The Australian Centre for Evaluation – plans, context, critiques

Description

The plan

- [Australian Centre for Evaluation to measure what works (23 May 2023)](#)

The 2023?24 Budget includes $10Â million over fourÂ years to establish an Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE) in the Australian Treasury. The Australian Centre for Evaluation will improve the volume, quality, and impact of evaluations across the Australian Public Service (APS), and work in close collaboration with evaluation units in other departments and agencies.

The context

- [Australian Centre for Evaluation: a quick guideÂ](#) A government view, but informed by various interesting reviews
  - [Our Public Service Our Future Independent Rewview Of The Australian Public Service](#), 2019. Aka the Thodey review. See pages 220-222
  - [Disrupting disadvantage 3: finding what works,](#) by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), 2023
  - [Evaluation and learning from failure and success, by the](#) Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), 2019. Including annexes
    - [Appendix A: Evaluation and learning from failure and success](#)
    - [Appendix B: Evaluation in the Australian Public Service: current state of play, some issues and future directions](#)
    - [Appendix C: Governing by looking back: learning from successes and failures](#)

The critique(s)

- [Â Risky behaviour â€" three predictable problems with the Australian Centre for Evaluation](#), by Patricia Rogers.Â Some highlighted points, among many others of interest:
  - *Three predictable problems*
    - *Firstly, the emphasis on impact evaluations risks displacing attention from other types of evaluation that are needed for accountable and effective government*
    - *Secondly, the emphasis on a narrow range of approaches to impact evaluation risks producing erroneous or misleading findings.*
    - *Thirdly, the focus on â€˜measuring what worksâ€™ creates risks in terms of how evidence is used to inform policy and practice, especially in terms of equity.*
      - ***These approaches are designed to answer the question â€œwhat worksâ€• on average, which is a blunt and often inappropriate guide to what should be done in a particular situation. â€œWhat worksâ€• on average can be ineffective or even harmful for certain groups; â€œwhat doesnâ€™t workâ€• on average might be effective in certain circumstances. ….***

This simplistic focus on â€œwhat worksâ€• risks presenting evidence-informed policy as being about applying an algorithm where the average effect is turned into a policy prescription for all.

Other developments

- *In September 2022 the Commonwealth Evaluation Community of Practice (CoP) was launched as a way of bringing people together to support and promote better practice evaluation across the policy cycle. The CoP Terms of Reference state that it is open to all Australian government officials with a role or interest in evaluation that can access community events, discussion boards and a SharePoint Workspace. According to the Department of Finance the CoP membership has grown to over 400 people with representatives from around 70 entities and companies.*
    - It would be interesting to be a "fly on the wall" amidst such discussions

My own two pence worth

- Not only do we need a diversity of evaluation approaches (vs "RCTs rule okay!"), we also need to get away from the idea of even one approach alone being sufficient for many evaluations – which are often asking multiple complex questions. We need more **combinatorial thinking**, rather than single solution thinking. So, for example, combining "causes of an effect" analyses with "effects of a cause" analyses
- Getting away from "average affect" thinking (but not abandoning it altogether) is also an essential step forward. We neeed more attention to both **positive and negative deviants** from anyÂ averages. We also need more attention to **configurational analyses**, looking at packages of causes, rather than the role of multiple isolated (but not in reality) single factors. As pointed out by Patricia, **equity is important – not just effectiveness and effeciency** – i.e the different consequences for different groups need to be identified. Yes, the questions is not is not "*What works*" but *â€œwhat works for whom in what ways and under what circumstances"*
    - Re "This simplistic focus on â€œwhat worksâ€• risks presenting evidence-informed policy as being about applying an algorithm where the average effect is turned into a policy prescription for all." Yes, what we want to avoid (or minimise) is a society whereÂ " *While the rich get personalised one to one services, the rest get management by algorithm*"

Category

1. Uncategorized

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