

Legitimising evaluation for vocational learning: from bastard sibling to equal brother

*John Guenther, Cat Conatus
Allan Arnott, Charles Darwin University*

Abstract

Within the world of systematic inquiry in the field of education the tacit distinction between research and evaluation has been such that the latter is subsumed by the former. There are a number of reasons for this. First, evaluation generally follows research in acronyms and publications (e.g. National VET Research and Evaluation Program). Second, the unstated assumption in much of the theory and practice literature is that evaluation is aligned with assessment and judgement while research is about the creation of new knowledge. Third, there is sometimes an obfuscated assumption that evaluation looks back at the particular while research looks forward to the general.

This paper explores the proposition that evaluation as a discipline within the field of vocational learning in Australia is undervalued, underutilised and misunderstood. This is confirmed by a quick review of Australian conference papers and journal articles in recent years, which reveals relatively few examples of papers based on evaluations. The authors' experiences are reflected in two case study illustrations from practice that demonstrate how the methodologies and learnings of evaluations can be used in much the same way as research outputs can.

We argue that while there are distinctions between evaluation and research, as disciplines they may be used for the same purpose (e.g. to improve practice or develop policy), use similar methodologies (e.g. empirical data driven processes), and result in the creation of new knowledge (particular or general). Further, one strength of evaluations is that they benefit from working within programs and are often integrated within a program. The authors contend that the perceived worth of vocational learning evaluations can and should be elevated to the same status as research programs. For this to happen, evaluators need to promote their work more actively and demonstrate the outcomes in terms of new knowledge, improved practice and policy development.

Introduction

The authors of this paper 'fell into' the role of evaluators some years ago. Before that we were researchers and adult learning practitioners. We found ourselves using our previously learned research skills but quickly discovered that there was another set of tools and approaches required for successful evidence-based evaluations. We also found that we could play an important role within the program, supporting its objectives and providing objective guidance to staff as 'critical friends'. We also discovered that the evaluations we were engaged with could be highly political—on the one hand there was an opportunity to inform policy and on the other there was a risk that policy would direct our findings, or worse still ignore them. Some of the evaluations were based on vocational learning programs. Others had strong elements of professional learning built within the methodology.

As we began to write on the subjects of evaluation projects and present at conferences we noted that there were relatively few papers based on evaluation findings, written by academics. Our hunch was that evaluation as a discrete professional discipline was less valued than research. We also noted that there were several misconceptions among those we

work with about what evaluation is. Most saw it as something you tack on to the end of a program and some saw it as equivalent to a survey of some kind. Our intent in this paper is to correct some of these misconceptions and demonstrate that evaluation is indeed undervalued. To do so we draw on two examples from our work as evaluators that highlight the important role of evaluation in generating new knowledge and applying it to the development of innovative programs and emerging policies. We commence with a consideration of the distinction and similarities between evaluation and research.

Distinctions and similarities between evaluation and research

The distinctions between evaluation and research have long been debated. Patton (2008: 40) suggests that: 'The question of whether and how evaluation differs from research haunts the field'. He goes on to argue that there is a clear distinction between the two disciplines: 'Research aims to produce knowledge and truth. Useful evaluation supports action' (p. 40).

According to the Australian Research Council (ARC) (2009: 10):

research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative.

The same *Excellence in Research for Australia* document goes on to indicate the importance of the 'use of this stock of knowledge to devise applications' (p. 10). A definition of evaluation is given as 'the systematic assessment of an object's merit, worth, probity, feasibility, safety, significance, and/or equity' (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007: 13). Most of the evaluation literature would agree to a large extent with this definition.

The definitions offered above suggest that the two fields do not intersect. However, to dismiss the similarities would be to ignore the obvious. A succinct tabular comparison of similarities and differences is offered by Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009) who categorise both fields in terms of purpose, audience, study focus, study design, data collection, reliability and validity, data analysis, and reporting. Their analysis suggests several points of connection particularly in relation to methods and data collection and several points of difference particularly in terms of reporting and purpose. Mathison (2008) suggest that similarities exist: 'Because evaluation requires the investigation of what is, doing evaluation requires doing research' (p. 188).

The contention of the ARC that research is defined in terms of new knowledge is worth teasing out in relation to evaluation. While Patton (2008) argues for a distinction between evaluation and research on this basis, this is perhaps an over-simplistic poorly premised difference. The premise on which this argument is based may be that evaluation of a program already in existence will not yield new knowledge—presumably because the knowledge is already there. However, while this may be the case with summative evaluations that look back at what has happened, it may not be true for formative evaluations, particularly those that are complex in nature. Hawe et al. (2009: 89), contend that: 'Programs and policies invariably contain new knowledge.' They go on to suggest that change processes captured in a formative evaluation will to some extent reflect the new knowledge that is created by complexity and the 'actor networks of implementation' (p. 98). Patton, in his more recent publication, *Developmental Evaluation* (Patton 2011), acknowledges the role of complexity and chaos as 'mindscapes' (p. 252) that shape perception. In the context of innovation, he goes on to say:

In complex situations, the relationships of cause and effect are disputed and unknowable until after the effect emerges; this means the evaluation has to be designed to track what emerges and provide rapid feedback to inform choices under conditions of high uncertainty. (p. 152)

In other words, the unknowable becomes knowable. New knowledge is created. This process is not too dissimilar from that which occurs when a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998) approach to evaluation is used to enhance learning in an organisation.

Research—whether it be ‘basic’ or ‘applied’—and evaluation are never conducted in a vacuum. Often, both are conducted in a lively political context and are built on the values and worldview assumptions of those conducting or commissioning the work. Evaluation is an inherently political work. It is often designed to inform policy and may at times be influenced by policy (Guenther et al. 2010; O’Brien et al. 2010). While there may be some that would argue for the independence of institutional research, in reality it is not that different. For example Australian Cooperative Research Centres are based on an assumption that research outputs will be utilised for the purpose of tackling ‘major challenges for end users’ (Department of Innovation 2010: 2). These challenges (e.g. climate change, bushfires, environmental issues) are inherently political.

One of the distinctions between evaluation and research noted above by Russ-Eft and Preskill relates to reporting. Because evaluation reports are often owned by the commissioner, the intellectual property arising from new knowledge created often cannot be freely released into the public domain. In an organisational learning context, Gill (2010) acknowledges that unless systems are in place to ensure a learning culture is maintained, new knowledge will not be shared with others. Even well-intentioned managers will ‘create controls... that become roadblocks to sharing information, applying new knowledge and discovering ways to work together effectively’ (p. 24). The point is that while new knowledge is often created in evaluations, more often than not it is not promoted as such.

The above discussion points to nothing less than a blurry distinction between evaluation and research. We do not want to understate the importance of research as a means of influencing good practice or policy. Notwithstanding this, one would expect that rigorous, evidence-based evaluations would also be a priority for Australia’s National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation program. But are they?

Evaluation and research related to vocational learning in Australia

The focus of our review of literature in this section is on Australia. Indeed our specific concerns are with the status of evaluation within the field of vocational education and training in Australia. We begin with a general discussion of misconceptions about the nature of evaluation before turning more specifically to the issue within Australian contexts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider evidence from international literature.

Misconceptions about the nature of evaluation

In the vernacular of adult learning practice, the terms ‘evaluation’, ‘feedback’, ‘questionnaires’ and ‘surveys’ often go together without consideration of the specific meaning of the terms being used. For example, a ‘course evaluation’ is often represented in a simple tick and flick survey. An example of the language used in one higher education institution is shown below:

Honours Course Evaluation

The SETL honours course questionnaires seeks feedback from students enrolled in an honours course on their teaching and learning experiences throughout the course.

The questionnaires should be handed to students once they have completed all components of their honours course but before their final exam or final result is known.

The results of this type of evaluation is confidential to the staff member conducting the evaluation. To request an order form, view the item bank or sample of the questionnaire please see below...(University of Tasmania 2009)

The wording suggests that the evaluation is the questionnaire and the questionnaire is the evaluation. More specifically, in the field of vocational learning, the NCVET's *Student Outcomes Survey* is the 'source for key performance measures used to evaluate the effectiveness of the system as a whole' (Misko and Priest 2009: 7). It is arguable that such misinterpretations and simplifications have over time formed an 'ideological position' that has the effect of decreasing the legitimacy of evaluation in the eyes of the research community. They perhaps should come as no surprise though as in the field of education generally, 'the roots of educational evaluation are in the assessment of individual student learning' which have broadened to include 'projects, instructional materials, teachers, and the school as a whole' (Nevo 2006: 445). The evaluation or assessment of students, teachers and schools tends to mask the broader role of evaluation in education and its utilisation for improving systems and stakeholder outcomes.

Evaluation as a discipline within the broader fields of systematic inquiry—whether scientific or social—is far more complex than might be suggested by the above descriptions and definitions. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) for example, identify 22 different approaches to evaluation. Evaluators use a distinctive set of tools to make the kinds of assessments they do, in addition to the sets of tools used by researchers within the range of disciplines from scientific to social inquiry. Evaluators, like researchers, are pre-eminently concerned with design. Research questions and strategies of inquiry are replaced with evaluation questions and evaluation frameworks. They are also concerned about the credibility of the evidence that they collect, validity and reliability of data, generalisability of findings and ultimately the rigor and utility of their research (Patton 2008; Donaldson et al. 2009). Their concerns about causation are expressed in 'theory of change' or 'program logic' models, which attempt to draw on an array of appropriate data sources and tools to demonstrate what works (see for example Frechtling 2007; Funnell and Rogers 2011) and thereby seeks to influence decisions at the practice and policy level (Pawson 2006). Wholey et al (2004) comment that:

The value of an evaluation is measured in the strength of the evidence produced; the credibility of the evaluation to policymakers, managers and other intended users of the results; and the use of evaluation information in influencing public policies, program activities, or program results. (p. 2)

Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) 2010 conference presentations

While AVETRA as an organisation, does not specifically mention 'evaluation' as part of its purpose, over the years conference presenters and members have shared their evaluation learnings as part of a broader understanding of what research is. As an example, Table 1 summarises an analysis of presentations (excluding panels and workshops) at the 2010 AVETRA conference, held in Surfers Paradise. The analysis is based on a review of abstracts. Less than 10 per cent of all abstracts described their presentations in terms of evaluation findings or learnings.

Table 1. Review of 2010 AVETRA conference presentations (excluding panels and workshops)

Type of presentation	Number of presentations
Research based presentations	52
Commentaries on systems, policy, theory and history (not based primarily on research or evaluation)	16
Presentations based on evaluations	7
Total presentations	75

Source: Adapted from AVETRA website (AVETRA 2010)

International Journal of Training Research articles

Table 2 summarises an analysis of articles found in the *International Journal of Training Research*, published on behalf of AVETRA over a period of five years. Sixty per cent of all articles are based on research project findings. One-third of all articles are effectively essays providing a commentary or analysis of systems, policy, theory or related history of various aspects of vocational learning. In five years of publication, only three articles explicitly described their bases as evaluation.

Table 2. Five years of articles in the *International Journal of Training Research* (Volumes 4 to 8)

Type of article	Number of articles
Articles based on research findings	27
Commentaries on systems, policy, theory and history	15
Articles base on evaluation	3
Total articles	45

National VET Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) program

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) manages the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) program. The program, at the time of writing included the following (NCVER 2011b):

- Adult literacy research program (completed)
- Building VET provider and workforce capability (completed)
- Enhancing future productivity: The interdependence of workers, employers and VET
- Low paid workers and VET: Increasing VET participation amongst lower paid workers over the life-cycle
- Securing their future: Older workers and the role of VET
- Tailoring VET to the emerging labour market (completed)
- Individual inhouse research projects (3 projects scheduled for completion 30 June 2010)
- Individual managed research projects (27 projects in various stages of completion)

A review of each project reveals that none is explicitly described as an evaluation. The research priority areas agreed to by the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) and which therefore guide NCVER's commissioned research are listed as follows (NCVER 2011a):

- Skills and productivity: To investigate how skills contribute to economic growth;

- Structures in the tertiary education and training system: To examine the impact of policy, funding and market frameworks on the provision of education and training;
- The contribution of education and training to social inclusion: To explore the reduction of disadvantage through education and training;
- Learning and teaching: To understand how, why, where and when people learn; and
- The place and role of VET: To consider VET's role in the tertiary education sector, world of work and community.

Evaluations of current programs, policies and systems could reasonably be expected to contribute significantly to this research agenda. Of course, evaluation of systems and programs is dependent on availability and accessibility of appropriate data. On this issue, the recent Skills Australia (2010) report on the future of VET suggests that the data required for evaluation of the system is neither available nor appropriate. This may be one reason why evaluations are not included in National Vocational Education and Training Research and *Evaluation* program. We will return to this issue later in the paper.

Case studies: building the credibility of evaluation

Both of the authors of this paper have a history as practitioners and researchers in vocational learning. However over the last five years we have broadened the scope of our work to more specifically include evaluations that go beyond a strictly educational focus. Invariably though, what we find is that there is almost always some connection between the subject matter of an evaluation—whether it be children and families, justice, health, child protection, domestic violence or something else—and education and training. Often the focus on learning arises from the methodology employed. The examples we offer are not directly related to vocational learning.

Case 1: Evaluation of a healing centre: Akeyulerre

Akeyulerre is an Aboriginal healing centre, funded by the Northern Territory Department of Health and Families. It offers traditional healing and supports cultural maintenance among Arrernte families in the Alice Springs region. The authors were part of a team of researchers who were tasked to conduct an evaluation of the program. The evaluation was largely qualitative in nature, relying on interview data, images and videos provided by the centre, along with observations by the evaluation team.

While Akeyulerre predominantly works with local Indigenous people, it also has an interface with mainstream services. One of its key goals is to ensure the continuing transmission of traditional knowledge from older to younger generations. While it could be seen as a 'service' to Aboriginal people, it is not a service in the conventional sense of the word. In fact it is difficult to clearly articulate what the healing centre is and how it works within a western worldview. One of the several tasks of the evaluation was to attempt to convey how the centre worked to achieve the outcomes it sought to promote. While the knowledge used to run the centre was certainly not new, the translation of the knowledge into a non-Indigenous frame of reference is something that has rarely been attempted. In the case of Akeyulerre, this is the way that evaluation generated new knowledge and new ways of thinking.

The evaluation report was targeted to meet the needs of the Department and as such it served a purpose in terms of informing the development of similar services within the Northern Territory. It was noted through the course of the evaluation, that there is growing interest in this kind of centre, not only in the Northern Territory but in other places, particularly in remote communities. Dissemination of the findings to a broader audience will provide an

opportunity for increased understanding of the factors that contribute to success and sustainability of this kind of service to other Indigenous communities across Australia. While we have sought to encourage this dissemination, the intellectual property issues associated not only with the Department's requirements but also with the organisation itself, make this more difficult than it otherwise may be.

Case 2: Evaluation of a differential response pilot

Our second case also comes from Alice Springs, where in 2008 a pilot program was established to trial a differential response framework for low risk, high needs child protection cases identified through the usual notification process. Again, the authors were part of a team tasked to evaluate the program. The topic—child protection—made it something of a political hot potato and therefore heightened the level of engagement among the evaluation stakeholders. While the program was new to the Northern Territory it was modelled on other similar services in Australia. However, the complex nature of the local context and the fast-changing nature of policy and practice in the field of child protection meant that the evidence generated from the evaluation needed to be soundly based and accepted as valid to all stakeholders. A mixed methods approach was used which drew on a combination of quantitative data from the service provider, qualitative data from stakeholders (including service users) and a reflective practice approach built around a 'community of practice' based on the evaluation reference group. It turned out that in terms of the perceived worth of the evaluation, this latter component was considered to be one of the most valued parts of the evaluation. It provided for a high level of information exchange and shared understanding of issues and contributed to acceptance of a range of recommendations provided by the evaluation team.

The new knowledge generated from the evaluation contributed to the implementation of a Territory-wide rollout of the service. The evaluation played a pivotal role in the development of policy related to the differential response framework in the Northern Territory. Not only were the evaluation findings useful for reconceptualising an understanding of the role of targeted family support as a response to the issue of child protection, the way the new knowledge was generated was of particular significance for those involved.

At this point in time we have not been able to publish from the findings of the evaluation. This is partly due to the intellectual property constraints imposed by the service agreement with Charles Darwin University but we are conscious too of the need for sensitivity in what is a highly contentious area of policy. What we have done though is actively promoted the methodology we have used and shared our learnings as evaluators, based on the successes of the 'communities of practice' approach used.

Implications and synthesis

Can evaluation be considered in the same category as research?

We have contended that evaluations can and do act in much the same way as research to generate new knowledge. The Akeyulerre case highlights the significance of translation of traditional knowledge into a mainstream context. The differential response example demonstrates the important role of evaluation as a vehicle for supporting critical thinking in an innovative policy environment. It also highlights the importance of methodology and process in the generation of new knowledge.

The literature discussed earlier points to a very blurry distinction between research and evaluation. Rigorous, evidence-based evaluations require a set of research skills and methodologies that are consistent with quality research projects. There are of course ‘dodgy’ evaluations and there are research projects that are poorly designed and poorly implemented. If the design, methodology and implementation of an evaluation are built on a sound set of research principles we would contend that evaluations are worthy of equal standing alongside any high quality institutional research project.

Why is so little new knowledge disseminated from evaluations?

The reporting and publication of evaluation findings appears to be a major point of difference between research projects and evaluations. The AVETRA data shown earlier points to a dearth of well-documented evidence-based evaluation reports available in the public domain. Further, our experiences as evaluators working on projects funded by government departments suggests that all too often an evaluation report to the commissioner is as far as the learnings go. Indeed many of the stakeholders in an evaluation may not see a benefit in making findings public. To date, while there are opportunities for publication from the cases described above, we have not as yet been able to find an appropriate medium for publication of findings for either evaluation. Intellectual property constraints detailed in service agreements require approvals that are sometimes difficult to obtain.

For higher education institutions, an evaluation report is not considered of value—at least in terms of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) guidelines. Often, because evaluation consultancies are not labelled as ‘research’, they do not have the same standing as other research projects. There is then little motivation within the institution to publish from findings. For the many private consultancies that conduct evaluations there is little to be gained—and arguably a lot of time spent working for nothing—from publishing their findings. The contract report is completed, the funds are in the bank and it is time to move onto the next project. The answer to the question posed above is therefore plainly obvious: new knowledge from evaluations is not disseminated because it is not published.

Evaluation of vocational learning programs and systems: a field ripe for harvest

There is arguably a need for rigorous systematic evaluations of many VET systems and programs (based on the dearth of reported evaluations). It would be an interesting exercise to undertake a review of evaluations of the VET system as was carried out by McDonald and Hayton in 1997. They concluded then that

Evaluation in VET in Australia has been a sporadic activity: carried out in some form on some occasions, not used to evaluate the 'big' issues, and rarely used as a tool in policy formation. (McDonald and Hayton 1997: 15)

We suspect that little has changed since then, at least judging by the priority given to evaluations in the NVETRE program. Before this can occur there needs to be a shift of mindset among many vocational learning researchers that evaluations are not the same thing as a tick and flick survey. Further, those seeking funding for vocational learning programs will need to allocate a realistic proportion of resources into evaluation of their activities. Ideally, evaluation should be built into programs so that learnings from evaluations that incorporate continuous improvement processes can be acted on through the life of the program. Further, if as *Creating a future direction for Australian vocational education and training* (Skills Australia 2010) suggests, the data is not there to evaluate systems, priority must be given to ensure that it is generated.

Evaluations are an ideal vehicle in which policy and practice can be informed so that systems, processes and procedures can be improved. They can also have an accountability function built into their design. It would seem appropriate by looking through both these lenses that the national institutions governing the VET system should be subject to ongoing evaluation. It is noted that the NCVET Strategic Plan for 2010 to 2013 suggests that 'Evaluation of broad policy areas will be given more attention than has previously been the case' (NCVER 2010: 3). At this point there appears little evidence of this happening. Further, it might be appropriate to ask another evaluation question: To what extent are the NCVET's outputs contributing to its own vision?

What can evaluation researchers do to legitimise their work?

While on the one hand we may ask ourselves: 'Why should we need to legitimise our professional work as evaluators?' the evidence presented in this paper suggests that there is indeed a need for an elevation of the status of evaluation as a discipline, aligned as it is to research. There are several things that we have done that are worthy of consideration.

Firstly, in the planning stages of an evaluation it is important to specifically include opportunities for joint publication from findings. A scope of work or evaluation framework document will set out evaluation assumptions, methods, tasks, timelines and outputs. Outputs should not be limited to a final report but include a range of other add-ons including dissemination options. Creating opportunities for promoting an organisation's learnings and achievements generates goodwill and a sense that the evaluation effort has produced something valuable to all those involved.

Secondly, research institutions should build evaluation capacity. There is a temptation to rely on research capacity to conduct evaluations but this may result in a reduced quality. The set of skills required for high quality evaluations are subtly but significantly different to those required for research. Expertise in conducting evaluations can be built through targeted training, mentoring and professional development of developing researchers.

Thirdly, evaluators should publicly promote methodologies to a broad audience. While conference presentations may be the preferred option for many institutions, we have found that smaller targeted seminars are perhaps more effective in reaching an uninitiated, yet interested audience. We have also found that a focus on innovative methodologies piques the interest of those who are sceptical of more traditional approaches to evidence gathering.

Finally, evaluators should intentionally publish and present on the basis of findings with a view to demonstrating how new knowledge generated translates into policy and practice changes. In doing so, evaluators need to look out for the 'big issues' that connect their research with strategic stakeholders.

All of the above will demonstrate the value and worth of evaluation in virtually any discipline. In the field of vocational learning an emphasis on sharing learnings is important. The evaluation process is then not something that is done *to* the organisation. Rather it becomes a professional learning activity that is done *with* the organisation.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to set out the case for quality evaluations as a legitimate form of research in the field of vocational learning. While the distinctions and similarities between both professional disciplines have been noted, it is quite clear that evaluations are a relatively rare feature of published research in this field within Australia. It may be that the reason for

this is that evaluation is seen as something of a 'bastard sibling', tolerated but not accepted as an 'equal brother' of research. It may also be though that the misconceptions about the nature of evaluation as a process of systematic inquiry are simply misunderstood.

Regardless, the credibility of evaluation depends to a large extent on the quality of the professional work carried out by evaluators. Our experience suggests that evaluation work can be recognised for its contribution to the development of new knowledge and its subsequent application for innovative practice and policy. We acknowledge that the lack of publicly reported findings sometimes diminishes the worth of the research work done during an evaluation. However, we also recognise that there is considerable scope to promote evaluation within the field of vocational learning as an important and valid form of research activity. In order for this to be accepted we believe that the stated intent of national organisations such as the NCVET needs to be followed up with tangible action. We also see a need for evaluation researchers and their institutions to play their part in adding to the reputation of evaluation work.

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