the aforementioned WHO framework has guided the M&E Framework. The M&E Framework was based on extant data collected by country partners that is used at a national level to meet the needs of the Consortium members, the donor, and the Program partners. The Framework included core indicators at each stage of the program logic that were indicative of the Program as a whole.

The use of several documents helped to ensure the use of standardised indicators for data collection, and identified opportunities for monitoring issues of interest. The core indicators were informed by global indicators including: the WHO's Universal Eye Health: A Global Action Plan 2014-19 (World Health Organisation [WHO] 2013); the International Standard Classification of Occupations produced by the International Labour Organisation (2013); the Western Pacific Regional Plan WHO; the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IABP); and the Australian Government's health, gender equality and disability inclusive strategies and performance framework (IABP 2013; Australian Government 2011a, 2011b, 2008, 2014) also guided development and later adaptation of the EAVP's M&E Framework.

Faced with the task of developing such a framework, an M&E Reference Group was formed. The Reference Group consisted of one to two representatives from each Consortium member organisation who had either evaluation expertise or in-depth program knowledge. It was important that both skill sets were represented in the group in order to allow parallel discussion of both the nature of program activities and partners, and the feasibility of M&E data collection. The Reference Group was tasked with not only developing the Framework (facilitated by the EAVP M&E Advisor), but also for ensuring ongoing collaboration, peer learning, and information and resource sharing regarding M&E among Consortium members throughout the Program. Before developing the Framework, the Reference Group needed to build a shared understanding of the purpose of M&E for the EAVP, as well as the terminology used, data availability, and evaluation capacity. In order to develop this shared understanding, Reference Group members needed to consult with colleagues and partners' in-country, thus a series of workshops were held to develop the Framework using an iterative process.

Despite all Consortium members being organisations involved in eye health and vision care, their backgrounds and institutional cultures are still quite diverse—with the member organisations working in non-government and research areas, as well as medical colleges. During the development of the Framework, the different focus areas, structures, M&E knowledge and institutional cultures of the organisations were considered.

Expectations and requirements of the Framework made by Consortium members also needed to be considered in developing the Framework. There were some shared expectations, which included: indicators that were meaningful and measurable; the identification of both positive outcomes and challenges and recommendations; and lessons learnt through program implementation. Member organisations also expected that the Framework should be developed together with key stakeholders and align with international and



Australian Government standards. Many of the members' requirements for the Framework were also shared. They noted that the Framework should be: relatively easy to use; compatible with internal M&E systems; utilise and apply lessons learned from earlier work of the Consortium; and include additional time for training and mentoring during the introduction of the Framework.

Two transformative activities required monitoring by the Framework including the introduction of the very first tertiary-level optometry-training program in Vietnam, and the introduction of the first formal continuing professional development system in health in Cambodia.

The M&E Reference Group agreed that the M&E Framework for the EAVP was designed to: monitor progress of the Program and evaluate its efficacy upon completion against the Program objectives; identify risks to implementation; provide a key accountability mechanism to ensure the activities resulted in the intended benefits for the target populations; reflect upon the management of the Program and benefits and limitations of the Consortium; and meet donor reporting requirements.

Guided by the international and national tools mentioned above, a set of core indicators was identified for monitoring and evaluating the diverse range of activities across the Program. The draft indicators were tested and refined during in-country workshops with staff who were able to consult with partners beforehand. The revised indicators were then used to develop the M&E Framework for the annual collection of qualitative and quantitative data from across the Program. Feedback from the donor was also incorporated.

From an evaluation perspective, it was important to use a theory-driven evaluation approach based on the program design and logic model. The overall East Asia ABI goal was to 'reduce avoidable blindness and low vision amongst the poor, the vulnerable, and people with disabilities in East Asia'. The purpose of the Program was to 'build the capacity and commitment of partner governments to provide integrated, equitable and sustainable eye health care' (Vision 2020 Australia 2013).

A considerable amount of time was put into the planning and design phase of the EAVP to ensure that it was developed as a cohesive program with defined outcomes and measurable targets in a logic model. The Framework enabled the monitoring of activities against anticipated end-of-program outcomes. Results were collected at an output and outcome level but could not measure longer-term impact due to the short three-year timeframe of the Program.

Quantitative and qualitative data were used to capture program outputs such as the number of training activities completed, and longer-term outcomes including whether knowledge and skills gained through training were developed and used. Barriers to the use of new

knowledge and skills and how they were managed were also captured—these were mapped against the logic model to determine whether the long-term program outcomes would be achieved. Program management data and reflections on the benefits and limitations of working in a consortium were also captured.

In developing the Framework, the M&E Reference Group examined sources and types of data common across organisations including activities that could be aggregated to provide meaningful country-level and Program-level results. In addition, the Reference Group aimed to ensure that staff members from all organisations could easily and accurately input data into the Framework. Finally, it was necessary that the Framework should align with relevant international indicators as well as requirements by the donor.

Face-to-face or remote briefing sessions were conducted by the M&E Advisor with Consortium member staff and their managers, both in Australia and in-country. The briefing sessions were conducted with those who would be using the Framework to ensure that the completed Framework would fairly reflect the breadth of the Program, and that it was comprehensible and easy to use. The briefing sessions were also used to identify any errors within the Framework. Although the sessions took considerable time, they were a worthwhile initial investment as they helped to minimise potential misunderstandings and errors during implementation of the Framework; they addressed anxieties about using the Framework; and they ensured a greater degree of shared ownership in the data collection process.

The Consortium has a strong management and governance structure with an executive steering committee to determine its strategic direction, and a program management committee to oversee program planning and implementation. These committees are at the CEO and senior program manager level, respectively. Country working groups also help ensure country-level cohesion and coordination between organisations. The member organisations are represented at each level of the governance structure as well as in the M&E Reference Group—this structure enhances governance and accountability, while also supporting further coordination and program alignment between the organisations and countries that are part of the EAVP.

The executive steering level and program management level committees were kept informed of the work of the M&E Reference Group. The country working groups and committees were required to support the use and socialisation of the Framework, and were often involved in overseeing its use at a country level by their agency staff. At the end of the first year of the Program, information gathered from the Framework was consolidated into an annual report, which was approved by the two committees.



As staff from member organisations entered data into the Framework, they shared working versions of their documents through an online project management system so that the M&E Advisor could review the data being entered and identify errors early in the process. Therefore, the quality of the data was enhanced, and as a result, minimal cleaning was required before datasets were combined for analysis.

## Results

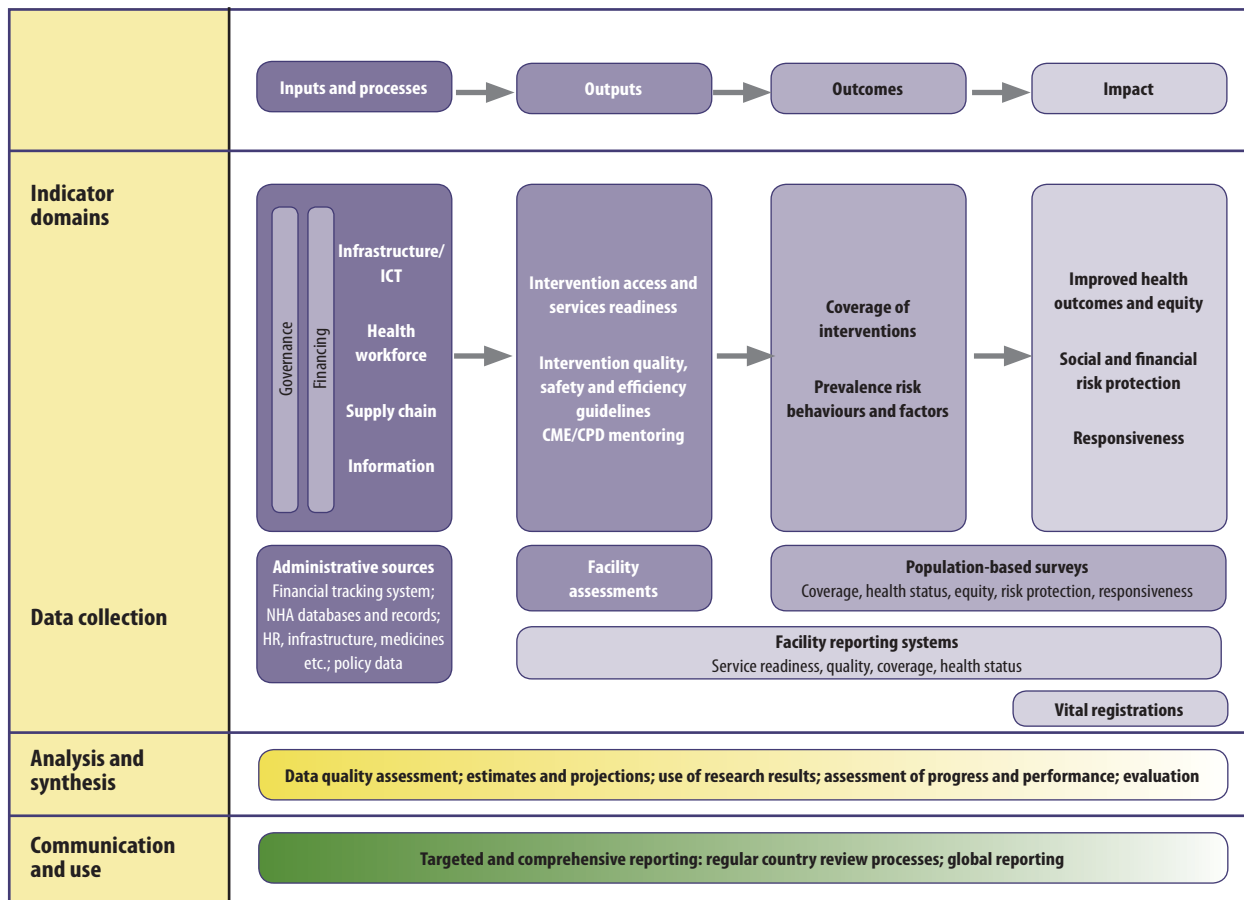
### The opportunities

The coordinated work of the EAVP led to comprehensive improvements in the health systems of each of the three countries, including the provision of a rich dataset with which to monitor and evaluate the Program.

Figure 1 shows the WHO’s framework for evaluating health systems strengthening that informed the EAVP

evaluation design. At the completion of the first year of the Program, the combined activities of the EAVP were able to demonstrate results across and within the health systems of the three countries. Program activities resulted in improvements that included: establishment of national clinical guidelines; increased size of the eye health workforce as well as its technical and managerial capacity; increased screening and treatment of patients; and improvements to national patient data collection systems. As a further example, more than 25, 000 people were screened for eye conditions and almost 700 training activities were completed across Vietnam, Cambodia and Timor-Leste. Over time the longer-term results of program implementation will enable the evaluation to determine whether trained skills were sufficiently maintained and transferred to the workplace, and assess the introduction of new activities such as optometry training in Vietnam.

**FIGURE 1: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION’S OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING, 2010**



Source: World Health Organisation 2010, *Operational framework for monitoring and evaluation of health systems strengthening—an operational framework*, World Health Organisation, Geneva.





The practice of combining and sharing monitoring data among Consortium member organisations motivated staff and enabled a greater degree of peer learning. Examples of good case studies were shared in order to guide staff in completing their own case studies; examples of qualitative data were also shared in order to motivate others to produce data of similarly high quality. Peer learning has been documented as a strength of other consortia (Shepard 2003). However, in one program, peer comparison led to competition and resentment between consortium members, highlighting the need to manage this process carefully (Hartwig, Humphries & Matebeni 2008). Some Consortium members were also able to draw on features of the shared M&E Framework to reflect upon and strengthen their own internal M&E systems.

Consortium members noted that whilst there were still some challenges in completing the M&E Framework, there had been useful application of some lessons learnt from earlier phases of the ABI in the Framework. These lessons included: allowing more time for consultation when developing the Framework; providing clear and detailed instructions and definitions of the indicators; and providing more support from the M&E Advisor during the first year of data collection.

As indicated earlier, Consortium members are frequently involved in the implementation of discreet activities within each country, however, they often work with the same local partners. The M&E Framework helped to standardise the data and monitoring information being collected across the EAVP; the reporting of outcomes captured through the Framework enabled outcomes to be shown at a country and Program level.

### The challenges

In the process of developing the Framework it was difficult to find a balance in the collection of data that adequately represented the wide diversity of activities being implemented across the EAVP, whilst simultaneously ensuring the data was of adequate depth to provide meaningful results. For example, the significant number of different cadres working and training in eye health required them to be aggregated into similar types of professions such as allied ophthalmic personnel; in order to reduce the data input workload for organisations. However, in some cases it was still necessary to be able to identify specific health professional types from within these groups (i.e. cataract surgeons), so that the small numbers of graduates completing longer-term training courses could be recognised. In addition, some organisations did not feel that the data being collected adequately represented their activities.

The data quality and availability varied between the Consortium organisations. This was in part due to the internal capacity and M&E systems of each organisation, as well as the availability of data in local

health information systems in each country. In cases where part of the dataset was of poor quality, or if similar data were being collected differently by the organisations and partners, then data could not always be aggregated at a Program or country level.

The M&E Reference Group enabled all organisations to be well represented and extensively consulted during development of the Framework. However, the Excel-based M&E Framework was still deemed complicated by different organisation staff. Detailed verbal and written instructions and definitions were provided, yet certain criteria were still interpreted differently, even within organisations. This in itself has provided a learning experience with subsequent minor amendments made to the Framework to support ongoing implementation.

The M&E capacity of the staff within the different Consortium organisations varied. During the input of data into the M&E Framework, there were some delays in being able to finalise the data collection, as some organisations needed additional mentoring and support to ensure that their data was accurate and of a high quality. The close mentoring and guidance provided by the M&E Advisor not only helped to alleviate this problem, but also led to some staff building their M&E capacity, which was valued by the Consortium organisations.

The data collection through the Framework highlighted gaps in understanding not only around M&E but also in cross-cutting issues such as disability and inclusive development, which have required further training and mentoring during subsequent years of the Program.

Some Consortium members' staff felt that the Framework led to an increased administration and reporting workload. There were mixed responses on how well the Framework tools allowed for tracking of program targets and their ease of use however, this issue is not isolated to working through a consortium. An Oxfam study of global, non-government organisations found that staff were particularly concerned that monitoring, evaluation and learning processes were not easy to use. The study pointed to the challenge of finding the balance between processes that enabled the collection of robust information whilst also not being overly time consuming (Coe & Majot 2013). As with many donor-funded programs, there were some differences between the manner in which M&E data was collected and reported on internally by organisations, and the data requirements for contractual reporting. Feedback from staff involved in utilising the Framework showed that overall, the time taken to complete reports and gather the Framework data was generally consistent with prior phases of the ABI.

One agency noted that while some of their expectations for M&E were not met entirely by the Framework, they were being addressed through quarterly narrative reports and working group and management committee meetings.



## Discussion

One of the primary differences in M&E work in a consortium is that it introduces an additional layer of complexity compared to the M&E activities of a single agency. As described earlier, this can be both a strength and a challenge. While individual organisations working directly with donors need to contend with their own internal M&E systems and with the M&E demands of the donor(s), participating in a consortium requires an additional layer of monitoring, which seeks to investigate common outcomes from member organisations, in order to demonstrate the combined impact of the consortium's activities within a particular program. These results must, in turn, also satisfy the evaluation requirements of the donor(s). Hartwig, Humphries and Matebeni (2008) also highlighted this challenge in the evaluation of programs situated within a similar structure.

The evaluator needs to find a balance between demonstrating the impact of the combined efforts of multiple organisations in a consortium, and reducing the additional demands on organisations' input into consortium-level monitoring and evaluation processes. In order to minimise this burden, an initial investment of time was required to establish and communicate the compatibility of the M&E Framework with the existing M&E systems. Commonly agreed definitions and parameters were developed for the data to be captured and the M&E Advisor worked with each organisation to ensure that the M&E Framework was clearly understood and that data requirements were achievable. The M&E Reference Group provided valuable guidance in developing program indicators and the M&E Framework; these consultations and processes required considerably more time to establish in comparison to working with one organisation. Similar partnerships have also reported the necessity of, and significant time taken to establish common systems and processes (Hartwig, Humphries & Matebeni 2008).

The member organisations had diverse priorities and mandates that were sometimes obscured when data were consolidated for the overarching program. For example, CBM Australia's mandate is inclusive development, and therefore aims to capture good quality inclusive results in its projects. Although the Framework included data on inclusive development practice, the Program-level results did not contain the level of detail normally recorded by CBM Australia. Some of this depth of data was sacrificed in order to capture the breadth of Program activity and reach a consensus on which data would be collected among Consortium members. BHVI's establishment of an optometry program in Vietnam is a significant step for Vietnam, but the data on the small numbers of initial trainees have been aggregated with other trainees in the Program. Thus, in the quantitative data collection for the EAVP, the significance of such activities is lost. To address

this, well-planned, longitudinal case studies provided an alternative means for the progress of such activities to be adequately captured.

Quality control measures were implemented to cater for the variable quality of data between organisations including entering draft data in versions of the Framework that were submitted online, verifying any inconsistencies in data with organisations, and triangulating data where possible.

The year one M&E of the EAVP yielded some rich results. However, the M&E carried out for the Program was more compatible and easier to use for some organisations within the Consortium than others. From an evaluator's perspective, it was challenging to find the ideal balance in the breadth and depth of Program data collected whilst still ensuring ease of data collection for all participating organisations. However, it was identified as important by the Consortium members to strive towards this goal. The Consortium members recognise the benefits and capacity gained in developing a Consortium-level M&E Framework and accept that compromises need to be made in order to meet the needs of the diverse range of organisations, activities, and countries that combine to form the EAVP.

## Conclusion

Implementing an international development program in eye health through the Vision 2020 Australia Global Consortium resulted in the collection of a rich dataset, which demonstrated improvements at a health systems level in Cambodia, Vietnam and Timor-Leste. However, finding the balance between the collection of data that would be indicative of the Program and minimising the reporting burden was a challenge and required a considerable investment of time. Developing the M&E Framework for the EAVP required significant upfront involvement by all organisations to agree on common definitions and parameters, identify data to be collected and brief users of the Framework. It was also necessary to build the M&E capacity of some Consortium staff to enable them to use the Framework; this was done through the provision of written and verbal instructions for the Framework. The early use of the Framework was closely monitored to identify errors. The use of the common Framework provided a platform for peer learning and sharing of good practice, and motivated Consortium members to collect high quality data for monitoring program implementation. Collaborative use of the Framework also identified weaknesses in M&E data of individual organisations and led to improvements in agency-level M&E systems that facilitate effective delivery of eye health activities.



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# Indicators of buy-in to gauge evaluation success

In order for novice evaluators to gauge the success of their evaluations, the ability to identify and recognize indicators of buy-in is an essential skill. While much is written in the evaluation literature about strategies to build buy-in, the indicators of buy-in are largely overlooked. This article shares strategies used for building buy-in from a multi-state evaluation of cardiac care. Indicators of the success of these strategies are then shared with an emphasis on simple, unobtrusive, robust measures that novice evaluators can use to assess stakeholder engagement and responsiveness. Four indicators of buy-in include: timeliness to evaluation team requests; quality and quantity of feedback received; interaction with decision-makers; and investment of in-kind contributions. Awareness of these indicators can boost confidence and authority for students who are new to the field of evaluation. A tracking tool is also showcased which serves as a systematic, responsive prompt to monitor buy-in. The value of the tracking tool is realized in its ability to alert evaluators to potential problems for which corrective actions can be made, assist evaluators in creating realistic expectations, and enhance confidence in evaluation proceedings.

## Indicators of buy-in to gauge evaluation success

Success of an evaluation is contingent upon the commitment and engagement of invested stakeholders (Patton 2008). However, gaining buy-in for the evaluation<sup>1</sup> from all intended primary users can be a difficult task. The evaluation literature discusses key factors needed for ensuring buy-in including—communication, collaboration, inclusion, involvement, and acceptance to change (Miller & Merrilees 2013; Ridzi 2004).

There are many barriers to achieving buy-in. Examples of stakeholder-level barriers include: resistance to change, skepticism, fear of the evaluation itself, and lack of time. Examples of organizational-level challenges to achieving buy-in include: cost, resources and administrative bureaucracy (Bechar & Mero-Jaffe 2013; Huebner 2000; Kotter & Whitehead 2010; Mederer

& Silver 2010; Shtivelband & Rosecrance 2010). Overall, these obstacles reduce the likelihood of achieving the level of stakeholder buy-in and cooperation necessary for a successful evaluation. Without the necessary level of buy-in, the evaluation plan may lack validity and the client may be less likely to act on recommendations (Torres & Preskill 2001).

Several strategies for building and sustaining buy-in include process analyses, program monitoring, impact assessment, and a clear design process (Howell & Yemane 2006). Communication and stakeholder involvement are crucial components of building buy-in; inviting stakeholders to provide input into the evaluation process helps stakeholders feel their values are being integrated as they become involved in part of the process as well as the solution (Lorenzi et al. 2009). The most successful strategies for building buy-in have a thorough design phase where stakeholders and evaluators come to a



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consensus on evaluation questions to be addressed, and the best approach in which to answer them. Moreover, stakeholders who understand the purpose of the evaluation are more likely to gather the evaluation data and use the results themselves (Patton 2008; Weiss 1978). Of equal importance is the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of the evaluation (Torres & Preskill 2001; Liket, Rey-Garcia & Mass 2014; Fine, Thayer & Coghlan 2000; Hoefler 2000). Overall, engaging stakeholders for the entirety of the evaluation process is necessary for continued and sustained buy-in (Bryk 1983; Greene 1988; Rogers et al. 2010).

Assessing complex constructs associated with the success of buy-in strategies such as ownership, relevance, understandability is challenging—especially for novice evaluators. One common criterion when evaluating buy-in is whether the information provided to clients is utilized (Alkin 1985; Howell & Yemane 2006). Utilization-focused evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be relevant and useful (Patton, 2008). This underlying standard equips evaluators with a decision-making framework to target the evaluation design from beginning to end through a lens of utility for the client.

While utility is a suggested indicator of buy-in, evaluators who rely on the utilization of findings to gauge stakeholder buy-in may be waiting too late to implement strategies for the improvement of buy-in. The task of determining buy-in through utilization is contingent on an analysis of the extent to which stakeholders make

use of outcomes and evaluation recommendations.

One common instrument used for this analysis is the retrospective pre-test, but the problem with this instrument is that it is administered after the evaluation is complete (Nimon, Zigarmi & Allen 2011). It would be far more advantageous to have early indicators of buy-in, to enable evaluators to identify potential problems and change their actions before buy-in is lost.

It is critical to continually monitor the level of buy-in, given its importance to the success of the evaluation plan. Early detection of indicators of the level of buy-in enable evaluators to increase efficiency, streamline communication, and thereby increase support for evaluation procedures and findings (Cartland et al. 2008). The value of understanding the level of buy-in early on is instrumental in enabling evaluators to proceed with confidence, knowing stakeholders are satisfied with the evaluation plan and progress. Once in place, buy-in aids in the ability to work collaboratively with stakeholders for common purposes and encourages the intended users to take ownership of the evaluation recommendations and reports (Rogers et al. 2010).

The ability to recognize factors of buy-in (such as stakeholder involvement and understanding of the evaluation process) depends on a certain level of experience and expertise on the part of the evaluator. It is reasonable to posit that novice evaluators will be less likely to recognize the factors contributing to, and the indicators of, buy-in. This is because novice evaluators



may lack the experience necessary to interpret the subtle clues of whether evaluation strategies being employed are accepted by stakeholders.

There seem to be very few strategies published that are geared toward assisting novice evaluators to efficiently determine whether they have gained stakeholder buy-in. Self-reflective reports can offer evaluation insights by sharing stories and lessons learned from particular evaluations (Cousins & Chouinard 2012). However, reflective case narratives may be difficult for novice evaluators to use because one evaluator (the author) is trying to convey his/her experiences to another evaluator (the reader). The success of knowledge transfer depends on the experience level of the reader; novice evaluators often lack the experience necessary to benefit from an insightful reflective case narrative.

Thus, given the importance of stakeholder buy-in to the utility of evaluation, and the limitations of current methods in the discipline for transferring knowledge to novice evaluations, we sought to employ a cost-effective and simple solution for novice evaluators to monitor stakeholder buy-in and ensure their evaluation is on track. Webb et al., (1966) discuss the utility of unobtrusive measures in evaluation as a data collection method that does not directly elicit data from research subjects. Applying the concept of unobtrusive measures we reasoned similar measures, or indicators, could be powerful for novice evaluators to use to monitor buy-in. Some authors note indicators of buy-in can also be of significance in understanding the implementation and influence of evaluation (Liket, Rey-Garcia & Mass 2014; Howell & Yemane 2006), however the literature is devoid of robust indicators upon which the novice evaluator can draw.

This paper highlights our effort to define a set of indicators for novice evaluators to monitor stakeholder buy-in. We begin by presenting a brief review of the evaluation literature, highlighting basic principles and strategies that novice evaluators could consider for achieving buy-in.

The application of these principles is illustrated using a case example from a system evaluation that is currently being conducted. We then describe four indicators we used to monitor stakeholder buy-in for the evaluation plan that are sufficiently robust and cost effective for novice evaluators to use in their evaluations. Finally, we showcase a tracking tool to assist in monitoring buy-in and creating realistic expectations.

### **Building buy-in**

The establishment of a common vision, understanding of priorities, and use of effective communication are all key factors in the process of gaining buy-in (Bohanon & Wu 2014). Conducting the evaluation based on a shared understanding of program goals develops cooperation

and buy-in throughout the course of the evaluation (Huebner 2000). Buy-in has been likened to social capital where the norms, networks, and values of the intended audience must come together and mold into one layer before an evaluation plan can be devised (Buchan 2012).

Of the four program evaluation standards, it is 'utility' that best relates to buy-in (Sanders 1994). Upholding the utility standards involves evaluators identifying stakeholders and addressing their needs while maintaining evaluator credibility (Azzam 2010), this task is often easier said than done. Keeping the client's values and goals as the centerpiece of the evaluation project is one way in which to foster stakeholder buy-in (Brandon et al. 2010), yet evaluators often face tension when weighing the methodological preferences of the evaluation alongside the needs of stakeholders (Azzam 2010). While utilization-focused evaluators may prioritize stakeholder concerns to increase the likelihood of using the recommendations (Patton 2008), other evaluators recommend minimizing stakeholder influence and focusing on the credibility of the evaluation (Weiss 1978).

Establishing evaluator credibility is very important for buy-in (Azzam 2010). Two ways to demonstrate one's credibility are to appeal to: 1) personal credibility where the client must believe and trust the evaluator; and 2) disciplinary credibility where the client must believe in the value of the field of evaluation (Shtivelband & Rosecrance 2010). Often, the credibility of an evaluation's findings are directly linked to the credibility of the evaluator; the relationship between the two is hinged on the evaluator's objectivity and impartial viewpoint as well as their expertise (Boulmetis & Dutwin 2005).

While establishing credibility is always challenging, it is especially so for novice evaluators who may lack the confidence needed to rationalize their evaluation approach and methods to their clients. As Patton (2008) noted, 'today's evaluator must be sophisticated about matching research methods to the nuances of particular evaluation questions and the idiosyncrasies of specific decision-maker needs' (p. 466). The lack of experience makes it difficult for emerging evaluators to know whether buy-in is being achieved.

Best practices to foster buy-in include building relationships by meeting face-to-face with clients and stakeholders, being timely and courteous, and most importantly, knowing the client's objectives (Brown 2010). Rogers et al., (2010) recommend five strategies to obtain buy-in including: 1) conducting an initial grantee needs assessment; 2) forming an evaluation summit to facilitate input on the evaluation framework, and encourage relationship-building and evaluation ownership; 3) creating an evaluation advisory committee to promote on-going input and negotiations regarding evaluation methods and measures; 4) providing technical assistance; and 5) integrating technology to streamline



data collection. Based on client feedback regarding the use of the various methods to foster buy-in, Rogers et al., (2010) determined the first four strategies worked well and resulted in stakeholders feeling more invested in the evaluation and more motivated to devote time and energy toward future evaluations. Overall, the authors concluded that ‘cultivating buy-in on an evaluation is a process involving continual engagement of stakeholders, sensitivity, and timely response to their needs along with the ability to let go and encourage stakeholder ownership’ (Rogers et al. 2010, p. 460). The work of these authors exemplifies the fact that attaining buy-in is a labor-intensive and challenging activity.

As noted above, there are many documented strategies to build and sustain buy-in, but there is a paucity of literature devoted to indicators of buy-in (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Inness & Booher 1999; Thomas et al. 1999). Ideally, indicators of buy-in are cost-effective, reliable, and valid for assessing in a timely manner the types of strategies that work in particular contexts and particular stakeholders. Certainly, the importance of evaluating evaluations is widely discussed in the evaluation literature (Patton 2001; Scriven 1993; Datta 2011) however, in our review of this literature we are unable to identify robust, cost-effective indicators that evaluators can use to gauge the success of their evaluation strategy. Having access to such indicators is especially critical for novice evaluators to be able to gauge the success of strategies to build buy-in. Early awareness of a potential problem can help make necessary amendments to the evaluation plan and increase the probability of a successful evaluation as well as build the credibility of the evaluator.

## Context

The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust contracted the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences to conduct an evaluation of cardiac care systems in both South and North Dakota over a three-year period. The evaluation team (consisting of four students enrolled in a graduate level advanced evaluation class under the supervision of the second author of this paper) devised a system-based (Renger et al. 2011) quality improvement plan informed by biological systems theory, program evaluation standards (Yarbrough et al. 2011), and utilization-focused evaluation (Patton 2008).

## Strategies for building and sustaining buy-in

### (i) Engaging leadership

It is important to have those who strongly support evaluation serve as champions to provide direction for the project, maintain day-to-day support, enlist the support of other key players, and manage the required

cultural change (Patton 2008; Yackanicz, Kerr & Levick 2010). Therefore, we formed an Evaluation Leadership Committee (ELC) comprised of invested stakeholders who provided oversight and input on the multiple system inputs. To gain buy-in, ELC members were engaged in conceptualizing the evaluation plan and assisting with defining the boundaries of the systems approach (Williams & Hummelbrunner 2009). By soliciting the opinions, interests, and concerns of the ELC early in the evaluation process, we hoped to address our stakeholders’ specific information needs and uphold the evaluation program of utility (Patton, 2008; Preskill & Jones 2009). Each revised draft of the evaluation plan was emailed to the ELC for review and feedback. The aim was to facilitate open communication with the ELC while the evaluation plan was being developed, to create an atmosphere of collaboration and respect, and to enhance evaluator credibility.

### (ii) Engaging credible subject matter experts (SMEs)

As part of the evaluation plan, input was needed from a range of experts in the cardiac care system. ELC members identified and contacted subject matter experts (SMEs) to ask whether they would participate in process flow mapping (PFM) (Madison, 2005). PFM helps to understand the critical stages of cardiac care needed for each element of the system: emergency dispatch, emergency medical service (EMS) response, and hospital care.

Using ELC members to make the initial contact with SMEs was a deliberate strategy designed to increase the likelihood of buy-in. The SMEs selected by ELC members were high-power stakeholders as they had a strong level of interest in improving the system and considerable power in their respective fields (Patton, 2008). The SMEs had substantive expertise; they held leadership positions and represented the different regions of each state. The SMEs were involved in the evaluation to ensure others viewed the final process as credible and would be more likely to use the evaluation results.

The SMEs were scattered throughout South Dakota and North Dakota, and were separated by several hundred miles. To demonstrate our commitment to the evaluation and willingness to understand the context in which SMEs were working we traveled to the place of employment for each SME, covering 19,663 miles in four months. It would have been more convenient to utilize telephone and video-conferencing technology to reduce costs, however, it was decided that face-face contact was critical in establishing an initial rapport and minimizing miscommunications.

In order to complete the PFM, meetings of one-hour duration were scheduled. To allay any concerns about the evaluation purpose (e.g. assessing job performance), SMEs were emailed a briefing document, which explained the purpose of the meeting and the PFM methodology.



After the evaluation team met with an SME or ELC member, a survey link was distributed via email to solicit feedback. Evaluation team members waited two weeks before following up with a phone call if no response had been made, asking the respondent to complete the survey.

### **(iii) Respecting client values**

Early in the evaluation planning the client expressed a desire to begin collecting data immediately. However, basing a quality improvement plan on readily available data without first completing the process flow map would likely have set the client up for failure (Harrell et al. n.d.), that is, the quality improvement plan would likely measure outcomes that had little to do with the steps needed for successful cardiac care. Instead of dismissing the client's values, we used the client-suggested data to validate and identify gaps in the process flow maps, following a process similar to program theory reconstruction (Renger 2011). This was an innovative way to show the client how the outcomes they desired were helpful in laying the foundation for a credible quality improvement plan.

Member checking was another strategy used to demonstrate respect for the clients' values (Renger & Bourdeau 2004). Member checking is a qualitative method used to promote accuracy and rigor (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Following each process flow map interview, SMEs were emailed a member check (within five business days) consisting of a process flow map and an accompanying narrative. SMEs were asked to review the process flow map and narrative for accuracy and make any necessary changes. The purpose of providing SMEs the opportunity to review the process flow map interview was to promote transparency and uphold the evaluation standards of accuracy and stakeholder respect. Moreover, the opportunity of individual and confidential outlets to debrief and offer clarification was designed with the intent to establish rapport and foster initial buy-in (Maritz & Jooste 2011).

### **(iv) Building credibility and respect through immersion**

Our team consisted of graduate and undergraduate students who lacked evaluation and substantive content knowledge and expertise (i.e. in cardiac care). It was reasoned that in order to gain credibility and trust, we needed to demonstrate commitment to understanding and appreciating the context in which SMEs operated.

To improve our understanding of what it means to deliver cardiac care in rural states we engaged in a multi-pronged immersion strategy. First, we completed CPR and First-Aid classes. These classes equipped us with a base understanding of key terminology and common acronyms used when discussing cardiac care, and helped establish realistic expectations in terms of procedures. Second, as

discussed above, we conducted SME site visits to complete process flow maps. This strategy was designed to improve the understanding of the cardiac care system components and the context in which SMEs operate. Third, we planned, conducted, and evaluated mock cardiac arrest exercises. Process flow maps only provided snapshots of how the system operated, but not how the system components interacted. Mock exercises permitted us to follow, in real time, a cardiac arrest through the entire system—from dispatch, to EMS response, to critical access treatment, and to transport and care at a tertiary medical facility. These efforts of immersing ourselves in cardiac care significantly aided our understanding of the system and we hoped—build credibility. Further, conducting mock exercises is a resource-intensive process; a four-hour mock exercise requires approximately four months of planning with over 50 stakeholders. It was hoped a successful exercise would be another way to demonstrate commitment to the process.

In summary, numerous strategies were employed to build buy-in. These were not especially novel and many were employed based on our reading of the evaluation literature. The evaluation literature abounds with strategies for building buy-in and significant attention is devoted to reviews of evaluations however, the literature offers limited, robust cost-effective indicators to monitor evaluation buy-in. Thus, we used a developmental evaluation approach to seek indicators as they naturally occurred within the context of our evaluation. Reliable and valid indicators are preferred for several reasons—their use is more cost effective, and they tend to be unobtrusive. As a result, the results are timely as there is no delay caused by data collection and analysis, so the information can be used immediately to determine whether corrective actions are needed (Kazdin 1979; Webb et al. 1966).

### **Four robust indicators of buy-in**

The indicators presented below were identified as we proceeded through the evaluation, consistent with the philosophy of development evaluation (Patton 2010). Thus, they were not necessarily identified as priority measures to be used to monitor the success of the evaluation. While these indicators surfaced in the context of building buy-in for an evaluation of a cardiac care system, we believe they are also applicable to a variety of evaluation settings and are cost effective, unobtrusive, and therefore, especially useful for novice evaluators to gauge evaluation buy-in.

#### **Indicator 1: Timeliness to evaluation team requests**

When members of the evaluation team contacted SMEs for input they were treated with respect and receptiveness. Indicators of receptivity included: SMEs responding





quickly to phone calls and emails, usually within 24 hours, and sometimes responding after 5pm. Many of these SMEs were busy medical professionals, working double shifts, evenings, and extended call. When judged within the context of seniority and experience, their level of responsiveness is especially noteworthy. It would be easy, for example, for a medical director to treat an email from an evaluation student as low priority.

Similarly, timeliness was also indicated by the number of requests sent out as reminders to complete the follow-up survey which was focused on assessing the quality of the evaluation experience. Eighty per cent of the ELC members and SMEs completed the survey after the first request, and all ELC members and SMEs completed the survey after the second request. Additionally, upon receiving our email asking for a meeting to go over PFM, four SMEs developed their own PFM. The SME's anticipation of our needs and advanced preparation indicated respect and commitment to engage with the evaluation process.

### **Indicator 2: Quality of feedback to evaluation team requests**

In addition to responding in a timely fashion, SMEs also offered feedback—a second indicator of buy-in. For example, 66 per cent of ELC members provided response to recommendations reports within two days. Taking the time to provide feedback indicated the SME was invested in the evaluation.

The practice of member checking offers stakeholders an opportunity to offer rich communication to ensure their values are understood and incorporated into the evaluation plan (Renger & Bourdeau 2004). However, it is common for the response rate when using this methodology to be less than 50 per cent (Cook, Heath & Thompson 2000). For unsolicited surveys, similar to member checks, the response rate hovers at 20 per cent (Fink 2003). Of the 26 member checks sent to those via email communications, 18 were returned with comments, equating to a 69 per cent response rate.

Quality of participant feedback is another indicator of buy-in. SMEs provided comments, often color-coding them or using the track-changes function in MS Word to make them easy to identify. Reviewing the specificity and length of the comments provided an indication of buy-in. In order to quantify the extent of the comments; the number of words edited by the respondents were compared to the number of words contained in the original member check. On average, the original member check document was 685 words; respondents added an average of 100 words of comments per member check. Some respondents included visual icons to display their approval with the evaluation process. The use of the emoticon smiley face served as another indicator of client satisfaction and engagement.

SMEs responded with appreciation for student involvement, expressing their enjoyment to work with 'young faces'. When students were unable to attend a meeting, the professionals noted their absence and inquired about them. Although the professor of the class supervised all meetings, professionals interacted directly with the students, engaged in eye contact, posed questions about the educational goals of the students, and were generally interested in their student perspectives. The extent of engagement and expressions of appreciation demonstrated esteem and equality for all members of the evaluation team.

### **Indicator 3: Interaction with decision-makers**

The positioning of SMEs within their organizational hierarchy was another indicator of buy-in. The SMEs involved in the evaluation were located at the top of their respective organizational charts, indicating they were powerful intended users (Patton 2008). Of the 26 SMEs we interacted with, 18 (69 per cent) held leadership positions, including 'president', 'medical director', 'manager', and 'coordinator'. The ability to meet with those in supervisory roles accelerated the approval process, conserving time and helping to uphold the evaluation standard of feasibility with respect to cost and efficiency (Patton 2008). Moreover, interacting directly with decision-makers propelled the evaluation forward as they have a greater likelihood of enacting change. An unanticipated benefit of working with decision-makers was that they referred us to other decision-makers in their peer network, resulting in a cycle of efficient, streamlined communication (Patton 2008).

### **Indicator 4: Investment of in-kind contributions**

The fourth robust indicator of buy-in was the extent to which others were willing to contribute resources to the evaluation plan. An example of an in-kind donation was the distance others traveled to meet with the evaluation team, this included costs associated with mileage, meals and car rental in addition to employees' time. The degree to which others were willing to absorb these costs to meet with the evaluation team indicated their perception of the value in engagement. Success of the mock exercises was dependent on cooperation and assistance with logistics, arranging the exercises required much coordination among allied health care professionals who worked in multiple counties. Yet, despite logistical barriers and limited resources, those involved in carrying out the mock exercises responded willingly and readily.

In addition, the leadership of those organizations involved committed financial resources to ensure the exercises would happen without disruption. Originally, the mock exercises were going to be conducted using available health care employees, however, it was noted



that if a real emergency occurred the exercises would be interrupted. In order to ensure continuity with the exercises, a secondary crew was assigned at each system input including: at the site of dispatch; during basic life support; during acute life support; at critical access hospitals; and at tertiary care centers. This commitment to staffing required significant financial commitment as the secondary crew were paid overtime at time-and-a-half wages. Moreover, the financial investment was made without any clear or guaranteed outcomes. From the four agencies participating in the mock exercises, a combined total of 81 hours were invested to plan, prepare and participate, amounting to \$3,345.66 in payroll expenditures. The commitment of in-kind contributions demonstrated mutuality where a symbiotic relationship developed in that both parties reciprocally benefitted.

**Application of indicators**

The four robust indicators of buy-in that have been explained assisted our young evaluation team to gain credibility and confidence. As the team grew we needed a tool to train novice evaluators in the use of the activities and processes. We developed a spreadsheet containing the four indicators of buy-in for each of our stakeholders to provide a visual framework for evaluating buy-in (see Table 1). In this way, we created a tracking tool for buy-in, which pinpoints criteria for success. The tracking tool helps to provide a systematic record, promote the culture of documentation, and ensure transparency.

As illustrated in Table 1, the responses of stakeholders to each of the indicators vary with some outcomes met and others not. By looking at the outcomes, across the indicators we were able to monitor buy-in at a particular

point in time. The value of the tracking tool was realized when it was used to filter the data, for example, in Table 1 the in-kind donation is less than what was desired—this could be interpreted as a negative outcome, indicating a lack of buy-in. Yet by looking at the final outcome, it is apparent that to some extent, in-kind contributions were invested. The use of the spreadsheet in a systematic fashion eliminates the evaluator’s emotions as a participant observer that may color the results and allows evaluators to objectively see responses, rates and dates (Rosas 2006).

While there is no rule of thumb for determining the extent of buy-in, the tracking tool works as a visual accounting system, which can be useful in alerting novice evaluators of potential problems. Although the table does not compute the extent of buy-in automatically (as there is no magical formula), it does serve as a systematic, responsive prompt for evaluators to inquire on evaluation proceedings. If a desired outcome is not met, evaluators need not conclude buy-in is lacking, rather, a missed outcome works as a flagging mechanism to alert evaluators to check in with stakeholders. In this way, evaluators can be proactive and consult with stakeholders early on to prevent lapses, inefficiencies or misunderstandings that could later harm the evaluation. This practice encourages novice evaluators to be reflective through the evaluation process and trains them to evaluate and monitor their evaluation projects for indicators of buy-in (Cousins & Chouinard 2012).

Another value of the tracking tool is its ability to assist with creating realistic expectations. Taking time to review interactions with stakeholders and feedback received is paramount to evaluation (Rogers et al. 2010). For example, Indicator 1 illustrated in Table 1 noted a

**TABLE 1: BUY-IN TRACKING TOOL [SPELT ALL MONTHS IN FULL; CHANGED UPPERCASE TO LOWERCASE IN HEADINGS]**

	<b>Indicator 1: timeliness of feedback</b>	<b>Indicator 2: extent of feedback</b>	<b>Indicator 3: level of leadership</b>	<b>Indicator 4: in-kind contribution</b>
<b>Action step:</b>	Respond to email	Comments pertaining to member check	Approval for revised evaluation plan	Travel costs for leadership team meeting
<b>Desired outcome:</b>	Within 48 hours	Narrative reviewed and questions answered	Response from VP	50% of request
<b>Date submitted:</b>	July 15	August 1	September 3	November 9
<b>Outcome &amp; date:</b>	No, received response July 19	Yes, lengthy response of 2 paragraphs received August 4	Yes, response from VP on September 7	Yes, less than wanted but still received 25% on November 12



stakeholder responding to an email within 48 hours as a desired outcome, in this instance, the response was not received in the allocated time. Again, this may not indicate buy-in is absent, but rather highlight a problem with the evaluators' sense of timeliness. If this pattern continues, then evaluators can glean that their expectations of timeliness are not realistic. Overall, attending to indicators can help give emerging evaluators measurable indications of support and increase confidence.

The framework of the tracking tool is flexible enough for evaluators to add or subtract indicators depending on criteria, and to customize it to their specific context. By brainstorming their own indicators of buy-in and updating the tracking tool, evaluators can create their own outcome measures that are contextually relevant. While determining acceptable outcomes for some indicators may vary across organizations and cultures, evaluators will need to exercise cultural competency to create realistic outcomes that recognize, appreciate, and incorporate the cultural context in which the evaluation takes place (SenGupta, Hopson & Thompson-Robison 2004).

## Discussion

The ability to recognize indicators of buy-in is a necessary skill to add to an emerging evaluator's tool belt. However, recognizing buy-in requires a trained eye and deliberate tracking methods. The robust indicators described above and applied in the tracking tool can be useful for novice evaluators to bridge the experience gap, recognize potential buy-in problems early, and engage in corrective actions to increase the likelihood of a successful evaluation.

By definition, no indicator is perfect. For example, response delays to emails may not necessarily mean buy-in is lacking. Nor does a lack of input from invested stakeholders signal the evaluation is deemed unimportant. There are many extraneous factors, which can account for delays in emails including technology problems or lack of input from stakeholders—some prefer to be more hands-off in the evaluation plan while others take on a more active role (Azzam 2010). Nevertheless, using these indicators serves to signal the evaluator of a *potential* problem, which then requires further investigation. The indicators force the evaluator to reflect on the context in which the evaluation is situated, before it's too late. This reflection leads to locating and considering solutions to improve the evaluation plan.

The insights gained from the reflection process (triggered by indicators) build confidence and this in turn builds credibility. As noted, both personal and disciplinarian credibility come into play when establishing buy-in (Shtivelband & Rosecrance 2010). Pertaining to the evaluation team, personal credibility was high, but unstable, as it rested solely on the professor's significant

evaluation experience. Credibility of the discipline was low as some stakeholders had previous disappointing interactions with evaluators. However, a project of this size and scope is helping to show the value of evaluation and build capacity.

Two efforts in particular helped to boost the personal credibility of novice evaluators: (1) attending to the indicators of buy-in; and (2) interacting with those in leadership positions. Giving students the opportunity to interact with decision-makers bestowed confidence on the team's ability to present to professionals and advance the evaluation plan. Using class-time to hold debrief meetings and hear from multiple perspectives helped incorporate self-reflection, allow for multiple interpretations, and take stock of what worked and what still needed to be improved in the evaluation (Cousins & Chouinard 2012). The real world, real-time nature of this evaluation project necessitated students to be prepared, polished and professional. As a result, the evaluation students gained a greater sense of confidence and started the transition from novice to experienced evaluators.

## Conclusion

The importance of recognizing the indicators of buy-in is helpful in granting a sense of confidence to an emerging evaluator and promoting a practice of reflexivity. Moreover, these four indicators of buy-in reassure evaluators that the evaluation plan is unfolding in a way that will add value to the client and adhere to the tenets of sound evaluation practices—providing the client with information that is valid, credible, and useful (Scriven 1991). Indicators that illustrate that buy-in has been established and can be sustained include: the prompt responses from stakeholders to evaluation team requests; the quality and quantity of feedback received; the direct interaction with decision-makers; and the commitment of in-kind contributions.

As the success of an evaluation project is hinged upon stakeholder support, it is a worthwhile endeavor to foster students' ability to be cognizant of strategies to build rapport; to build awareness of signs of strained relations; and to be guardians against misuse of evaluators' credibility (Patton 2008). Awareness of these indicators of buy-in can help alleviate anxiety, confusion and lay the foundation for an effective evaluation.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 Hereafter the term buy-in refers specifically to the stakeholder buy-in for a proposed evaluation.



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# An evaluation of governance mechanisms as determinants of performance

## A case study of Australian universities

The premise underlying the introduction of corporate governance principles in the Australian higher education sector is that good governance results in good performance. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the influence of internal and external corporate governance mechanisms as determinants of performance in the context of Australian publicly-funded universities. Secondary data from annual reports were transformed to create indices of internal and external governance practices, and teaching, research and financial performance. Relationships between governance and performance were analysed using correlation analysis. The study illustrated in this paper is important as literature suggests that corporate governance mechanisms and the influence of these mechanisms on performance are contradictory. The results of this study do not support the contention that in Australia, the governance of universities has a significant relationship with their performance.

### Introduction

‘Governance’ refers to the direction and control exercised by the boards or senior executives in organisations, and the structures and relationships that make this possible. It encompasses authority, accountability, stewardship, leadership, direction and control exercised in organisations (Australian National Audit Office 1999).

Evaluation is an integral part of good governance because it provides the performance information for assessing accountability. Governance was introduced into the university sector as a means of ensuring greater efficiency and accountability including holding the decision-makers accountable. Governance has its origins in the public sector where it is defined as a process for ‘giving attestations on such matters as reliability, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, safety, ease of use and probity’ (Stuffelbeam and Shrinkfield 2007, p. 4).

The Australian Securities Exchange (ASX) principles and guidelines (2003) provide the basis

for the development of the Australian Government’s Corporate Governance Protocols that are applicable to all publicly-funded universities. The Protocols were introduced to the higher education sector in the white paper ‘Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future (BAF)’ (Nelson, 2003). The National Governance Protocols were implemented under BAF and became effective on 2 June 2004. The Protocols were intended to improve governance practices at universities by providing a set of standards to ensure that governing bodies were effectively overseeing university operations. It was widely expected that the new governance practices would improve the efficiency, effectiveness and performance of universities by creating transparency, responsibility and accountability (Universities Australia 2010; Williams & Van Dyke 2004), however, research into the success of governance in the university sector is scarce. This study contributes to understanding governance in the university sector. The key research question addressed in this study is—are



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governance mechanisms a strong determinant of the teaching, research and financial performance in universities in the Australian context?

### University governance

Existing literature suggests that corporate governance mechanisms and the influence of these mechanisms on performance are contradictory. Furthermore, the governance variables of universities are not recognised in the literature as important factors affecting the performance of universities.

According to the data used in this study, 36 of 37 government-funded universities generate multi-million dollar revenues. With the higher education sector now a major national industry (Birrell & Edwards 2009; Bradley et al 2009), many believed that an appropriate definition of university governance for such large enterprises would conform to the definition of the ASX Corporate Governance Council which is presented as follows:

University governance is the framework of rules, relationships, systems and process within and by which authority is exercised and controlled in institutions. It encompasses the mechanisms by which institutions, and those in control, are held to account. Governance influences how the objectives of the institutions are set and achieved, how risk is monitored and assessed, and how the performance is optimized. (De Silva Lokuwaduge 2011, p. 199)

The purpose of this study is to report on an evaluation investigating the influence of internal and external corporate governance mechanisms on performance with respect to universities in Australia.

A variety of economic, business management and governance theories have impacted on the development of governance structures. Various scholars from many different disciplines have contributed to the development of these governance theories. According to Kiel and Nicholson (2003), studies by scholars from a variety of theoretical perspectives have resulted in a number of competing theories including: Jensen and Meckling (1976) and Jacobson (1996) from the discipline of economics; Fama (1980) from finance; Useem (1984) from sociology; Boyd (1995) from strategic management; and Johnson (1981) from organisation theory. Numerous governance theories have emerged through the development of theoretical perspectives from the above-mentioned disciplines including: agency theory; stewardship theory; resource dependency theory; stakeholder theory; social contract theory; legitimacy theory; neoclassical theory; and institutional theory. The main theories used in this study to analyse the governance of the Australian higher education sector in this study include: agency theory; stewardship theory; and stakeholder theory.

### Agency theory

Agency theory provides a rational argument for the introduction of corporate governance mechanisms in institutions. This theory is based on the inherent conflict of interest between the owners (or the principals) and management (Fama 1980; Fama & Jensen 1983a). Jensen and Meckling (1976) and De Matos (2001) suggest that agency costs in a firm arise from the principal-agent problem; the managers (being agents) may not maximise the profits of the principals, and instead pursue their own interests and make decisions that do not result in increased value



for stakeholders (Agrawal & Knoeber 1996; Fama & Jensen 1983a; Jensen & Meckling 1976). Also, according to agency theory, adequate monitoring and control mechanisms are needed to mitigate the agency problem (Fama & Jensen 1983a, 1983b). For instance, initiatives to control management such as the appointment of non-executive directors to a board are designed to address the agency issue. In addition, a higher proportion of non-executive directors on a board are intended to have a positive effect on firm performance (Fama 1980; Fama & Jensen 1983a; Jensen, 2002). Thus Shleifer and Vishny (1997) and Kiel and Nicholson (2003) concluded that the incorporation of agency theory leads to normative recommendations that a board should be comprised of a majority of outside independent directors, and that separation of the positions of chairman and CEO are needed to increase performance.

### Stewardship theory

Stewardship theory suggests there is no agency cost between the principal (stakeholders) and the agent (management). The interests of the management coincide with the stakeholders and thus there is no need to motivate or discipline the management to ensure the performance of the firm (Davis, Schoorman & Donaldson 1997; Donaldson & Davis 1991; McKinnon, Walker & Davis 2000). Stewardship theory presents a contrasting view to agency theory. According to the perspective of the theory, managers are 'inherently trustworthy and faithful stewards of the corporate resources entrusted to them' (Donaldson & Davis 1991, p. 82). Therefore, managers are good stewards of their organisations and it is in their own interests to work to maximise corporate profits (Donaldson 1990).

Drawing on the above argument, proponents of stewardship theory (Donaldson & Davis 1994) argue that firm performance is linked to a majority of inside directors and CEO duality. Thus, stewardship theory supports the argument for boards to consist of executive directors with speciality knowledge, rather than a majority of non-executive directors and the need to combine role of board chair and the CEO as suggested by agency theory. According to the literature (Dalton & Kesner 1987; Donaldson & Davis 1991; Kesner & Johnson 1990), stewards protect and maximise shareholder wealth through firm performance, which results in maximising the stewards' utility. Therefore, through improved firm performance, the organisation satisfies most groups that have an interest in it (Donaldson & Davis 1991; Kesner & Johnson 1990). According to Clarke (2004) stewardship theory supports a strong relationship between managers who strive to successfully achieve the objectives of the firm, and the resulting satisfaction of investors/owners, as well as other participants in the enterprise.

### Stakeholder theory

According to stakeholder theory, managers must consider the impact of their decisions on a broad spectrum of stakeholders (Patton 1997), and hence they should evaluate their decisions based on the potential impact of the decision on stakeholders and the value of their firm (Bird 2007). This theory is based on the accountability of the board not only to the shareholders but also those who can affect or are affected by the degree to which the firm's objectives are achieved (Freeman 1984). If the achievement of a firm's objectives can be influenced by stakeholders, then a firm's decisions, and hence its performance, can be affected by stakeholder activities, and in turn the 'firm's decisions may affect the well-being of its stakeholders' (Berman et al. 1999, p. 488). Clarke (2004) considered that if corporate managers are there to maximise the total wealth of the organisation, they must take into account the effects of their decisions on all stakeholders. The most important feature of stakeholder theory is that a firm must be profitable and viable, because the prospective stakeholders will be reluctant to take a stake in companies that indicate a probability of failure (Berman et al. 1999; Clarke 2004). According to the theory, for a firm to be economically successful, senior managers should adopt corporate governance strategies and policies that facilitate the maintenance of an appropriate balance between the interests of different stakeholders (Ogden & Watson 1999). However, it is unlikely that the managers could maximise the value of a firm to its owners by completely ignoring the interest of other stakeholders (Berman et al. 1999; Wicks, Berman & Jones 1999).

In summary, each of the above theories contributes in different ways to the understanding of governance and performance. Agency theory explains the conflicting interests between principals and agents and it also focuses on the governance structures of the organisations, suggesting that independent boards with majority outside directors and board committees are important in monitoring firm performance, in order to lead to better performance. Stakeholder theory suggests that a firm has a responsibility to take account of the interests of all the stakeholders who are affected by the decisions and activities of the firm, and whose management will be a risk management activity for a firm. Accounting for these interests would result in reporting to a broad range of stakeholder groups and hence would lead to better performance in the long term. Stewardship theory views managers as stewards of the firm and considers managers as agents of the principals who have an intrinsic motivation to maximise the value of the firm, consequently, the board should be considered as stewards. The theory notes that an insider-dominated board structure with specialist knowledge is likely to maximise performance due to their particular interest in and knowledge of a firm's business.





## Governance and performance of Australian universities

The impetus for the introduction of the Governance Protocols was the changing environment in which universities operate. Traditional governance structures in universities emphasise representation on boards and committees and participation by academics in decision-making. The change in the nature of governance has been influenced by factors such as: an expansion in provision; the number of students and the number of providers of higher education; increased diversity in student cohorts; the need to increasingly differentiate from, and between higher education providers; and increased expectations from society of the role and function of higher education that has challenged traditional academic structures. In addition to the factors listed above, the global environment in which universities are situated also has an influence with respect to increasing competition, international rankings, and the growing importance of higher education to the Australian economy. As such, governments are seeking more efficiency and accountability from publicly-funded educational institutions.

While the origins of governance mechanisms are in the private sector, there are differences in legislation between universities and other public bodies. For instance, unlike other public bodies, university legislation generally does not give the relevant governments explicit power over universities. Nevertheless, as much of the funding for universities is still provided by the public purse, universities are accountable to the Auditor General in their various jurisdictions and associated national standard setting bodies (e.g. The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Board). The Governance Protocols for Australian universities introduced in 2003 were intended to improve the accountability and performance of universities.

This article describes part of a larger study. Its purpose is to describe an evaluation of the impact of the new governance measures on the performance in the case of Australian universities.

External governance mechanisms and the influence of the regulatory body is related to compliance with the Protocols. Internal governance mechanisms in this study included governance structures (council size, council independence, and council committees) and council processes (meetings). The performance outputs outlined in a case study of Australian universities were defined as teaching, research and financial performance.

The propositions emerging from the research question of the case study were:

- P1: Regulatory authority is positively related with the performance of universities.
- P2: Regulatory authority positively relates with the internal governance mechanisms.

- P3: Council size was negatively related with the performance of universities.
- P4: Council committees have a positive relationship with the performance of universities.
- P5: Council meetings were positively related with the performance of universities.
- P6: Council independence positively relates with the performance of the universities.

## Methodology of the current study

This evaluation utilised a case study approach. A case is defined as ‘specific, a complex, functioning thing’ (Stake 1995, p.2). While the majority of case studies use qualitative methods (making observations in naturally occurring circumstances and interpreting the results based on the context), it is also possible to conduct a case study comprised of quantitative data, or to use a mixed-methods approach. The contemporary groundswell of interest in mixed methods research addresses these different ways of making inferences from the data and combining/integrating them to inform policy and program development (Simons 2009). A mixed-method approach to case study design was utilised in this study. The case study findings presented in this article report the results of the analysis of secondary data collected from annual reports.

Large samples are usually preferred over small samples as they have the advantage of greater reliability and increased statistical power. However, ‘samples between 10 and 30 are large enough to test null hypotheses’ (Isaac & Michael 1974, p.67). The participants included in this study comprised the complete population of 37 government-funded universities, thus they were not a sample.

All current governance principles (including the ASX Governance Principles and Guidelines, and the education sector’s Governance Protocols) justify their use and purpose by noting that the benefits of good governance are to improve performance (Refer to Agrawal & Knoeber 2013 for a review of the relationship between governance and performance). In the higher education sector, it was widely expected that the new governance practices would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of universities by creating transparency, responsibility, and accountability (Universities Australia 2010; Williams & Van Dyke 2004), however, there is little empirical research to support this assumption.

The governance measures of the 37 government-funded universities included council size, council independence, council committees and council meetings. The performance data used in this study was selected from the compulsory annual performance reports completed by Australian universities for the Department of Education. Thus, performance was considered the



independent variable, in fact, the analysis indicated that within ‘performance’ there were in fact six independent variables; the factor analysis confirmed the six performance attributes that were included in the final model of teaching research and financial performance. Each component of the independent variable (performance) in the study was evaluated separately as teaching performance, research performance, and financial performance. Secondary data for the variables were obtained from the websites of the universities and via published sources including university annual reports.

To measure the teaching performance of universities, data recording full-time employment, graduate satisfaction and the progression rate were obtained through the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund website (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, [DEEWR]), the Graduate Careers Council Australia (GCCA), and the Australian National University data archives for the years 2005 to 2008. Student and staff load data were obtained from the Higher Education Statistics DEEWR. Ramsden (1991) and Abbott and Doucouliagos (2003a, 2003b) also used the published indicators of the former Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST] and DEEWR as data for analysing teaching and research performance of Australian universities. Financial performance data (including total revenue, total assets, total liability, total equity, current liability, current assets and operational surplus/deficit), student load data, and data on the full time equivalent staff load were collected from the Higher Education Statistics (DEEWR) collection from 2005–2008.

### Results and implications

Higher education research performance data such as research and publications, research grants, and research degree completions were obtained from the online higher education research data collection from the Department of Innovation and Research, and the DEEWR Higher Education Statistics collection (Abbott & Doucouliagos 2003a, 2003b; Ramsden 1991; Ramsden & Moses 1992; Worthington & Lee 2005) from 2005 to 2008. The variables—progress rate, overall satisfaction, and full-time employment rate were transformed into a percentage to allow for the coefficients to be comparable with other variables.

Table 1 shows the compliance of the 37 universities with the National Governance Protocols. The descriptive statistics results indicate 92 per cent compliance justifies the conclusion that the majority of the 37 universities complied with the protocols. The detailed statistical analysis revealed that the few universities who did not address the risk criteria as outlined in the protocols at the time of research brought the results down to 92 per cent.

Council size was measured by counting the number of appointed, elected, and ex-officio members in a board (Chaganti et al. 1985; Eisenberg et al. 1998). The council size of Australian universities was reported to have a mean value of 19 members, which suggested that Australian universities preferred to have larger councils within the given framework.

Independence of the councils of universities was measured as the percentage of external members of the total number of members in the university governing

**TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR GOVERNANCE MECHANISM VARIABLES FOR 37 UNIVERSITIES**

Variables	No.	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Regulatory index (Compliance with protocols)	37	.92	1.00	.94	0.03
Council size	37	12.00	22.00	19.24	2.76
Council independence	37	0.50	0.70	0.60	0.05
Council committees	37	0.18	0.76	0.54	0.14
Council meetings	37	4.00	12.00	6.84	1.48
Valid No. (listwise)	37				

Source: Author’s calculations, 2009



board (council) (Bhagat & Black 2001; Khanchel 2007). The descriptive statistics showed a minimum value as 50 per cent, and a mean value as 60 per cent. These results confirmed that 37 universities complied with the 2003 requirement of having a majority of external members in the governing body.

A council committee index was constructed by using the board committee index measures used in the existing literature (Klein 1998; Callen et al. 2003; Khanchel 2007). The index examined the existence, process and independence of audit, remuneration, and nomination committees as standing committees of the university governing body. In the analysis, the number of meetings held and the influence of the CEO's in the committee were investigated.

In order to calculate the index, the following factors were used: existence of an audit committee; a nomination committee; a remuneration committee; the independence of these committees (CEO involvement); and the process of these committees (Khanchel 2007). In calculating this index, one mark each was given for: the existence of the audit committee; whether or not it was chaired by an external member; whether the majority of external members and 6 or more meetings were held in the year; and the existence of a nomination committee or similar mechanism. Marks were also given if the CEO was not the chair or a member of the committee, and lastly whether a remuneration committee existed. Similarly, marks were also allocated if the CEO was not the chair or a member of the remuneration committee. The overall score added up to 10 and the scores were used as a percentage to calculate the overall governance committee index. The descriptive statistics of the analysis of council committees reported a maximum value of 76 per cent of councils with committees and a minimum value of 18 per cent, whilst the mean value was 54 per cent. The universities with lower scores on the index either did not have remuneration and nomination committees by 2007, or were in the process of establishing those committees at the time of the study.

The number of council meetings held was a proxy for the influence exerted by council. The overall number of meetings varied from a maximum of 12 to a minimum of 4 and the mean value for council meetings showed as 6.8, which confirmed that most Australian universities have a satisfactory number of meetings during the year with which to monitor the performance of their operations.

### Correlation analysis

A correlation analysis was performed to test the relationships between all variables used in the study. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 2 (on page 28).

### Implications of the research

The results of the correlation analysis helped to ascertain the relative influence of external and internal governance mechanism variables on the teaching, research and financial performance of universities.

#### P1: The regulatory authority positively influences the performance of universities

The first proposition of the study (P1) was regarding the influence of a regulatory authority, and stated that the regulatory authority positively influences the performance of universities. To investigate this, a regulatory index was developed using the list of compliance with governance protocols. This index was used as an external governance mechanism instrument in this study. According to the correlation results shown in Table 2, there was no correlation between the regulatory authority and the variables used for research performance, teaching performance, and financial performance. According to agency theory, the regulatory authority should closely monitor the performance and discipline the agency for the benefit of stakeholders (Agrawal & Knoeber 1996; Fama & Jensen 1983a). The correlation results did not support the conclusion from the literature in regards to the influence of regulatory authorities in the Australian university context and the proposition was subsequently rejected.

#### P2: Regulatory authority positively relates to internal governance mechanisms

This proposition was developed to understand the relationship between the external governance mechanism and the internal governance mechanism variables used in the study namely: council size; council committees; council meetings; and council independence. According to the correlation results shown in Table 2, regulatory authority (which was measured with respect to the level of compliance with protocols) was strongly correlated with council size, and there was a moderate relationship with council committees as a process.

Council independence did not show any relationship with regulatory authority. The correlation results further confirm the descriptive statistics that Australian universities demonstrated high compliance with the university governance protocols. This proves the proposition that the regulatory index is positively correlated with internal governance mechanisms of universities, and the compliance of university governing bodies as agents with the requirements of principals.

#### P3: Council size was negatively related with the performance of universities

The third proposition (P3) was that 'council size was negatively related with the performance of universities',



TABLE 2: PEARSON CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF GOVERNANCE AND PERFORMANCE (ALL VARIABLES)

VARIABLE	CSIZE	CCMT	CMEET	CIND	REG	FCR	FAT	FROE	TPR	TFEM	TSAT	RRP	RRDC	RRIN	TSSR
CCMT	-0.219	1													
CMEET	0.357*	-0.083	1												
CIND	0.091	-0.034	0.094	1											
REG	0.433**	-0.361**	0.451**	-0.074	1										
FCR	-0.240	0.488**	-0.056	-0.455**	-0.152	1									
FAT	0.478**	0.074	-0.144	-0.096	-0.030	0.384*	1								
FROE	-0.150	0.135	-0.024	-0.234	-0.006	0.498**	0.443**	1							
TPR	0.493**	-0.217	0.196	0.062	0.319	-0.435**	-0.480**	-0.142	1						
TFEM	-0.064	0.219	-0.119	0.147	-0.228	0.051	0.038	0.133	-0.374*	1					
TSAT	0.240	-0.048	0.102	0.145	0.189	-0.197	-0.099	0.026	0.230	0.008	1				
RRP	0.157	-0.061	0.140	-0.019	-0.003	-0.191	-0.418**	-0.323	.0237	-0.167	0.225	1			
RRDC	0.203	0.166	0.279	-0.200	0.056	-0.004	-0.302	-.223	0.254	-0.139	0.177	0.810**	1		
RRIN	0.120	0.151	0.372*	-0.179	0.111	0.011	-0.321	-.070	0.338*	-0.296	-0.208	0.313	.610**	1	
TSSR	-0.220	-0.250	-0.355*	0.195	-0.143	0.035	0.493**	.222	-0.445**	0.256	-0.071	-0.446**	-0.651**	-0.780**	1

Notes: \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Abbreviations:

- CSIZE: Council size log
- CMEET: Council meetings
- FCR: Current ratio
- FROE: Return on equity
- TFEM: Full-time employment rate
- RRP: Research and publication per academic
- RRIN: Research income per academic
- CCMT: Council committees log
- REG: Regulatory index log
- FAT: Assets turnover
- TPR: Progression rate log
- TSAT: Overall satisfaction
- RRDC: Research degree completion per academic
- TSSR: Staff to student ratio

Source: Authors calculations, 2009

based on the notion that bigger boards lead to inconsistency and inefficiency of decisions due to lack of cohesiveness among members, and the free rider problem as discussed in literature. Council size, as an independent variable, was transformed into a log form to get the best possible results in the study. This variable was positively correlated with the asset turnover ratio as a financial performance variable, and the progression rate as the teaching performance variable, thus rejecting the proposition that bigger councils negatively influence performance. Based on the results, the implication is that larger boards positively influenced the financial and teaching performance, and this supports the argument of stewardship theory as bigger boards could accommodate more experts relevant to teaching and finance skills, and hence positively influence the teaching and financial performance of Australian universities. This further supports the stewardship theory argument that board members as good stewards provide resources, leadership, and control—which leads to better performance.

**P4: Council committees have a positive relationship with the performance of universities**

Council committees were used as an internal governance mechanism variable in this study, and this was transformed into a logarithm to get the best form of the variable. It was proposed that council committees have a positive relationship with the performance of universities due to their role in providing expert and independent advice on financial decision making, reporting, nomination and remuneration of executives of universities. Correlation analysis reported a moderate relationship between council committees with current ratio as a financial performance variable and this did not have any significant relationship with any other performance variables used in the study. Based on these results the proposition that council committees have a positive relationship with performance and play an important role in influencing the performance of universities was rejected. The results did not support



the argument of agency theory, which suggests that independent audit, remuneration, and nomination committees monitor the performance of the institute and the CEO, and hence positively influence overall performance.

#### **P5: Council meetings (process) were positively related to the performance of universities**

Council meetings were significantly related to the research income earned per academic as a research performance measure, and negatively related with the staff to student ratio as a teaching performance variable.

The final proposition of the study suggested that council meetings were positively related to the performance of universities, as a higher frequency of meetings provided more opportunities to monitor the outcomes and take corrective action when necessary. Further, it was suggested that a higher frequency of meetings provide more opportunities for members to contribute their ideas and participate actively in decision-making. According to stewardship theory, council committees provide advice when necessary and monitor and control operations (John & Senbet 1998; Klein 1998), which improves performance. The correlation results reported a small but significantly positive relationship between committee meetings, research performance and teaching performance. There was no statistically significant relationship with financial performance, and this result led to a rejection of the proposition. The results also did not support the monitoring aspect of agency theory nor the accountability to stakeholders' requirement in stakeholder theory.

#### **P 6: Council independence positively relates to the performance of the universities**

The final proposition of the study, that is, 'council independence positively relates with the performance of the universities', was constructed to support the argument that performance improves through better monitoring. This variable showed a significant positive relationship with current ratio as a financial performance variable and as a research performance measure, however, council independence did not correlate with any of the other variables used in the study. Hence, council independence, as an independent variable, moderately explained the variation in the dependant variables.

When Krivogorsky (2006) examined the empirical validity of claims that the composition of boards of directors affects firms' profitability ratios (ROE, ROA, profit margin), results indicated a strong positive relationship between the percentage of independent directors on the board and profitability ratios. These results may be explained by stewardship theory, which supports the argument that internal members of the council have a better understanding of the environment,

and that insider dominated councils positively influence performance.

Correlation results further revealed that a high staff to student ratio has a significant negative relationship with research publications per academic, research degree completion per academic, and progression rate as a teaching performance measure. However, a high staff to student ratio shows a significant relationship with the asset turnover ratio as a financial performance measure. This may further suggest that high financial performance or cost efficiency measures lead to high staff to student ratios and as an outcome of this, teaching and research performance goes down.

### **Conclusions of the study**

The results of the analyses of the governance and performance relationships were different in the research, teaching, and financial performance variables, and thus, they imply that different governance policies should be used to improve the three respective areas of performance. Conversely, some of the results implied that the same governance policies should be used to improve performance of universities.

The funding system proposed by the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2009) requires an appropriate public accountability framework to ensure that governments and the community can have confidence in higher education, and in the efficient and effective use of public funding. This study attempted to analyse the role of governance in improving teaching, research performance, and financial viability through the effective utilisation of the financial and human resources of universities in Australia. In addition, the role of the regulatory authority and the majority stakeholders as external governance mechanisms in calling the council and CEO of universities to account was addressed. The overall results suggested that both stakeholder theory and stewardship theory play an important role in explaining university governance in Australia.

However, the results of the study do not support the central argument in the study—that governance mechanisms in universities have a positive relationship with the performance of universities in Australia. Similarly, this study failed to find any consistent significant relationship between external governance mechanisms and institutional performance; however, the external governance mechanisms highly influence the internal governance performance of universities in Australia.

As with all studies, this study has its limitations, notably, the use of interpretive statistics in a small population sample. However, it is a population survey, the data was carefully and reliably collected, the results are drawn from appropriate statistical analysis, and the interpretation is relevant to policy makers and university



administrators grappling with the issues and contemporary challenges facing the higher education sector.

The diversity of findings presented in the article may be attributed to the endogeneity problems with the selected variables, including reverse causality, joint-endogeneity (Hermalin & Weisbach 2003; Hermalin & Weisbach 2007; Zhou 2000) and unobserved heterogeneity (Himmelberg, Hubbard & Palia 1999). The mixed findings of the study indicate the need to carefully analyse and include all-important variables and appropriate operational measures in this type of research, as suggested by Gietzmann and Ireland (2005) and Zarowin (2002).

Governance is an important factor in the sustainability of any organisation (Universities Australia 2007), and thus it is important to study in detail the influence of regulatory authorities as external governance agents in influencing the performance of universities. This study was undertaken from 2005 to 2007 and it is likely that with the introduction of the National Governance Protocols (Nelson 2003), the adoption of best practice has increased since 2005; therefore, longitudinal analysis would enrich and may further investigate the findings.

Prior studies suggest that the relationship between good governance and good corporate performance may be mitigated by firm specific circumstances. Corporate governance principles suggest that the role of the CEO is important in improving the performance of a firm as they have the most responsibility in managing the firm. In addition, the performance and governance of universities could be improved by linking the performance of the CEO's with that of institutions, assuming that the presence of a powerful CEO provides leadership to the institution and sends the right signals to its stakeholders to encourage the attraction of more funds, and the creation of a better image in a market driven higher education system.

Compliance with National Governance Protocols was used as the proxy for regulatory authority in this study. No significant relationship with performance was observed with council size, council committees, council meetings and council independence as internal governance variables and governance mechanisms.

As observed by Guthrie and Neumann (2007) some variables such as the performance indicators of universities could vary for a number of reasons. For example, factors such as the location of regional universities could affect performance due to labour supply issues. The Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) rating indicators for a university could vary between years for reasons associated with sample sizes, or differences in the mix of course areas, rather than university teaching quality which were also suggested by Guthrie and Neumann (2007). Further, the indicators for tertiary entrance scores, over and under allocations in the Research Training Scheme

(RTS) are acknowledged by the government (Guthrie & Neumann 2007?) as unreliable due to difficulty in obtaining accurate data. Guthrie and Neumann (2007) and Carrington, Coelli and Rao (2005) argued that there is a confusion of processes, inputs and outputs, and a lack of defined criteria in determining performance indicators for the higher education sector.

The finding of this case study of Australian universities confirmed that high financial efficiency measures could negatively affect teaching quality and research outcomes, which are the main expectations or outputs of any university system. The results further confirmed that of Guthrie and Neumann (2007) who concluded that it is important to understand that the teaching and research activities of a university, and the quality of its' academic staff represent highly complex challenges for the formulation of performance indicators and their measurements. Governance of universities and the role of governing bodies of universities are unique and therefore, regulators have to be careful in applying concepts from the business sector too far (Harman & Treadgold 2007), as the university governing body is different to a board of directors (Universities Australia 2007) of any other service sector organisation.

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## SPECIAL FEATURE

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# Cost–benefit analysis explained

In every evaluation context, the question of worth underpins the motivation or role of the evaluation, even if it is not explicitly stated.

Often, this question cannot be answered fully, simply because people or parties may make varying subjective judgments about the value and likelihood of different outcomes—it is at this juncture that cost–benefit analysis (CBA) can be of use. For evaluations where most significant inputs and outcomes can be valued in monetary terms, CBA provides a systematic methodology for reaching conclusions on ‘worth’.

CBA is best used in conjunction with traditional evaluation approaches rather than as a replacement approach. The use of CBA can help an evaluator to be more confident in stating the evaluation findings, particularly in social policy settings where the use and importance of CBA is growing.

This article aims to help evaluators learn more about CBA by demonstrating its use to analyse an intervention designed to help young people disengaged from learning.

## What is cost–benefit analysis?

Cost–benefit analysis (CBA) provides a systematic framework for assessing whether or not the costs of a ‘policy change’<sup>1</sup> are outweighed by its benefits.

CBA can be both retrospective and prospective in assessing the policy against a baseline of what the world might reasonably be expected to look like in its absence. It is only the incremental benefits and costs of the ‘policy

change’ scenario, over and above those that would have occurred in the ‘do nothing’ scenario that are measured.

An effective CBA aims to reflect the best available evidence and collective knowledge of the subject matter experts in the particular domain(s). Furthermore, the discipline of CBA can help articulate the intangibles and communicate assumptions and judgements in a transparent manner (that is, reduce uncertainty in evaluation and complement other evaluation methods).



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Further detail about CBA is available from a range of resources. See for example, Department of Finance and Administration (2006).

### When is it used?

CBA is often used in evidence-based policymaking to support or analyse the merits of particular courses of action at any point in time, in order to ensure more effective and efficient prioritisation. Indeed, the value of CBA in evaluation is the natural extension it provides to perhaps more traditional evaluation methods, by reducing policy impacts to largely quantitative measures that ultimately allow for more ready comparisons across alternatives.

While it might be considered a necessary condition (in value for money terms) for the benefits of any policy to exceed its costs, CBA is most powerful in making decisions between alternative policy options, based on the scale of the benefit-to-cost ratios.

It is also important to note that as investments in perhaps less tangible economic and social imperatives (i.e. when compared to infrastructure proposals) become more sizeable, and budget constraints become more binding, the role and appetite for CBA is heightened.

### Why would an evaluator use cost-benefit analysis?

#### Helping to answer the value question

Ultimately, evaluation is about making judgements of worth. If the outcomes are seen as worthwhile, one evaluation question to be answered would be—is it reasonable to spend the resources to achieve these outcomes? Often an evaluator would answer this question intuitively however, CBA helps to provide more specific quantified answers.

#### Enhancing decision-making

CBA is an evaluative methodology that is valuable to decision-makers at the highest level. When an organisation is considering its strategic priorities, there will always be competition for scarce resources and CBA highlights tangible evidence of the value of investing in a particular intervention. Ultimately, the final decision of whether or not to support a program may be based on a range of factors. However, a CBA with a sound design adds a dimension of credibility to any claims made about a program's worth.

#### Increasing the demand for evaluation

Finally, the leverage that CBA provides to push in the direction of demanding more sound evidence is a strong argument for the use of CBA as a decision-making



tool. Once a program can be shown to have attributed an estimated benefit level for a given cost, the obvious question is—what would be the relative benefits of other current programs?

### Carrying out a cost–benefit analysis

This section explains the steps used to undertake a CBA by showing how it was used to examine a particular education intervention called Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN).

#### About ICAN

This was an initiative of the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development and caters for young people aged 11 to 19 years, who rarely attend school or have ceased attending.

Students who are persistently absent from school are likely to have a number of complexities in their life. For instance—they may come from a very dysfunctional family; they may have been abused; they may be a parent or a carer for a parent or other family member; have a mental illness; be affected by drug use; be homeless; or have been bullied at school. Each identified young person is assigned a paid and qualified case manager, who is not a teacher. The case manager focuses on the young person's wellbeing and helps them with whatever is necessary to get back into learning.

Local ICANs are established through community organisations, businesses, schools and other government agencies. These agencies or parties collaborate through local ICAN management committees to create opportunities to help young people re-engage with learning and return to school and/or embark on a pathway to further education, training or employment.

ICAN participants are enrolled in a local school through what is known as a Flexible Learning Option (FLO) enrolment, through which case managers and school staff work together to plan accredited learning programs.

In 2012, there were about 5000 young people enrolled in ICAN programs in South Australian Government schools, and the largest proportion of these were in Years 11 and 12 (aged 11–13 years).

#### Step 1: Establish an appropriate comparison group

Before any analysis was carried out, a suitable comparison group was located and comprised of a sample of young people with similar characteristics to the ICAN cohort, but who did not experience the ICAN intervention. Such a 'control' group was used to establish a baseline to which the learning and earning outcomes of the 'treatment' group were analysed, thereby allowing the CBA to take into account the potential achievements of the ICAN cohort if they had not been FLO-enrolled.

The accuracy of this approach depended critically on how closely the control group matched the ICAN cohort—this proved to be a major challenge. The group of young people targeted by ICAN originated mostly from low socio-economic communities. Also, as explained above, the individual members of the group were experiencing a number of complex personal issues.

The CBA report by Deloitte Access Economics (2012) considered alternative comparison groups from the limited data sources available and concluded that school leavers in the lowest quartile of socioeconomic status (according to data from the Next Step and Early School Leavers surveys by the Queensland Government) would provide the best match for the ICAN cohort (albeit from another context). However, the report acknowledges that this comparison group is only an approximate match for the disadvantage faced by the ICAN cohort, and was therefore likely to lead to an over-estimate of what the cohort would otherwise achieve (i.e. an under-estimate of the benefits).

The critical assumption was made that without the ICAN intervention, no young people in the ICAN cohort would have completed Year 12. This assumption was justified by information obtained from ICAN program managers about the difficulties faced by the young persons concerned, and the implications this had for the likelihood of Year 12 completion in the absence of additional support. The effect of this assumption on results of the CBA was examined through sensitivity testing (as noted in Step 4).

Finding an appropriate comparison group or base case scenario is a fundamental part of an effective CBA. Evaluators or program managers should do some investigation about this to be certain that a suitable comparison group can be found, before recommending such an analysis.

#### Step 2: Identify all costs and benefits

The report by Deloitte Access Economics (2012) considered costs and benefits of the ICAN program over the period 2007–10. The dollar costs, including system-level support through field and state office staff and grants to local management committees were readily calculated. However, the calculation of benefits in dollar terms was more challenging.

In a CBA all the potential benefits are considered, however, only benefits that can be readily converted to dollar values are included in the calculation. In this CBA, the key economic benefit of improved employment prospects was calculated. The available data included the year level at which FLO-enrolled young people exited schooling as well as the qualification achieved by them at that point in time—regardless of whether or not they had completed Year 12 and/or achieved particular vocational, education and training levels. Intended destination data was also available for FLO school leavers detailing



whether they would be entering employment, further training or unemployment. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has information about average wages earned by school leavers who hold particular qualification levels. Combining these data allowed for the likely returns to future employment, and the benefits that would accrue, for the cohort of young people who were FLO-enrolled in the period 2007–10 to be calculated.

A number of other benefits were described in the report, but were not included in the benefit calculation; this meant that the CBA understated the net benefits. Some of the non-employment related benefits could have been partially quantified through ‘benefit transfer’ techniques (e.g. the health benefits associated with more years in formal education or training), however, there were other benefits (e.g. improved self-esteem) that could not easily be assigned a monetary value.

Some of the impacts of a policy are immediate, for example, any up-front capital expenditure costs. In this project, costs and benefits occurred over a longer period of time. In order to compare impacts that occur at different time periods within the project’s existence and therefore arrive at an overall project evaluation, the method must compare impacts in the present and in the future. To do this, a discount rate is applied to future impacts (costs or benefits), to convert to equivalent present values. As there is no single discount rate that is appropriate across all projects, it is typically selected to reflect the advice and standard practice of the treasury in the jurisdiction for the CBA.

### Step 3: Compare costs and benefits

In order to allow for costs and benefits to be compared accurately, the outcomes that were likely to have been achieved in the absence of ICAN were considered; therefore, outcomes of FLO enrolment were adjusted to reflect this. The adjusted benefits were then compared with total costs to give an overall result.

Benefits of this nature tend to accumulate over time and accordingly, the analysis calculated benefits at 5 years, 10 years and 40 years beyond 2010 to reflect this. The result at the five-year point was as follows: the investment in ICAN over the period 2007–10 will result in a net present benefit to the South Australian community of \$4.1 million, up to the year 2016. (This is equivalent to a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.8, given an investment of \$5.3 million over the 2007–10 period).

The report also considered indirect costs and benefits and concluded that the total increase in economic value to South Australia is around \$7.7 million (in net present terms) by 2016 (a benefit-to-cost ratio of 2.2).

### Step 4: Conduct sensitivity testing

In any CBA, the development of an overall benefit-to-cost ratio involves a number of assumptions, which are open to

variation. As part of any such analysis, sensitivity testing is therefore carried out to reveal what happens if critical assumptions are varied.

For this analysis, two key aspects of the calculations for the overall benefit to 2016 were examined; these were the program costs and benefits. An analysis of varying program costs showed that the ICAN program would still result in a net positive economic return to the South Australian community, even if the program costs were increased by up to 73 per cent. The assumption that no ICAN cohort students would complete Year 12 without the ICAN intervention was also tested. The sensitivity testing revealed that, provided no more than 6 per cent of the comparison group was assumed to complete Year 12, the CBA would still show a net positive return from the ICAN program.

### Step 5: Articulate other assumptions

A number of other assumptions were made in calculating costs and benefits and these are detailed in the Deloitte Access Economics report (2012), for example, intended destinations for school leavers were used as there was a lack of data regarding actual destinations. Another example of an assumption was that if the intended destination for a school leaver was unemployment, it was assumed they would stay unemployed, if their intended destination was employment, it was assumed they would stay employed.

Of course, the incorporation of assumptions and an element of subjectivity are not confined to CBA. While the types of assumptions and judgements in a CBA may be different from those in traditional evaluations, the processes used in other evaluations also include: (1) personal judgements (which amount to assumptions); (2) the outcomes that should be examined for evidence of achievement; the adequacy of sample size; (3) the adequate representation of the group; (4) the reliability of the data; (5) the overall judgement that should be made (given a range of evidence).

One of the advantages of CBA is that the assumptions made and methods of calculation are likely to be transparent, and this therefore facilitates discussion of the results with different groups. In absolute terms, there is no clear right or wrong position to take, as decisions rely to a large extent on the frame of reference adopted for the analysis, that is, the level at which the analysis is being conducted for the Australian or South Australia communities. In the process of defining the included costs, it can be very helpful to make reference to standards of practice for CBA, so that the observer can determine the degree to which the methodology is in-line with established practice. CBA is a specialised area of work, most commonly available through economic consulting organisations, and there are common practices used by a range of different practitioners.



### Step 6: Describe non-quantified benefits

In addition to examining direct economic benefits, a typical CBA provides evidence about benefits, which cannot be so easily quantified. For an evaluator, descriptions of non-quantified benefits can provide valuable additional material in making findings about a program. This is particularly of note if such descriptions are backed by research, as is customary in a CBA.

This CBA explored three such areas of significant benefit to the community of retaining students longer in school:

- improved physical health
- reduced crime and punishment
- intergenerational effects.

In each case, literature and relevant data were examined to provide evidence of the community benefit. The key findings are outlined in the following paragraphs.

#### Health benefits

Examples studied for this CBA included correlations between the age of school leavers and smoking status and alcohol use, as well as correlations between poor physical and mental health. For example, Deloitte Access Economics (2012) stated that smoking costs society around \$8,857.00 per year for each smoker, as a result of workplace absenteeism, premature death and sickness. According to Scollo and Winstanley (2008), a 2004 survey of smokers showed that 30 per cent of those school leavers who had completed Year 10 or 11 smoked, while for those who had stayed on to finish high school, smoking levels reduced by 9 to 21 per cent.

#### Reduced crime and imprisonment

The research on education levels amongst Australian adults in prison shows that early school leavers are over-represented in the prison population. For example, according to a report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013), 37 per cent of prison entrants aged 18–24 years had only completed Year 9 or less, compared with 15 per cent for the general population in this age group. The Australian Institute of Criminology (2011) estimated that crime in Australia costs around \$36 billion per year, which is 4.1 per cent of GDP. This includes costs for victims, property loss, incarceration, law enforcement and private security. Thus any initiative, which helps young people to stay on at school longer, will result in reduced crime and punishment and will have a significant positive economic effect on the community.

#### Intergenerational effects

There are established links between low educational attainment and intergenerational disadvantage (Vinson 2007).

Table 1 summarises Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) data for relevant Year 12 completion rates. The data shows that students have an increased chance of completing Year 12 if one or both parents have completed Year 12 themselves.

**TABLE 1: YEAR 12 COMPLETION RATES IN AUSTRALIA IN 2009**

Parent completion of Year 12	Proportion of young people aged 20–24 years who had completed Year 12
Neither parent	68%
One parent	78%
Both parents	90%

#### A note about timing

A CBA can be completed in a relatively short time if the appropriate data exists or can be accessed reasonably easily. The CBA analysis for ICAN was commissioned in January 2012 and completed within three months.

Planning for a CBA may identify data quality issues or data gaps. Where this is the case, it may be prudent to postpone conducting the CBA to enable program managers to set in motion steps to gather appropriate data, and then have the analysis conducted later in the program cycle.

#### Three final points to consider

- For a large or particularly significant program, an evaluator could plan to allocate a portion of the budget to a CBA to help with decision-making about the program, and to provide useful information for program managers, program sponsors and the agency itself.
- A CBA will provide a socioeconomic value model based on defensible costs and benefits, underpinned by rational assumptions; this illustrates the real benefits of a program. It also has the potential to give an evaluator additional information to help justify findings.
- In the context of demands from program funders to ‘show us the numbers’, cost–benefit analysis has a role in providing useful evidence to communicate to stakeholders and determine relative program effectiveness.

#### Notes

- 1 ‘Policy change’ is used here to encompass changes to interventions, initiatives and infrastructure.



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## Title: *Interpretive Autoethnography*

In his book *Interpretive Autoethnography*, Norman Denzin calls us ‘Back to the beginning’. In this dense yet small volume, the reader traverses the array of forms that belong under the aegis of autoethnography, as a qualitative form of inquiry. The book is a delightfully rich read in its straightforwardness and contention.

There is a continual return to the beginnings of ideas, theories and practices, which is exciting and revitalising for the reader of this second edition. It is a book laden with the richness of Denzins’ earliest ideas, juxtaposed with the latest thinking on qualitative inquiry— which provokes us to understand the world through the lives of those who inhabit it.

The question of what exactly this book is about can be answered in the reference to Pelias (2011, p. 64), which, without any measure of ambiguity captures what is a seemingly simple thesis and the answer to the question posited. Denzin, who is a global leader in qualitative inquiry, prompts us to wonder why he wrote this book when he quotes Pelias:

Today I want to write my way out of this history, and this is why I write my version of performance and autoethnography. I want to push back, intervene, be vulnerable, tell another story. I want to contest what happened. (Pelias 2011, p. 12)

Indeed, it is clear that for anyone starting on the qualitative autoethnographic journey this book will be an exceptional guide or map. Yet there are moments when, as a reader, I feel I am deliberately munificently deceived into believing that what one is seeing is a model of simplicity. This book is a paradox as it is written to effortlessly map the terrain of this research territory but it also brings the intricacies, complications and densities of multiple subjective qualities of knowing to the reader. To continue, I will endeavour to draw out some of the questions that the quote by Pelias raises and how Denzin leads us across the topography of autoethnography.

As Denzin notes, *Interpretive Autoethnography* is a way of ‘writing my way out’ – and indeed of righting wrongs; of writing down rites of passage and is a way to review life rituals and what it means to be alive. This book is situated in a research field where biography or ‘life-writing’ is a given and it is privileged rather than admonished, the core principle of the book is life writing, which remains the *raison d’être* for this text. From the outset Denzin (Marx cited in Denzin 2014, p. xi), calls us to realise that the story of the self is where ‘...men and women make their own history, but not...

### ■ Author

Norman Denzin

### ■ Publisher/year

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### ■ Extent/type

107 pages, paperback

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under conditions they have chosen for themselves; rather than in terms of immediately existing, given and handed down to them’. Denzin goes on to note that autoethnography’s role is to ‘interpret and change the conditions under which lives are lived’ (2004, p. xx).

The second edition situates the reader in the recent history of contributors to the field. It sets out to value what is known and lived out in the activity of research under the aegis of autoethnography. Denzin cites the concept of ‘my story’ (2004, p. viii) listing a very comprehensive range of both new and familiar architects of narrative ethnography forms. For those interested in ‘drama’ or creative dramatics I draw attention to the work of Ellis (meta-autoethnography), Saldana (2011) (ethnodrama) and Pelias (2011) (sociopoetics and performance writing) in this edition.

Throughout this book, Denzin reminds us that, as the audience, we will be taken to a space to critique and ‘interpret and change the conditions under which (our) lives are lived’ (2004, p. xi). The lives of the self and the lives of the ‘other’ are deliberated upon from what is both a traditional life worldview along with the less familiar human realms of the outsider—using art and creativity to permeate the research encounter. Denzin demands that we consider the ‘immediate particularity’ of the life world of each protagonist in the act of him/her being alive (2004, p. x). Not unlike Moreno (1971), Denzin’s principles as espoused in psychodrama,

and each protagonist can and does go backwards and forwards in time and place to contest their life understanding. This ‘progressive-regressive method’ as ascribed to Sartre, allows for subjectivities to be considered and the ‘immediate particularity’ of the story of one’s life be pondered from ‘sites where structure, history and autobiography intersect’ (Denzin 2004, p. x). These junctures of connexion move us through the polity of the text, which reads like a community of minds.

The book examines ‘key’ conventions and traditions beyond biography with Sartre (1971/1981), Derrida and others bridging the histories of the biographical ‘I’ (cited in Denzin 2004, p. x). Denzin is demanding that a quality of deep attention be paid to the moments, as illustrated by Yvonna Lincoln’s life story described in the book. Yvonna Lincoln’s life is seen and felt as we read about her family story. Very early we are alerted to the central theme of the book—the ‘epiphany’ moment; and this form of deep transformative knowing is revealed when Yvonna awakens to her family’s historical legacies. She has the intense insight that in her life she ‘read(s) her emotions through her family history’ (2004, p. 3), and we are from here repeatedly made aware of the value of the felt self. The central theme of the ‘emotions’ and the place of affect in research is not new to researchers but in an age of the denial of emotional literacy and the prescription of only the ‘right’ way to behave, I am excited by the prospect that as Pelias states we can use research to ‘push back’ and ‘intervene’ so to ‘contest’ the world we have lived through and in (Denzin 2004, p. 64). I am excited also for the social researchers who traditionally have had to justify the emotional forms of knowing, and am especially aware of how meaningful this book will be for the ‘teachers’ who value the education of the psyche.

Yvonna Lincoln’s crossing in to the past is comically yet so purposefully juxtaposed when Denzin uses Claudio Moreira’s dinner table narrative of a chicken breast to poignantly show us the world of a nine year old boy and how in one moment in time his ‘resistance narrative’ is born. I will leave you to enjoy the ‘historicising’ of the boy’s body and the examination of the impact and extensiveness of such simple encounters as described on page three of the book.

In particular, the theme of performance and autoethnography in *Interpretive Autoethnography* is explored and expanded on. The book is concerned with performance so much that it is almost impossible to read a page without the alignment between performance and autoethnography becoming clearer.

Another highlight of this book is the astonishing historical recount of ‘meanings’ entitled: ‘A clarification of terms’. This would be a good place to begin with any

exploration of autoethnography. In the chapter we read Denzin’s call to remember that:

Multiple narratives, drawn from the self-stories of many individuals located in different points in the process being interpreted can be secured. This triangulation, or combination of biographical methods, ensures that performance, process, analysis, history, and structure receive fair and thorough consideration in any inquiry. (2004, p. 32)

Interpretive Autoethnography brings the space and place in which the researcher can assist the researched subject (modelling after Pelias) to ‘tell another story’. The reader is asked to consider the belief that history is ‘a montage’ (2004, p. 28) of meanings. Whilst *Interpretive Autoethnography* is an easy read for both the novice researcher and ‘old hands’ alike, there are dense moments that demand our attention. In this small book, Denzin positions us to long to know the life stories and motivations for behaviors, yet at the same time he recounts that there is often a ‘sting’ in memory and there can be a larger drama that can and does often emerge. This can be something that we might be made aware of when we return to the past; something that brings pain or unease. This is eloquently portrayed in the words he writes, ‘I wish I could reach back and hold on to all of this, things I loved then’ (2004, p. 33).

In this book Denzin (2004, p. 28) is asking that we recognise that ‘history becomes a montage, moments quoted out of context, “juxtaposed fragments from widely dispersed places and times” (Ulmer 1989, p. 112) thus are revealed hidden features of the present as well as of the past. I want to invent a new version of the past, a new history. This is what interpretive autoethnography does.’

The book is a guidebook to the landscape he has co-created and the articulation of the value of the work is best in a quotation (Denzin, 2014 p. 89) where as author Ginggrich-Philbrook reminds us that autoethnography ‘allows me in fits of nostalgia, to forge a link between myself and the world, the living and the dead, a reaching out...to make sense of a world gone mad, and now I need this because the world does not make very much sense to me right now’ (2013, p. 609).

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## Title: *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*

The second edition of *Qualitative Research Practice*, subtitled *A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, offers theoretical and practical advice for anyone interested in the range of approaches and practices that constitute qualitative research. While methodological traditions are discussed in this volume, the emphasis is clearly on the ‘doing’ of research and therefore, the book is set out to assist the researcher through each stage of research practice. While it is tempting to say that the book will best suit those who are new to research, I have no trouble recommending this text to experienced researchers in search of updated examples of social research issues and practices.

This edition of *Qualitative Research Practice* follows 11 years after the publication of the first. The editors—Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston, as well as the additional chapter contributors, are all current or past research directors for the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen Social Research) in Britain. This independent social research organisation has a commitment to quality applied research methods focusing on: children and young people; social change; justice; health and well being; and income and employment. The expectations of the editors are that the book will be particularly useful to researchers investigating policy and practice in substantive social areas such as academia, government, and public services. The elements that set this book apart are the book’s use of plain-language and the ease with which it is possible to find the theory, principles and/or exemplars, which are included in each of the chronological stages of research.

### ■ Editors

Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, Carol McNaughton Nicholls, Rachel Ormston

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### ■ ISBN 978-1-4462-0912-7

The book begins with a chapter that outlines the foundations of qualitative research and the divergent schools of thought that underpin research in the social world. Both the broad and nuanced positions are summarised within ontological, epistemological, positivist and interpretive stances that influence research enquiries. In Chapter one, research traditions, origins and aims are neatly broken down in a table, which provide a sound introduction and/or a useful revision to research methods. For example, ethnography (the tradition) has origins in

sociology and anthropology, which, as disciplines, are concerned with the study of the social world through immersion into a community. From the overview of terms and traditions, the authors' caution against fixed paradigms and instead encourage flexibility and overlap in the range of available approaches.

The 13 chapters in this book cover areas from foundations of qualitative research to writing the research. Some of the chapters include principles and considerations of design, ethics, fieldwork, interviews, analysis, wider inferences and writing. The new chapters to this edition are 'Ethics of qualitative research' and 'Observation', which reflect the new challenges of observational methods, greater scrutiny of practices, and the implications of digital communication. In the chapter titled 'Observation' for example, no knowledge is assumed on the part of the reader and as such, the role of the ethnographer is explained clearly at the outset, but without a hint of condescension. It is striking that despite the number of contributors, a straight-talking narrative voice is maintained throughout the chapters.

The consistency of chapter design in the book is particularly pleasing and accessible—each chapter includes an outline of content, and theoretical principles and exemplar boxes, which serve as illustrations of the principles. Also included at the end of each chapter is a section outlining key points, key terms, further reading, and online resources.

The chapters titled 'In-depth interviews' and 'Focus groups' are particularly substantial and useful for the many researchers who embark on these methods. The chapters attend to preparation, questioning and group processes. There is an emphasis on generating meaning through data interpretation that is relevant both contextually and beyond immediate contexts. Features of successful interviews are highlighted with examples of the functions of particular questions and questioning prompts that can be utilised to deepen understandings of experiences. There is recognition that questioning in interviews is a highly complex and sophisticated research process and the landscape of questioning is covered purposefully and in significant detail, highlighting the kinds of questions that might expand, explain, explore

impacts, challenge or clarify interviewee responses. In the 'In-depth interviews' and 'Focus group' chapters, the authors explore the often overlooked and invisible features, which underpin both individual and group interviews.

If there is an oversight, I would name the downplaying of narrative inquiry within applied social research. The contributors acknowledge the 21st century growth of narrative and biographical methods in the first chapter but seem to devalue personal accounts and storied experiences as one of the many tools that are available to researchers within the social research sphere. As a sole method, perhaps personal narratives are often flawed or incomplete, but as part of a toolbox of qualitative methods, there is much to value in the use of contextualised 'lived' accounts.

NatCen Social Research 'has a practical, applied focus, aimed at better understanding society and informing and evaluating public policy' (2014, p. xxi). The detail of the research stages and steps will benefit all individuals and organisations embarking on research projects in government agencies, universities, health sciences, and all sectors of education and public service. While there are other qualitative research resources that may give further detail into mixed-methods, case studies or autoethnography, for example, it is rare to find this combination of 'big picture' thinking and fine detail in a single text. I have no hesitation in recommending this book for any novice or seasoned researcher.



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