Prioritising HEPPP-funded programs for Impact Evaluation

Introduction

The Continuous Quality Improvement activities set out in earlier sections of the SEHEEF are expected to be undertaken by universities across all of their HEPPP-funded programs. These activities are characterised by their primary purpose (accountability, learning, and/or development) and their requirements for relatively low levels of evaluation expertise.

Another key proposal in the SEHEEF is that universities select programs to undergo more advanced evaluation, including Quantitative Impact Evaluation (QIE) and/or Theory-Based Impact Evaluation (TBIE). Impact evaluations are crucial for obtaining a robust measure of the impact of a program on target beneficiaries, and for understanding why and how particular outcomes are brought about. They can also enable an understanding of what works, for whom, in what circumstances, how and why.

These evaluation approaches are resource-intensive, requiring strong expertise in evaluation design, theory, and methods. In most cases, they are likely to require commissioning of external evaluators. It is important that universities adopt a systematic approach for selecting programs to undergo QIE or TBIE.

Prioritising programs for advanced evaluation

It is proposed that a standard set of criteria is used by universities to make an informed assessment of what programs they will expose to impact evaluation, and why. This is an approach used in other public sector evaluation contexts.[1]

Table x provides criteria that universities should consider when prioritising programs for Impact Evaluation. Applying these criteria to all HEPPP-funded programs within a university will enable a shortlist to be developed. This shortlist can then be stratified according to broad program characteristics such as the student life stage at which the program is implemented, program size (defined as % of overall HEPPP funding) and the primary equity group targeted. This is important to ensure that there is a variability in the programs selected for impact evaluation.[2]

Where possible, impact evaluations should include QIE, either as the only approach, or embedded within a TBIE. As such, there is a specific criterion pertaining to QIE feasibility. If administrative data to enable QIE

[1] See, for example, New South Wales Government and Northern Territory Government Program Evaluation Guidelines.

[2] As noted in Section x.x., in the short-term, Quantitative Impact Evaluations are likely to be most feasible for those HEPPP-funded programs delivered to students currently at university (i.e. delivered during the Participation and Completion and Transition Out stages) as university data can be used to assess 'primary' outcomes.

are not available, an in-depth theory-based evaluation should be considered. Ideally, programs will undergo TBIE which incorporates QIE as this will provide the most instructive evaluation findings.

Prioritising programs is ultimately a matter of judgment. Universities may wish to develop a tool for the calculation of a prioritisation score to support decision making, such as the example provided in **Box x**. It is important to note that universities must consider the amount of funding that it will allocate towards evaluation. A general rule of thumb is that 5-10% of a program's budget should be reserved for resourcing evaluation. The implications of adequately resourcing evaluation on both the distribution of funding to universities, and the management of funding by universities, is a key consideration.

Confirming selected programs

The intention is that the list of selected programs, and the rationale for their selection, will be submitted to DESE as part of the SEHEEF CQI Planning Template.

Table x: Criteria to support the prioritisation of programs for advanced evaluation

Criteria	Description	Prompts to guide prioritisation
Program maturity	This concerns the extent to which the program is new and innovative or a continuation of an already established program.	• Is this a new and previously untried project? • Is this program similar to other programs you have delivered or are delivering? • Does the program contain innovative approaches? • Is there uncertainty about program outcomes? • For how long has this program been delivered? • Has the implementation and impact of this program been evaluated before?
Program profile	This concerns the profile of the program in terms of: • Program cost • Number of participants • Number of partners and stakeholders involved • Stakeholder importance	• How many participants will be involved in this program? • To what extent are partners and stakeholders involved in this program? • What is the total cost of the program, including staff and non-staff costs? • How does the cost of the program compare to other HEPPP-funded programs being delivered by the university? • Is this program deemed of high importance within the university and to other stakeholders?
QIE feasibility	This concerns the availability of data that facilitates robust QIE: • data on participation in HEPPP activities; • data on equity characteristics of participants and non-participants (for generating control groups); • data on relevant outcomes for participants and potential control groups	• Can the collected data reliably identify who has participated in a HEPPP funded activity (and when and in which way)? • Has there been enough time for primary outcomes to accrue and become measure able? • Is there reliable data available on such outcomes for each participant but also for potential control groups? • Do sizes of participant and potential control groups allow robust estimates of differences in outcomes (see Additional Note)?

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Box x: Example Prioritisation Scoring Tool for selecting programs for impact evaluation

Prioritisation Tool

Scenario

Program A accounts for the highest share of University X's HEPPP allocation. It is a relatively new program, having only been implemented for the first time 2 years ago. It is delivered to a large number of students and uptake has been good. The program's design has been informed by available evidence, but it also contains some innovative elements and some of the underlying theory is speculative. The program steering committee involves numerous senior leaders from the University and the number of external stakeholders involved in supporting the program has grown year-on-year. Monitoring of student progression suggests the program is making a difference; however, no formal evaluation has been conducted. The university collects data on the student ID of program participants and this can be linked to outcomes on the university's main data system.

Step 1: Determine whether there is a need for Impact Evaluation
(by discussing the criteria of Program Maturity, Program Profile and QIE)

If there is a clear need for Impact Evaluation, please complete Step 2 to prioritise the evaluation of the program against other programs.

If there is not an identified need for Impact Evaluation, the program will be assessed using the continuous quality improvement activities.

Step 2: Calculate a prioritisation score

	Yes (2)	To some extent (1)	No (0)
Program profile			
The amount of HEPPP funding for this program high compared to others within the university	2		
The program reaches a high number of participants / students compared to others in the university.	2		
HEPPP is the main funding source for this program	2		
The program involves a large number of internal and external stakeholders/partners	2		
		Subtotal	**20**
Program maturity			
The program has not been evaluated before	2		
There is uncertainty about the program's impact on intended outcomes		1	
There is uncertainty about how the program will bring about its intended outcomes		1	
There is a lack of evidence to support the program's design		1	
		Subtotal	**12.5**
QIE feasibility			
It is likely possible to undertake QIE of the program	2		
		Subtotal	**20**

TOTAL	52.5 / 60

Note: Each prioritisation category accounts for an equal weight. Category subtotals have been calculated by totalling the category score, dividing by the number of items, and multiplying by 10.

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Additional note to support assessment of QIE feasibility

Determining a sufficient number of participants and non-participants (for generating control groups) for robust QIE depends on the specific data analysis methods used in the QIE, the underlying population size, and the discriminations shown in outcomes indicators. These matters are not necessarily well defined prior to a QIE, particularly the specific analysis methods to establish program effects will often only emerge once the qualities of available data have been thoroughly examined.

A rough indicator of required sample sizes can be derived by anticipating an effect size (e.g. a difference of 5 percentage points in a retention rate between an intervention group and a counterfactual) and consult power estimation tools available on the internet or included in statistical software packages. These can provide required minimum sample sizes for determining statistically significant differences when undertaking particular comparisons and for different statistical confidence levels.

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