



Australian Government



Learning Evaluation across the APS

Learning Evaluation Glossary



Glossary

Version control

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Term Definition

APS Academy	The Australian Public Service (APS) Academy supports the APS workforce develop fundamental capabilities to perform their best work.
APS Craft	<p>APS craft is the fundamental capabilities the APS workforce needs to deliver great policy and services. APS craft capabilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrity • Working in Government • Engagement and Partnership • Strategy, Policy and Evaluation • Implementation and Services • Leadership and Management
APS Continuous Learning Model (CLM)	<p>The CLM describes how people develop their capability through any combination of different methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work • People • Resources • Courses
Assumptions	A proposition that is taken for granted, as if it were true. For the purpose of evaluation, assumptions about initiatives are hypotheses about causal linkages or factors that could affect performance.
Assessment	<p>The process of judging performance results against a set of explicitly stated evaluation criteria of merit.</p> <p>Related terms: Criteria of Merit; Evaluative reasoning.</p>
Attribution	Ascribing a causal link between observed changes and a specific initiative, taking into account the effects of other initiatives and possible confounding factors.
Baseline	Information collected before or from the start of an initiative that provides a basis for planning and/or comparative assessment of subsequent change.
Benchmark	A standard or point of reference against which things may be compared. Typically, a quantitative level of performance, which defines best in class results.
Benchmarking	The process of comparing performance against a benchmark to help drive continuous improvement.
Capability	A combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes and attributes that define performance; acknowledging that other elements such as environment and context, also impact performance.
Case study	A systematic description and analysis of a specific subject such as a project, initiative, activity or organisation. Case studies are good for describing, comparing, evaluating and understanding different aspects of an evaluand.
Causal pathway	A series of cause and effect relationships. The cause is the act or event that produces the effect.

Competence	Observable and measurable levels of skills, knowledge and abilities required to perform successfully in a particular role.
Complementarity in evaluation	Strengthening the links between monitoring, evaluation and learning systems to make them mutually supportive. Complementarity can involve: using monitoring information to generate evaluation questions or using evaluation findings to focus monitoring efforts; avoiding parallel information streams; and recycling data for different uses, including for internal and external reporting.
Course – Learning through a course	Learning through targeted formal learning, e.g. eLearning, MOOCs, micro-credentialing, workshops, webinars, or professional qualifications.
Criteria of merit (CoM)	Evaluation, by definition, answers questions about quality and value. Therefore, value criteria are essential to evaluation. They are the specific aspects, qualities or dimensions that distinguish a more successful and worthwhile initiative from another. Performance is evaluated against each criterion, and the results are then used to draw evaluative conclusions. Examples of well-established evaluation criteria of merit include Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact, Sustainability, Efficiency and Coherence. Additional systems-thinking criteria of merit include Diversity/ Equity/ Inclusion; Interconnectedness momentum; and Transformation fidelity. Related term: Evaluative reasoning.
Data	In this context, data is the information collected by the monitoring and evaluation system. Data gathered is analysed to yield findings that serve as the basis for conclusions and recommendations.
Data collection methods	Techniques used to identify information sources, collect information, and minimize bias during an evaluation.
Data collection tools	Instruments used to acquire evidence.
Data synthesis	A credible process of blending and mixing evidence to balance the different dimensions of an evaluation, either within an evaluation or to combine data from across multiple evaluations.
Ecosystem (APS L&D)	A network of contributors to APS capability development. Contributors share responsibility for a continuous cycle of learning that enables and supports APS people to access relevant resources, people, work experiences and courses to meet both current role capability needs, and long-term career and organisational goals
Effectiveness	The extent to which an initiative attains its major relevant objectives.
Efficiency	The extent to which initiative inputs are minimised for a given level of outputs, or the extent to which outputs are maximised for the given level of inputs. Efficiency is concerned with the processes and inputs (activities/ strategies/ operations) by which the initiative is delivered and which produce the outputs of the initiative.
Evaluand	The object of an evaluation situated within a specific place and time. Typically what gets evaluated is some sort of initiative - such as a policy, program, product, system, training course or entity (e.g. a partnership arrangement, community of practice, organisation or policy/ service delivery function).

	<p>Initiatives are intentional, man-made phenomenon intended to address a particular problem or alter conditions for a cohort of individuals or group.</p> <p>Related term: initiative</p>
Evaluation	<p>Evaluation is a knowledge-making endeavour carried out to gain a more complete understanding of <i>what</i> is happening in relation to social programming, <i>why</i> and <i>how</i> as well as how worthwhile these changes are.</p> <p>Evaluation involves answering evaluative questions about quality, value and merit which involve defining what is meant by quality and value and then gathering relevant evidence. In other words, new local knowledge is acquired through a mix of: research inquiry; evaluative reasoning which involves a systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of an evaluation compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards; and evaluation-theory based practice. This is what makes evaluation more useful than simply measuring against indicators, summaries of observations and stories.</p> <p>Evaluation is positioned within the ‘Strategy, Policy and Evaluation’ APS craft capability - a competency needed to deliver great policy and services. Evaluation reasoning and practice, therefore, is integral to how policy makers practice their craft and learn from experience; and evidence-informed practice, adaptation and improvement.</p> <p>The APS Academy focuses on what good evaluation craft capability looks like.</p> <p>Related terms: Evaluation culture; Evaluation policy; Formative evaluation.</p>
Evaluation culture	<p>Organisational customs and norms typified by a commitment to deliberately seek out, act on and value evidence to learn from experience to better manage and deliver policy, programs or services for social betterment.</p> <p>A strong evaluation culture encompasses: a vision for quality evaluation quality and how it will be used to support social betterment, an enabling environment, and appropriate infrastructure that creates both ‘demand’ for evaluation and actually uses evaluation finding as well as the capacity to carry it out. A strong evaluation culture is actively supported by leaders and decision makers who positively promote evaluative thinking and quality evaluation in their organisations to support their vision coming to fruition.</p> <p>A weak evaluative culture, on the other hand, undermines attempts to build an effective evaluation system.</p>
Evaluation policy	<p>The Commonwealth Evaluation Policy was launched by the Evaluation Centre of Excellence, Department of Finance to embed a culture of evaluation and learning from experience to underpin evidence-based policy and delivery. The Policy took effect from 1 December 2021 and applies to all Commonwealth entities and companies subject to the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (PGPA Act).</p>
Evaluation practice	<p>Evaluation practice encompasses evaluative attitude; knowledge of and commitment to upholding professional codes and ethics and relevant practice standards; demonstration of professional credibility and practice within their own competence; discretion and confidentiality throughout evaluation process; transparency about their influence on the evaluation process, particularly value positions and cultural perspectives; and a commitment to on-going professional development to build their competence as evaluators.</p> <p>Professional evaluation practitioners reflect on their practice history, tradition of understanding and framework of ideas, preferred methods. They think about what they are doing and the choices they make, how they account both to</p>

	<p>themselves and to others for the activities they initiate, support or discourage, how they explain what they do or don't do and the nature of their contribution.</p>
<p>Evaluation questions (key evaluation questions)</p>	<p>The overarching questions to be addressed in order to assess the worth or significance of an initiative in relation to its goals. They frame the evaluation.</p> <p>A number of more specific sub- questions may sit below the key evaluation question relating to specific aspects of the logic model (i.e. program logic or theory of change.)</p>
<p>Evaluative reasoning</p>	<p>Evaluative reasoning is used throughout an evaluation to synthesize information necessary to draw evaluative conclusions about the merit, significant or worth of something. This is achieved through combining:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence about performance on a particular dimension and interpreting it relative to definitions of 'what does success like' or 'how good is good' to generate a rating of performance on that dimension; and • Ratings of performance on several dimensions to come to an overall judgement or conclusion about how 'good' performance is for a particular site, project, initiative or policy.
<p>Evaluative thinking</p>	<p>Evaluative thinking is a disciplined approach to inquiry and reflective practice that helps us make sound judgements about the merits and significance of something and <i>how</i> worthwhile it is using good evidence as a matter of habit. It can be understood as critical thinking applied in the context of an evaluand, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence that involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action (Buckley, J. et al, 2015).</p> <p>Evaluative thinking seeks to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrestle with questions of impact, effectiveness and their value, not just activity and implementation • Suspend uniformed judgement, consider alternative explanations and allow new evidence to change our mind • Question assumptions, particularly about causal pathways and the influence of context • Select and develop solutions that are informed by a strong evidence base and are responsive to our context and priorities • Value the lessons learned from experience, disappointments as well as triumphs • Maximise the value of existing data sources already available to us, mindful of their limitations • Contribute to strengthening the evidence base.
<p>Evidence base</p>	<p>The integration of the best available body of facts or information from systematic research and evaluation with expertise, judgement and experience for the purpose of indicating whether a proposition is true or valid.</p>
<p>Feedback</p>	<p>The transmission of information derived from a reaction or response to parties for whom it is relevant and useful so as to facilitate learning. In evaluation, feedback may involve the collection and dissemination of findings, conclusions, recommendations and lessons generated from people's experience back to program managers so that the strengths of an initiative can be amplified and weaknesses corrected.</p>

Findings	A finding uses evidence from one or more evaluations to allow for a factual statement.
Formative evaluation	<p>Formative evaluation involves using newly constructed evaluation knowledge to determine what to do next to enhance improvement. It enacts the principle of learning from work and from each other, and can help to overcome some of the biases that constrain organisational learning, adaptation and improvement.</p> <p>Evaluation is considered <i>formative</i> when it is conducted with the intention of identifying aspects of an initiative that can be improved to achieve better results. It is future orientated and improvement focussed to advance positive change. L&D is never complete and formative evaluation, therefore, is a valuable part of the ongoing management process to fine-tune strategies and delivery plans to improve future outcomes and advance positive change.</p>
Impact	<p>'Impact' is a problem word that requires careful case-by-case definition. The first problem is that the word is understood in various ways. For example, in program management it can be used interchangeably with related terms such as results, outcomes, performance, benefits, effects or even changes that are an immediate experience or a more enduring change in circumstances or capacities at the level of individuals or institutions.</p> <p>The second problem is that it tends to overlook human agency in favour of a 'treatment' orientation that is administered to those facing problems which are often defined by external administrators. The third problem is the assumption that impacts endure and are self-sustaining. Finally, while some initiatives that can be understood as addressing simple causes through linear causal relationships, changes must be understood more holistically as a consequence of interaction between various activities.</p> <p>Typically in evaluation, 'impact' makes a causal inference to long-term effects (positive and negative, primary and secondary) proceeded by outputs delivered by an initiative and outcomes achieved, whether direct or indirect, intended or unintended. For example, amidst other contingencies, when individual/ Agency performance improvements (immediately/ incrementally/tapers off over time) relative to what it might have been can be attributed (at least partly) to learning transfer outcomes.</p> <p>Related terms: Impact Evaluation, outcomes.</p>
Impact evaluation	<p>Impact evaluation (IE) seeks to describe what 'caused' observed effects of an initiative either in terms of: (i) assessing changes that can be attributed to a particular initiative; or (ii) demonstrating all impacts that follow from initiative activities whether directly or indirectly, or in the short or long-term.</p> <p>Where organisational learning is prioritised in order to improve current initiatives and replicate them with greater confidence in the future, IE may extend to understanding why and how an initiative succeeded or failed. In contrast, IE for the purpose of accountability tend to focus on demonstrating and measuring Impacts without necessarily examining the links between cause and effects.</p> <p>Typically IE is intensive and, where possible, would consider concepts such as a 'counterfactual' (what would have happened without the intervention) and 'additionality' (what else might have contributed to the changes observed).</p>
Indicator	Indicators provide a standardised comparison point at regular intervals which are expressed as a cardinal number, percentage or proportion in relation to the whole, index, ratio or rate. Whereas performance measures are very useful where there is a high degree of certainty of the quantity of the variable and an exact number can be counted e.g. audit, stocktake of something tangible, indicators are used for the purpose of performance measurement

	<p>and monitoring where the variable is strongly correlated to an important aspect of performance that is not easily quantifiable (i.e., measureable) such as for intangible aspects of wellbeing (e.g. perceptions and attitudes) or the cost of collecting the data is prohibitive. For example, The unemployment rate is a direct measure of unemployment. Yet, it is highly correlated with the economy making the unemployment rate an indicator for the overall state of the economy.</p> <p>Data against indicators serves as an indication that a particular phenomenon or attribute or interest may have occurred. Each indicator usually provides only partial information upon which to form a judgement.</p> <p>Related term: performance measure</p>
Initiative	<p>Initiatives are intentional, man-made phenomenon intended to address a particular problem or alter conditions for a cohort of individuals or group. Initiative is a generic term encompassing policy, program, product, system, training course or entity (e.g. a partnership arrangement, community of practice, organisation or policy/ service delivery function)</p> <p>In L&D, the initiative can be the key learning strategies and plans described in the corporate plan to achieve the entity's purposes or aspects of the plan such as the Continuous Learning Model, a learning suite or learning pathway to capabilities needed to deliver policy and services, performance consultancy, professional stream, a learning model, learning resource such as a training course, toolkit or combination of these. It can be helpful to determine whether the learning initiative is intended to build competency to address simple, complicated or complex problem solving as this has implications for what can be known about the initiative and what data and collection methods should be used.</p>
Inputs	Resources used to implement an initiative. Examples are money, staff, time, facilities and equipment.
Learning and development	Learning and development refers to all processes associated with the identification of agency and individual requirements in relation to skills development, and the design, delivery and/or brokering of opportunities to bridge gaps in skills or behavioural requirements.
Learning culture	The customs and social norms that support a growth mindset, an independent quest for knowledge, and shared learning directed toward the mission and goals of an organisation.
Learning pathway	A recommended selection of learning products, topics, modules, programs or learning suites for people to progress through for mastering a particular subject or program.
Learning suite	The catalogue of learning solutions within a public service craft area available through the APS Academy. These offerings are potentially part of a pathway or program, or available as standalone learning.
L&D practitioners	People who develop capability, and work in L&D or business teams within the APS, including the APS Academy, departments and agencies.
Lessons learned	'Effective practice', 'promising practice', 'evidence based-practice' and 'lessons learned' are various terms for the notion that practice can be informed by evaluation conclusions about more effective designs and implementation practises. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or

	<p>weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect performance, outcome and impact.</p> <p>Related term: Formative evaluation.</p>
Logic model	<p>A logic model demonstrates how an initiative is understood to bring about changes in conditions, behaviours, attitudes or wellbeing. It can include a sequence or hierarchy of outcomes which are positive changes (i.e. beneficial) and/or negative changes (i.e. detrimental). Logic models can also identify other influences on conditions, behaviours, attitudes or wellbeing. .</p> <p>Logic models are variously referred to program logic, program theory, theory of change, causal model, results chain and intervention logic). They can be drawn visually in different ways or presented in a narrative form.</p> <p>Related term: program logic.</p>
Monitoring	<p>A continuous and routine function that uses systematic collection of data to provide an indication of the extent of progress, and achievement of objectives. It relies on performance measures and indicators, and is generally associated with well-established and ongoing initiatives to account for the use of resources and demonstrate that funds continue to be used wisely.</p> <p>Related terms: Complementarity in evaluation; indicator; performance measure.</p>
Outcome	<p>‘Outcome’ refers to an interim result or effect that is caused by or attributable to an initiative and is an important pre-requisite to long-term impacts.</p> <p>For example Thalheimer’s (2018) learning outcomes hierarchy begins with low level learning outcomes which are inadequate for validating learning success: ‘Attendance’ refers to signing up, attending or completing a learning experience; ‘Activity’ refers to engaging in activities related to learning; Learner perceptions or satisfaction; and ‘knowledge recitation’ and ‘knowledge retention’. More important for validating learning success are the higher level learning outcomes such as ‘Learning transfer’ which refers to when a person uses what was learned to perform their work tasks successfully; and ‘Effects of Transfer’ on the person, their co-workers and Agency.</p>
Output	<p>The products, goods and services which are produced and delivered by the initiative.</p>
Participatory evaluation	<p>Evaluation approach in which representatives of agencies and stakeholders (including beneficiaries) work together in designing, carrying out and interpreting an evaluation.</p>
Performance management	<p>A system, integrated with initiative management for improvement purposes, of producing and using performance information to answer questions about whether promises were kept, goals were achieved and money was properly spent.</p>
Performance measurement	<p>Definitions of performance measurement tend to be predicated upon an assumption about why the performance is being measured. In general terms, performance measurement utilizes both financial and non-financial metrics to quantify results for the purposes of planning and reporting operations and implementation procedures within an organisation.</p> <p>In government, performance measurement is the process of quantifying results to demonstrate results of activities against an Agency’s purpose. Effective performance reporting is considered a key aspect of good governance and important for accountability, as entities are accountable for</p>

	<p>their activities to the Parliament and ultimately to the public who depend on them. The Department of Finance provide guidance on developing good performance information under the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (https://www.finance.gov.au/)</p> <p>Related term: Indicator; performance management</p>
Process evaluation	An evaluation of the quality of an initiative's internal components and dynamics, including implementation, policy instruments, service delivery mechanisms, management practices, and the linkages among them. Process evaluation is intended to inform program management improvement.
Program learning	Evaluation provides rich opportunities for organisational learning to stimulate thinking about what works in a particular setting and to ensure that future practice, policy or program design and implementation is informed by current evidence.
Program logic	A form of logic model tool used to clarify the rationale and causal logic behind an initiative: what are understood to be the cause-and-effect relationships between activities; outputs delivered intended outcomes and longer-term impacts. The program logic can be used to consider the plausibility of the initiative achieving its intended outcomes and longer-term impacts, and as an organising framework for evaluation.
Qualitative data	Text-based data that can be collected and analysed using appropriate of qualitative approaches, and reported in narrative form. Qualitative data provides a rich picture of people's experience of an initiative and its aftermath.
Quantitative data	<p>Information that can be counted or expressed numerically. This type of data can be statistically analysed and is often represented visually in graphs and charts in evaluation reports alongside a discussion of the findings and their implications.</p> <p>Quantitative data is the mainstay of business orientated performance measurement and metrics such as operational matters, and how customers are engaging with a product or service it (i.e. productivity, profit margin, and costs that a business can track.) Performance management information data dashboards concisely display metrics and data points to monitor a project's status in a succinct visual format. Typically data points are assumed to be self-explanatory and presented without analysis, interpretation or a discussion of their implications.</p>
Recommendations	Proposals aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, quality, or efficiency of an initiative; at redesigning the logic model or objectives; and/or at the reallocation of resources. Recommendations should be linked to conclusions.
Relevance	The extent to which the initiative is suited to the priority needs of individuals and the Agency, and can be adapted when circumstances change, including whether the initiative is doing the right things and the problem being addressed is of critical importance.
Stakeholders	Agencies, organisations, groups or individuals who have a direct or indirect interest in the initiative or its evaluation.
Summative evaluation	This form of evaluation is used to determine whether the initiative caused demonstrable effects on specifically defined target outcomes. Often undertaken to meet accountability obligations and to secure further funding, summative evaluation generally reports when the initiative has been running long enough to produce results, although it should be initiated during the

	design phase. Summative evaluation assesses the merits of the initiative in terms of the extent to which it served the interests of social betterment including positive and negative results, as well as the intended and unintended outcomes achieved.
Target	Used to establish the level of results expected against a performance measure or indicator. Setting targets should involve careful consideration and they should be regularly reviewed and revised to reflect changing circumstances. The organisations policy for target setting should take into consideration the trade-off in positioning targets so that they won't be used disingenuously, for example to portray consistent over-achievement.
Target group	The specific individuals, work team or organisations for whose benefit the initiative is undertaken.
Terms of reference (ToR)	Written document presenting the purpose and scope of the evaluation, the key questions, methods to be used, the standard against which performance is to be assessed or analyses are to be conducted, the resources and time allocated, and reporting requirements. Two other expressions sometimes used with the same meaning are 'scope of work' and 'evaluation mandate'.
Toolkit	A set of resources, e.g. templates, checklists, videos, networks, links to information that supports APS people to learn independently.
Utilisation Focussed Evaluation (UFE)	Utilization-Focused Evaluation begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use. As 'Use', is always strategic and intentional, evaluators must think about where to focus improvement efforts before starting to design evaluation tasks. Then careful consideration should be given to how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use. Use concerns how people apply evaluation findings, how they experience and the evaluation and what they learn from the evaluation process.
Validity	The extent to which the data collection strategies and instruments measure what they purport to measure.