

Appendix A

ANZSOG Research Topic 3: Evaluation and learning from failure and success

Evaluation of government policies and programs is critical to the quality and impact of public policy. The potential gains from evaluation and other forms for feedback on performance will, however, only be realised if there is institutional learning capacity within the system that permits and even encourages an openness to both continual and ad-hoc learning from experience, other jurisdictions within the federation, and abroad. Topic 3 examines the state of the art of such institutional learning capacity within the APS.

Specifically, ANZSOG was asked to deliver research into the following two sets of questions:

A. On the organisation and impact of evaluation

- What does existing research about ex-ante (formative) and ex-post (summative) evaluation in and for government suggest are good practices in their design and utilization?
- What are the preconditions to the APS being able to critically evaluate government policy and its own role in policy advice and policy and program implementation?
- How well do current evaluation practices meet performance reporting/monitoring, and contribute to performance analysis and improvement, including issues on such as:
 - What are the opportunities for evaluation arising from big data and linked data? What does the APS need to do to capitalise on these emerging opportunities?
 - To what extent is transparency and public availability of administrative data sets creating an environment for more open approaches to evaluation?
 - How can evaluation practitioners best bring in the experience and evidence of clients/users/customers/communities and the views and experience of staff in the field?
 - What should the role of trials and other forms of experimentation be?
 - The balance between fit for purpose and timeliness as opposed to expensive longer-term gold-standard evaluations.
- To what extent should evaluation be undertaken within the APS or outsourced? What is needed for the APS to maximise the benefit from outsourcing? How to maintain skills and capacity?
- Does existing research offer examples of evaluation systems that could work well in the APS?
 - What are some examples from international and state jurisdictional practice which might be relevant for the APS?

B. On systemic learning from success and failure

- What does research about success and failure in public policy conclude about how governments and public service systems learn from positive and negative feedback about their past performance?
- What can we learn from case studies about the APS's propensity and ability to undertake, commission and utilise robust evaluations of government policies (including major program/project failures and service delivery breakdowns) and of its own role in the design and delivery of those policies?
- Does existing research offer examples of productive learning from success and failure that could work well in the APS?

Research into these questions in order to inform the work of the panel undertaking the Independent Review of the Australian Public Service (APS) is presented in two discrete papers. The first considers the state of evaluation within the APS and the second learning from success and failure. Both of these efforts take stock of existing practices, past performances, as well as insights gleaned from contemporary academic literature.

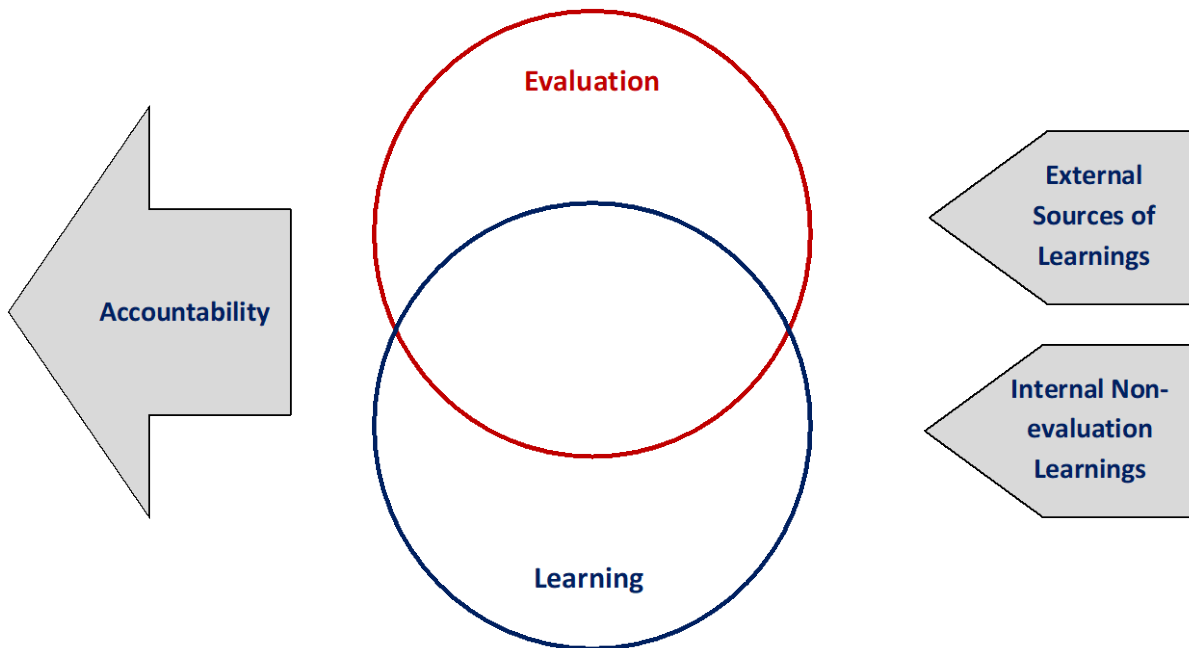
The papers are intended to be read alongside one another given the intersections between these two functions in public administration. While evaluation and learning from success and failure have a strong intersection there are elements which are quite distinct. Evaluation, and in particular what is often described as institutionalised evaluation, has both an internal and external function. That is while informing the APS about performance, it also has a core role as an instrument of accountability, including potentially to the parliament, stakeholders and the wider community.

The paper on evaluation provides a summary of the literature on the role of evaluation, its organisation over time in the Commonwealth, and the experience in other countries to raise a series of questions primarily concerned with how the evaluation function can be organised and supported, as well as the scope for looking at the ways in which policies and programs could be implemented to improve the evidence base that can be built through evaluation.

The companion piece, *Governing by Looking Back*, explores the potential for learning by offering a comprehensive overview of contemporary interpretations of success and failure, and the opportunities and challenges both types of experiences present for institutional learning. In the case of learning from failure and success, although evaluations are an important input into the evidence base of success and failure, they are not the only source. Success and failure are not objective facts; they are interpretive and reputationally consequential labels which can be mobilised to perform and serve different functions. The paper reviews what we know from international research about learning from major ad-hoc reviews of certain policies, projects or domains such as royal commissions or senate investigations, as well as from experiences of other jurisdictions (e.g. via 'policy transfer'). Reviewing both current APS practices and current views on 'good learning practices' both at home and abroad, the paper maps out opportunities to strengthen the institutional learning capacity of the APS.

As such while the two domains have considerable overlap (see Figure 1), the issues which need to be considered for each go beyond the intersection. In the case of evaluation there is a major question about its role in accountability. In the case of learning there are many sources of learnings other than evaluations and these include internal and external learnings.

Figure 1: The domains of evaluation and learning from success and failure



While the two papers both have a discrete set of probing questions it is also possible to consider some cross-cutting themes:

- Both papers address questions of expertise and experience, and the ability of the public service to maintain and develop these.
- Both identify the need for a more open and reflective professional culture within the APS which while being responsive at all times to political realities and ministerial preferences also has the maturity to continuously seek and actively engage with feedback in order to learn and improve.
- Both identify the importance of an evidence base and a systematic processing of that evidence in the policymaking process.

Finally, the juxtaposition of the two papers raises strategic questions about the design and management of the APS learning culture and accountability, in terms of:

- The *balance between internal and external mechanisms* of review, feedback and accountability.
- The ways in which both *evaluation and institutional learning capacity can best be organised within the APS* system including the *kind of leadership and stewardship* that is required.