

## Program evaluation

### Laying the right foundations

**Program evaluation:** 'The systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of a program\* to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming.'<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Mental ill-health is the most common health issue affecting young people, with 75% of mental health issues having their onset before the age of 25 years.<sup>2</sup> Whilst there are a range of evidence-based interventions and programs demonstrated to improve outcomes in young people with mental ill-health,<sup>3</sup> it is a substantial challenge to implement them and maintain their quality in the 'real world'.<sup>4</sup> One way that we can improve the quality of mental health care provided to young people is to effectively make use of program evaluation.

### Why evaluate?

A well conducted evaluation can help:

- Identify those approaches to youth mental health care that work well and those that don't
- Understand why programs have been successful or not
- Understand how we can improve programs
- Provide evidence for funders and commissioners to make important decisions about programs
- Build the evidence for new and innovative models of care, thereby improving the knowledge base of the wider youth mental health sector.



### About this document

The idea of conducting an evaluation has appeal to many service providers and researchers, but the process can be daunting without adequate guidance or an evaluation framework. It can be difficult to even know where to start. This short guide will take you through the first few essential steps of evaluation. It will help you to think through what you need your evaluation to do, what types of evaluation you should consider, and what questions you should ask.

\* The term 'program' is most commonly used in the evaluation literature, but the principles apply to interventions, services, organisations, or policies.

## Types of evaluation

Evidence suggests that it can take two to four years to successfully implement a program and achieve the intended outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Different types of evaluation are appropriate at different times during a program's life and should ideally be planned for as early as possible. Even before the program begins, a needs assessment can be used to inform the program's design. Once the program is up and running, the three most commonly used evaluation types are process, outcome, and economic.

### Process evaluation

When a program is implemented well, it is more likely to achieve positive outcomes for young people.<sup>6</sup> A process evaluation assesses the quality of program delivery and provides important insights into how the program can be improved. It is particularly useful in the early stages of the program's life.

### Outcome evaluation

Once the program is more established, an outcome evaluation can assess how effective the program has been in achieving its objectives. Most notably, it will examine how, to what extent, and under what circumstances young people benefit from the program.

### Economic evaluation

Economic evaluation assesses the efficiency of the program by comparing costs and benefits.<sup>7</sup> It requires reliable outcome data, so would usually follow an outcome evaluation.

**It can take two to four years to successfully implement a program and achieve the intended outcomes.<sup>5</sup>**

Table 1: Evaluation types compared

	Process evaluation	Outcome evaluation	Economic evaluation
When to use	Once program delivery begins	Once the program is well established (2-4 years)	Once the program is well established and producing reliable outcome data (2-4 years)
Areas of focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assesses quality of program delivery</li> <li>Describes the implementation process</li> <li>Explains how program outcomes are achieved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assesses degree to which program objectives have been achieved</li> <li>Measures changes in young people's health and social outcomes</li> <li>Identifies whether some groups of young people benefit more than others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measures economic costs and benefits of the program</li> <li>Assesses how efficiently resources have been used</li> </ul>
Potential uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informs program improvements</li> <li>Informs decisions about the program's continuation</li> <li>Informs program replication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informs decisions about the program's continuation or expansion</li> <li>Informs changes to program design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informs decisions about future programs when there are multiple options</li> <li>Identifies where the program can be made more efficient</li> </ul>

## Scoping the evaluation

Scoping the evaluation is an integral first phase in an effective evaluation. It informs the evaluation's design, how it will be conducted, and how the findings will be reported, so it is important to give it careful consideration. The following five steps will help you to scope your own evaluation:

- Step 1: identify stakeholders
- Step 2: describe the program
- Step 3: clarify the evaluation's purpose
- Step 4: determine available resources
- Step 5: identify key questions

### Step 1: Identify stakeholders

Who needs to be involved in the evaluation?

Involving stakeholders in the development of the brief and throughout the evaluation process will improve the quality of the evaluation and the usefulness of its findings.<sup>8</sup>

List those people that have an interest in or could be affected by the evaluation's findings. This may include program funders, program managers and staff, young people and families, the local community, and partner organisations.

Identify the primary users of the evaluation. These are the people who will be expected to make use of the evaluation's findings.

Consider how you will involve young people and families in the evaluation. Their involvement is integral, as it will help to ensure that the evaluation findings can be used to improve the acceptability, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the program.

Attention should also be given to identifying and engaging people from specific populations who may be impacted by the evaluation.<sup>9</sup> This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people

from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people who identify as LGBTQI.

### Step 2: Describe the program

What is the program? What is the background to its development? How long has it been operating? What needs does it address? Whose needs does it address? What does it do to address these needs? What are the desired outcomes?

Describing the program gives an evaluator (who may have or no prior knowledge of the program) important contextual information, which will be used to inform decisions about the evaluation's planning and design.

#### Develop a logic model

In addition to a written description, it can be helpful to include a logic model.

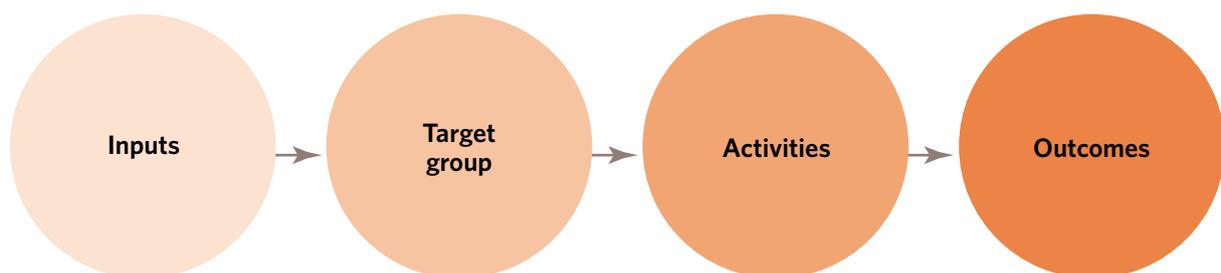
The logic model illustrates how the program is intended to work by connecting its resources, activities, and outcomes.<sup>10</sup> This helps the evaluation by:<sup>11</sup>

- Identifying particular areas of focus
- Identifying potential evaluation questions
- When and where data should be collected
- Engaging stakeholders and developing shared understanding of the program

Logic models vary in format and complexity, but including even a simple model will help to focus the key evaluation questions. A simple model could include:

- **Inputs:** What resources does the program use?
- **Target group:** Who does the program help? What are the needs of this group?
- **Activities:** What does the program do to help the target group? What are the interventions and services that make up the program?
- **Outcomes:** How are the target group supposed to benefit from the activities? What changes should they experience?

Figure 1: A simple logic model



### Step 3: Clarify the evaluation's purpose

How will the evaluation findings be used? What decisions will they influence? Who will make the decisions? When will they need to make them?

Being clear about why the program is being evaluated is essential to ensuring that that evaluation generates useful information. In the brief, include a few sentences about the purpose(s) of the evaluation and how the evaluation findings will be used.

If you need some ideas, referring to the common evaluation types can be a useful place to start. Often, evaluations will have multiple purposes and will address a combination of process and outcome questions. You will need to decide which evaluation types and purposes are most appropriate for your program's context.

### Step 4: Determine available resources

What resources can the evaluation use? How much time is there to complete the evaluation?

An evaluation is always constrained by a budget, and the availability of staff, time, and existing data. Articulating what resources are available will help inform decisions about the evaluation's design and scope.

#### Budget

What budget is available? Allocating approximately 5-15% of the total program budget to evaluation is advisable, but not always possible. The evaluation's cost will depend on its scope, use of internal or external evaluators, the rigor of the methods used and the amount of additional data that has to be collected.

#### Staff

What staff are available? Do they have the required skills to manage and conduct the evaluation?

#### Time

When do decisions about the program have to be made?

#### Existing data

What program data is currently collected? What is the quality of this data? It is preferable to make use of routinely collected monitoring data in an evaluation. The more good quality data currently available, the less an evaluator will have to collect new data.

### Step 5: Identify key questions

What information is needed to inform decisions about the program?

The evaluation's key questions are the overarching questions that the evaluation attempts to answer. They guide the collection and analysis of data, and how the findings are reported.

The questions should be shaped by the evaluation's type and purpose, and through discussion with key stakeholders.

To generate some initial ideas, ask key stakeholders to make a list of ten things they want to know that they could imagine using to make the program better.<sup>4</sup>

No evaluation can examine every important area of a program, so decisions will need to be made about which questions to prioritise.

Aim to set just three to five key evaluation questions. It is better to answer less questions with higher quality data than to answer more questions with lower quality data.

#### Asking the 'right' questions.

It can be helpful to apply the following criteria to your questions to determine their appropriateness:<sup>12</sup>

- **Useful:** are the questions useful in providing the information needed to assess the program's progress, effectiveness, or value?
- **Practical:** can the scope of the questions be accommodated by the available resources?
- **Agreed:** are the questions endorsed by key stakeholders?

Table 2: Generic evaluation questions

Process evaluation questions	Outcome evaluation questions	Economic evaluation questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent has the program been implemented as planned?</li> <li>• To what extent has the program reached the target group?</li> <li>• How satisfied are young people and families with the program?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent has the program achieved its intended outcomes?</li> <li>• Which young people have benefited from the program, how, and under what circumstances?</li> <li>• To what extent can the changes be attributed to the program?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can resources be allocated more efficiently?</li> <li>• How cost-effective is the program compared to alternatives?</li> </ul>

## Next steps

Once you have scoped the evaluation and identified a set of key questions, you will be in a good position to move on to phase two of the evaluation: developing the evaluation design.

The evaluation design defines which research methods will be used to provide the evidence needed to answer the evaluation questions. It sets out what data is needed and how it will be collected and analysed.

Some useful resources are included here to help with the next stage in your evaluation and you can also contact Orygen for support and advice.

### Useful resources

The Australasian Evaluation Society  
[www.aes.asn.au](http://www.aes.asn.au)

Better Evaluation Manager's Guide to Evaluation  
[www.betterevaluation.org/en/managers\\_guide](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/managers_guide)

NSW Ministry of Health Commissioning Evaluation Services: A Guide  
[www.health.nsw.gov.au/research/Publications/evaluation-guide.pdf](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/research/Publications/evaluation-guide.pdf)

NSW Ministry of Health Developing and Using Program Logic: A Guide  
[www.health.nsw.gov.au/research/Publications/developing-program-logic.pdf](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/research/Publications/developing-program-logic.pdf)

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