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Senate House, University of London was the location for the UK Evaluation Society's annual conference in April this year. More than 150 people registered for the event including participants from far away places such as Australia, Bangladesh, Malawi, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Uganda and the USA. The conference theme *Evaluating to make a difference: achieving results through learning and accountability* seemed to have particularly attracted representatives from development agencies, charities and NGOs. But policy evaluators and commissioners were also present. It seems that the world's economic crisis may once again have raised commissioners' concerns about the value and utility of evaluation. In response the UKES designed a conference to address these criticisms, particularly to consider what methods and practices are best placed to tackle complexity, risk and uncertainty.

The event was organised around three keynote addresses and 5 parallel sessions, each of which focussed on the following themes: *real time evaluations, assessing impact, promoting change and innovation, embedding evaluations in organisations and professionalising evaluation - which evaluation capabilities and competencies make a difference?* For each session, the papers presented insights into methods (traditional, exploratory or innovative) and case studies. Some 22 papers were presented during the workshops. Unable to attend all sessions, *I choose to mainly follow the sessions on "embedding evaluations in organisations" and highlight here the messages that struck me in particular.* For those of you seeking information on the other themes, the UKES is currently preparing a special conference issue of its magazine "The Evaluator". For more news on this, please contact the editor Beverley Bishop through ukes@profbriefings.co.uk

So what came out of the sessions dealing with "embedding evaluations"?

In the main, the discussions considered optimising the use of evaluation and reviewed the accountability versus learning debate in light of controversies as to whether or not accountability evaluations are making any major difference. Many of the issues raised are not new; many echo what Nicoletta Stame, for example, has already argued on several occasions, the last being in her presentation to the EES Symposium in 2011. She says that too much emphasis on "accountability" stifles any learning. In the UKES conference, many of the NGOs and charitable foundations were arguing the same thing. For example, Carol Candler, strategic director of a major UK foundation presented a case study of how her foundation was moving towards the use of developmental type evaluation (Patton) as a more useful

approach for strategic planning. There was a shift in her organisation's attitude from "simple binary outcomes measures" towards a more comprehensive stance to include "examining social networks, innovations, most significant changes and beneficiaries' learning". Rather than the foundation expecting NGOs to account for their performance in classical ways such as how many have been "reached" by the project, with what outcome / effect, the emphasis is now shifting much more towards learning about how / in which ways the donor's investment has helped the NGO to be more appreciated, recognised and effective in its activity field. David Salisbury (Macmillan Cancer Support) argued for a balance between using evaluation to prove AND improve. Useful evaluations have to be honest, he argued, and often "accountability" models do not sufficiently encourage respondents to reflect on how to improve and maximise impact; but more especially to have the courage to discuss what *hasn't worked as expected*.

The main message I heard was that for evaluation to be useful, it should be embedded within an organisation and become part of its core business.

Reflective and critical thinking should become the hallmarks of results oriented management. Whilst there is a place for accountability and learning (different audiences need different information) the choice does not have to be one or the other. Similarly one can learn from independent, external evaluations (Sabine Dinges, Germany) as well as from internal ones – or from combining both (Chris Perry and Joe Abah, Nigeria and Susan Cooper, UK). The crucial factor again is the willingness of key players to listen to the findings and react with some actionable plans.

But what about methods?

It is argued (and evidenced) that there is an increasing trend toward results-based management and demonstrating social returns on investment – coupled with more emphasis on value for money or at least doing more for less. This is said to be pressurising evaluators to produce evidence on how the evaluand has directly contributed to change. However, many have argued (e.g. Geoff White's paper and references) that the "problems" being evaluated are increasingly taking place in an ever more complex context where there is increasing risk and uncertainty about the possible outcome. Yet these complex problems are still being addressed with simple methods. Geoff White argued that in particular, quasi-experimental and experimental methods do not lend themselves to tackling interventions which are complicated and, more particularly, complex. Linear thinking as a mechanistic input-output-outcome-impact model is less and less suitable to the complexities of today.

Ben Ramalingam's keynote speech echoed similar criticisms. He called into question the need for better commissioning and evaluation management. Problems include "mechanistic estimation of evaluation budgets that risks deepening the "cookie-cutter" approach...where the cost and duration of an evaluation was programmed without consideration of evaluability, existing M&E data, size and scope of the intervention... program theory is widely viewed as a linear process with inputs and activities at the front and long-term outcomes at the end... The systems for management engagement are not strong enough to give [evaluation] its appropriate importance among the various streams of management information." Most importantly, he said "there is insufficient corporate strategic thinking regarding the use of evaluation and where evaluation should fit on the learning-accountability spectrum...".

External evaluators, he argued, also need 'a new manner of thinking' – "they come with their own world views ... are seen to have preconceived ideas and concepts.... sometimes seen as linked to weak understanding of the subject being evaluated [the organisations, policies and strategies]."

Their answers? **First**, they said, there is real potential value for making better use of existing data, and of synthesising evaluation research, case studies & peer reviews of evaluation functions. **Second**, this should be used to enable evaluation itself to do more double loop learning. **Third**, public administration and politicians need to change their mind sets – they need to move away from mechanistic thinking where they believe that the future is knowable - given enough data; where social, economic and political change can be broken down to simple cause-and-effect relationships; where breaking down parts would reveal how the whole system worked. **Fourth**, they both argued for more use of complexity research, open and dynamic systems thinking, and (therefore, especially in policy evaluation)¹, more application of *realist* (Tilley and Pawson²) and *developmental* (Patton³) evaluations.

In trying to keep this account short and to the point, I cannot obviously give due credit to all the papers and all the arguments presented at this most stimulating conference. But much of what was said has been said by many, in different towns, in different contexts (e.g. F. Leuw⁴, P. Rogers⁵ K. Forss et

¹ My inclusion!

² Pawson, R. and N. Tilley, 1997, *Realist Evaluation*, Sage Publications

³ M.Q. Patton, 2011, *Developmental Evaluation*, the Guildford Press

⁴ De Leeuw, F. and J. Vaessen (eds), 2009 *Mind the Gap: Perspectives on Policy Evaluation and the Social Sciences* (Comparative Policy Evaluation) Transaction publishers.

al⁶ and at different times. There are, of course, situations that can still be tackled with less demanding evaluations. There is still a strong need to demonstrate sound and effective use of investments. But accountability is not just an exercise in isolation. The knowledge generated should be appropriately managed and used. There would seemingly be a (possibly small) shift taking place in how charitable foundations are thinking about what they need to know from their investments, but this is not always so for the public sector. Here, it seems the challenge is twofold (at least!) (1) commissioners are still too often expecting simple solutions to complex problems with limited budgets provided to do so – they expect “faithful and known methods” and are often unwilling to try out new ways and take a risk. (2) Evaluators are therefore hesitant to try out innovative methods and more dynamic and developmental evaluation models.

The ideas are well captured in the closing image and quotation with which Ben Ramalingam left us :

‘We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them’ (Albert Einstein)

⁵ Patricia Rogers, 2008, Using Programme Theory to Evaluate Complicated and Complex Aspects of Interventions in *Evaluation* Vol 14(1) 29-48, Sage publications

⁶ K. Forss, M. Marra, R. Schwartz (eds), 2011, *Evaluating the Complex; Attribution, Contribution and Beyond*, Vol 18, Transaction Publishers