

How to interpret implementation evaluations

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The vast majority of funded programs are now evaluated in some way. Treasuries require evidence to justify funding, and therefore it has become an imperative for programs to measure success. A huge amount has been done to develop the science of measuring outcomes, including the development of hundreds of hierarchies of evidence and research rigour. However in reality the majority of evaluations focus primarily on implementation issues, and draw heavily on methods such as document analysis, examination of administrative data, focus groups and stakeholder consultations which do not even feature in these evidence hierarchies, and even when they do, may not provide findings which are useful or meaningful for policy makers and program funders. Furthermore, the implementation evaluations generally produce findings which are either so generic that they are almost meaningless (eg that the key factors facilitating implementation have been effective leadership, shared vision, commitment, adequate infrastructure, management support etc) or alternatively so site specific that they are difficult to translate into learnings for future program development. Finally evaluations almost inevitably focus on the particular program which they are funded to examine, but fail to take into account the broader context. The result is that policy makers and program funders often find it difficult to make any judgement on the value of the program based on implementation/process evaluations. Whilst implementation science offers some insights in this area, it does not always capture the reality of the sorts of evaluations commonly carried out in the Australian context.

Drawing on implementation literature and on a number of such evaluations which I have conducted or reviewed, this paper will contribute towards the development of a rigorous approach for drawing lessons from process evaluations and for using the findings from such evaluations for improving the delivery and effectiveness of social policy interventions.