

Performance audit and evaluation:
common ground ? The UK National Audit
Office experience

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National Audit Office

Structure of the presentation

- Introduction
- Audit: observations about the debate
- Audit: some background
- Similarities between two disciplines
- Conclusions

Audit and evaluation: observations about the debate

- Much written on similarities and differences
- Very different traditions and backgrounds
- Very different challenges and roles
- Overlapping methods and objectives
- Danger that terms used interchangeably
- Misses the fundamental differences

Audit: some background

- Encompasses a wide range of activities
- Longer history than evaluation
- Governed by professional standards and often has legal status
- In public sector undertaken by organisations with statutory authority
- End result often a certificate, opinion, discharge
- Performance audit more recent approach
- 20-30 years of methodological development

Characteristics of audit

- Checking against agreed criteria
- Independence
- Coverage: regularity to outcomes
- Resource focus
- Accountability focus
- Providing assurance
- Public findings

Strengths of audit

- Evidence based
- Strong legal powers
- Credibility of practitioners
- Well grounded in practice over many years
- Well based standards (especially financial audit)
- Flexible and evolving discipline
- Rigour in quality assurance arrangements

Evaluation: some background

- Developed in last 20-30 years in many countries
- Broad definitions, approaches and methods
- Purposes:
 - increase knowledge
 - improve management and delivery
 - justify policy or programme or alterations to them
- Undertaken by wide range of practitioners in a range of settings

Similarities 1

- Both forms of assessment
- Rooted in idea that possible to scrutinise and understand problems and offer solutions
- Both examine public sector programmes and activities
- Aim to gather and make use of robust, objective evidence and form judgements
- Make use of a range of quantitative and qualitative methods
- Both make use of systematic and well tested procedures
- Design tailored to needs of particular study; contrast with financial audit

Similarities 2

- Both disciplines concerned with the quality of what they do and have developed quality assurance arrangements
- Shape of work depends on the skills and experience of practitioners
- Generate reports to enlighten, advise and recommend to others
- Often recognise that formal reporting not sufficient; developing other ways to share conclusions and recommendations

Performance audit and evaluation – why coming closer ?

- Subject matter and demands on audit bodies
- Aiming to help organisations learn
- Having to deal with complexity of government
- Explaining why programmes working or not
- Flexibility of performance audit legislation
- Aspirations of auditors and expectations of stakeholders

Conclusions

- Grown closer together through audit taking on more evaluative approaches
- Audit developing heightened awareness of needs of rigour and care
- Audit has sought to be more useful, rather than always emphasising accountability role
- Auditors broadened performance audit as a discipline – topics, approaches, perspective
- Can learn from each other and so become closer
 - Evaluation from audit quality assurance processes
 - Audit from focus of evaluation on learning
- At most – similar, but not the same

- In which case why have two disciplines ?

Because.....

- Will (must) always be significant differences and audit shouldn't try to be evaluation
- Different mindset – always accountability flavoured
- Different status and institutional setting – government role to evaluate its own programmes
- Always public
- Differently commissioned and different relationship to commissioners
- Different objectives
- Different methods at times – clearly some that audit would not use
- Important performance audit does not lose unique focus and role