Getting started with evaluation

Key points

- Evaluation is about understanding the impacts or outcomes of a program or service and why these impacts or outcomes were achieved. It is different from monitoring a grant program.
- Evaluations are undertaken for a number of reasons including learning and reflection, building evidence, measuring success, future planning and transparency.
- Planning for evaluation should be considered from the beginning of program or project–part of the project plan.
- Key aspects to consider in evaluation – clear project/program objectives; data collection systems, skills in the team to undertake evaluation, budget and an evaluation plan.
- The scale of an evaluation and whether it is conducted internally or externally will vary depending on the scale of the project/program, budget and skills in the team.
- Evaluations of arts projects/programs may include quantitative and qualitative information as well as intrinsic and/or instrumental outcomes. The best evaluation include a combination proving a comprehensive picture of the project/program.
- It is best to use a variety of methods to validate evaluation findings. – that is, if you receive similar results across a range of methods, your findings are likely to have more validity.

For a range of reasons, organisations in the arts, cultural and creative sector are increasingly wanting and needing to undertake evaluation of their programs and services.

Arts Queensland has put this basic fact sheet together as a guide to getting started with evaluation and to point you in the direction of some useful tools and resources.

Why evaluate?

There are many reasons people do evaluation including:

- **strategic learning and reflection** – understanding why something worked or didn't work; improving what we do and how we do it; learning lessons for the future; building a sector culture where learnings are shared with others
- **advocacy** – developing a body of evidence that shows what we are doing makes a difference
- **credibility** – building a reputation as a transparent, accountable organisation open to sharing information about outcomes of programs and services.

What is the difference between evaluation and monitoring?

Evaluation is not the same as monitoring. Monitoring is undertaken to keep track of the ongoing status of a program or service and involves routinely collecting information such as a list of activities that have been implemented, the number of participants in a project and budgetary expenditure. This is a critical part of project management but is not the same as evaluation.

Evaluation is about understanding the impacts or outcomes of a program or service and why these impacts or outcomes were achieved. It can also focus on the processes used to plan and deliver a program or service and the extent to which these were effective in contributing to positive outcomes. Evaluation is about strategic learning and reflection that can be used to plan future programs and services. A key point to note is that evaluation is not about 'compliance' – it is about organisations and practitioners wanting to understand their work better and how they do and can make an impact.

When should you start planning evaluation?

Ideally, evaluation should be built into a program or project from the very beginning – it should form part of the project plan. This ensures that the information needed for evaluation is being gathered at key stages as the project progresses, making it a much easier task. For example, if you want to tell the story of the difference your project/program has made, it is important to gather baseline data or information about the 'current state' of things before you start, so you can compare the situation as your project/program is implemented and completed.

Building in evaluation at the beginning also sets in place an 'action learning' model – the idea that projects and services can be improved while they are being implemented based on evaluative information, rather than having to wait until the end when changes can no longer be made.

However, while not ideal, it is still possible to 'retrofit' an evaluation towards the end of a program or project. It is always preferable to undertake some kind of evaluation than none at all.

What needs to be built into a program or project to make evaluation easier?

There are some key elements that are worth building into your program or project to help with evaluation.

Clear objectives	An evaluation plan	Data collection systems	Budget	Skills and Knowledge
• Articulate what you intend to achieve through your project/program • Clear objectives help in answering a common evaluation question: have you achieved what you set out to achieve?	• set out how you intend to undertake your evaluation in a plan or framework, including: purpose of the evaluation, objectives of project/program to be measured, what will be measured under each objective, methodologies, data stores, timelines and key personnel involved	• Ensure systems are in place to gather the data you need. Eg. this might involve setting up online databases or spreadsheets to collect required program information or developing participant feedback surveys	• While evaluation budget will be dependent on the purpose of the evaluation and the methodologies you use, dedicating 5-10% of your budget towards evaluation is a good general guide.	• Encouraging project/program staff to attend some basic training or professional development in this area can help demystify evaluation, increase confidence in undertaking evaluation tasks and enhance understanding of why evaluation is important.

How big should an evaluation be?

The scale of an evaluation will vary depending on the scale of the project/program. As a general rule the bigger the project, the more in-depth the evaluation. An exception to this might be if you are trialling a new method or model of working on a small scale, but evaluation is critical to deciding whether to expand or continue with the new approach.

Part of determining the scale of evaluation is deciding whether it is a one-off/point-in-time study or an ongoing/longer-term process. One-off evaluations are more common and are usually finalised towards the end of a project to determine what outcomes have been achieved over a particular time period. Longer-term evaluations are more common where a program is ongoing, or where there is an expectation that a legacy will be left by the project/program that needs to be measured again down the track. Longer-term evaluations are more resource-intensive but can be a source of very useful trend data.

Should evaluation be conducted internally or externally?

Sometimes evaluation is undertaken by people who work internally within the organisation or program being evaluated, while at other times organisations engage an independent, external person to lead evaluation. There is no hard or fast rule, but some of the considerations you might like to think about are as follows:

	Pros	Cons
Internal evaluation	• Generally the less expensive option • A good working knowledge of the project or program and contextual issues informs the evaluation • Develops the skills of staff in undertaking evaluation	• More potential for bias in findings or perception of bias • More time consuming if staff need to develop new skills to undertake evaluation • May be difficult if the project/program is complex and requires particular evaluation expertise
External evaluation	• Perceived as being impartial and therefore often given more credibility by readers • Participants in the evaluation (e.g. survey respondents) may be more likely to share honest views with an independent person • Ability to engage someone with a high level of skill in evaluation and learn as an organisation from those skills	• External person less likely to understand the intricacies of the project/program or the contextual issues • Often the more expensive option

Arts Queensland has developed a separate fact sheet about engaging external evaluators.

What is evaluation trying to measure?

You need to be clear about what you are trying to measure with your evaluation.

Evaluations commonly focus on one or more of the following key questions:
- What have been the outcomes or impacts of this project/program? (e.g. artistic/cultural, social, economic and organisational outcomes; impacts on participants, communities and artists)
- What has been the overall quality of service provided through this project/program?
- How effective have the processes been to implement this project/program?

If you are gathering evidence to engender future support for a similar project/program, a focus on outcomes and impacts will be essential. If you are trialling a way of working with new project partners, then it will be important to reflect on the effectiveness of processes used. If you want to determine how satisfied your clients are with the services you provide, then service quality will clearly be a major focus.

In a staged evaluation, you might also adopt a different focus at different points in project/program delivery. For example, mid-way through a project you might want to find out if the processes you have established are working effectively, while measuring outcomes and impacts might occur towards the end of the project.

What is the value of quantitative and qualitative information?

The best evaluations include a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, as they provide the most comprehensive picture of a project/program and offer different types of information suited to different audiences.

Quantitative information	Qualitative information
• Presented in number format – e.g. participant numbers, demographics, sales figures, percentage of participants satisfied and so on. • Information is provides a short, sharp overview of overall outputs and outcomes in a way that readers can quickly digest.[1] It also helps to quantify how funding has been spent. • Drawback - relying on quantitative data alone is that it only provides part of the picture and often obscures the more complex, nuanced and meaningful aspects of a project/program.	• Maybe in the form of participant interviews and case study examples • Provides a picture of your project/program, demonstrating what difference you have made at a deeper level of experience and providing a more 'human' element behind the numbers. • Drawback – relying on qualitative information alone, as it can make it difficult for the reader to get a clear sense of the overall outcomes and a picture of general trends elicited through evaluation.

An effective way of approaching the integration of these two types of data is to think about how

---

[1] Note there is a difference between outputs and outcomes. Outputs refer to the level of activity undertaken (e.g. number of participants) while outcomes refer to the result/benefit/costs of the activity (e.g. community cohesion). While outputs may be referred to, evaluation is ultimately about understanding outcomes.

qualitative information can be used to demonstrate quantitative data in a richer way. For example, if you were to present a quantitative finding that '80% of participants rated the event as excellent or good,' some direct quotes taken from participant interviews about what aspects they enjoyed most would provide a much more comprehensive and memorable picture. Similarly, if your demographic data showed that 25% of participants in your project were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, you might choose to do a more in-depth case study with some of these participants to explore the particular experiences of the project for them and how these might be different or similar to other participants.

What is the value of information on intrinsic and instrumental outcomes?

Evaluations of arts projects/programs may focus on **intrinsic and/or instrumental outcomes**. The most comprehensive evaluations include both, though it may be more appropriate to emphasise some outcomes over others depending on the objectives of your project/program and the purpose of your evaluation.

Intrinsic outcomes	Instrumental outcomes
• Impacts of your project/program that are related to its artistic nature. • Examples of measures include: audience engagement, captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, • Tend to receive less attention in evaluation due to challenges in developing indicators and measures. • Critical to demonstrating the value of arts and culture • Intrinsic benefits are a necessary precursor to instrumental value	• Impacts of the project, typically cover social and economic impacts. • More commonly evaluated and often linked to value of the arts • Social impacts may include - increasing community cohesion, improving health and wellbeing, enhancing learning outcomes or supporting communities to deal with particular issues and challenges • Economic outcomes may include – employment opportunities, contribution to local economy (relevant where projects/programs have an explicit economic objective or where the program is of a sufficiently large scale to warrant comparison of quantifiable costs and benefits.)

In deciding which types of outcomes to focus on, you will need to consider:
• the primary objectives of your project/program
• the purpose of your evaluation and how you intend to use the results
• the type of information that will best support you to reflect on and refine your practice
• the broader audience for your evaluation and what type of information is most relevant to them
• the budget you have for evaluation.

How do you select the best methodologies for the job?

There are many different methodologies you can select from when developing an evaluation framework. If possible, it is best to use a variety of methods to validate your evaluation findings – that is, if you receive similar results across a range of methods, your findings are likely to have more validity.

Some more common methodologies include:
- analysis of existing databases – e.g. for information about participant numbers, types of activities provided, sales figures and so on
- written surveys (including online)
- face-to-face interviews
- focus groups
- case studies – e.g. of a particular aspect of a program or a particular group of participants.

Some considerations in choosing methodologies are as follows:
- **The scale of evaluation and resources available to you** – e.g. some methods such as electronic surveys are more cost and time efficient than face-to-face interviews.
- **The type of information you are gathering** – e.g. quantitative data is often gathered through a 'tick box' survey, whereas qualitative data requires open-ended questions and may be best gathered through interview.
- **Sensitivity of the evaluation** – e.g. if you are asking people to talk about sensitive issues, face-to-face contact may be most appropriate. Conversely, some people may feel more comfortable revealing personal information anonymously through a written survey.
- **Evaluation respondents** – e.g. if you are gathering information from people with low literacy, interviews are clearly more appropriate than written surveys. If you are gathering information from people who have very limited time to contribute, a quick 'tick box' survey is likely elicit a higher response rate than an in-depth one.

What goes into an evaluation report?

While there is not one model for presenting an evaluation report, common sections include:

1. **Executive summary** – *a brief overview of major findings and recommendations (generally no more than 3-4 pages)*
2. **Introduction and context** – *purpose of evaluation and brief overview of the project/program being evaluated*
3. **Methodology** – *data collection tools used, number/demographics of evaluation respondents, limitations of data collection*
4. **Key findings**
5. **Analysis of learnings**
6. **Options for consideration** – *if there are several options to consider as a way forward, detail can be provided on the pros and cons of each*
7. **Recommendations**

You might also consider how to present information to be most readable to your audience. Graphs, tables, photographs and 'pull-out' text boxes can assist in making dense information more accessible.

It is also worth keeping in mind that standard written reports are not the only way to present evaluation findings. For example, some people use digital stories or video content to communicate their findings, and this may be particularly well-suited to some creative projects. Think about your audience and what you want to achieve in communicating your evaluation findings to determine the best approach to presenting results.

How do evaluation findings get shared?

Evaluation offers an important opportunity for you and your colleagues to reflect on practice. To get the most from your investment in evaluation, it is important that staff members (and board members where applicable) are encouraged to engage in detail with the findings and consider the future implications and learnings.

Beyond this internal level, you will also need to consider how you will share your findings with other interested parties. It is good practice to ensure that people who have contributed to the evaluation (e.g. participants who provided feedback) have access to relevant findings, so they can see how their thoughts and ideas have been captured.

If you want to use evaluation findings to influence decision-makers, think about how best to get your message across. Is this by sending a copy of the report, creating a 'fact sheet' version that highlights key findings or asking if time can be made to present the findings in person?

Your evaluation also offers a great opportunity to share findings with other practitioners and help build a sector culture where reflection on practice is valued. You could consider posting findings on your website, talking about them on a blog or sending them out through your networks.

What tools and resources are out there to help?

Professional development

The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) is the primary professional organisation in Australia for people involved with evaluation. The Queensland branch runs free lunchtime seminars in Brisbane as well as paid professional development workshops in Brisbane and other parts of the state (usually Cairns). Register via their website for the e-newsletter to keep up-to-date with events and workshops: https://www.aes.asn.au/resources-landing

Online tools and resources

Arts Queensland has published a number of fact sheets, resources, templates and sample surveys to support funding recipients with their outcome reporting. These resources may also be relevant to other people undertaking evaluation in the arts and culture area: www.arts.qld.gov.au/arts-acumen

Creative Victoria has developed a comprehensive 'how to' guide for evaluating impact of community arts projects, including practical tools, resources and templates: https://creative.vic.gov.au/resources/a-guide-to-evaluating-community-arts-and-community-wellbeing

Queensland Government