

Maximising the Impact of Evaluation in Road Safety

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Abstract

Evaluation should be a key input to road safety policy-making, and developing and improving countermeasures. There is broad consensus on this, but evaluation utilisation is by no means universal. This paper presents the perspective of a road safety agency on its practice of evaluation. It draws on nine interviews with a range of agency staff, and lessons learnt through experience. It discusses the most common barriers to evaluation utilisation, and explores practices that maximise the chance of evaluation findings being translated into policy decisions and practice. Key findings include scope, focus and reporting.

Background and method

At the NSW Centre for Road Safety (CRS), evaluation is viewed as a key tool to inform policy and program development and implementation. Good evaluation not only answers the question whether or not an initiative works, but also *why* it does or does not work. Understanding the facilitators and barriers to evaluation use is essential for maximising evaluation impact and for achieving the best return on countermeasure and evaluation investment.

This work draws on two fields of literature – the work of Rune Elvik and others on evaluation in road safety specifically, and the work of Michael Quinn Patton on the utilisation of evaluation more generally.

However, this piece of work is ultimately pragmatic – it reports on 360 degree feedback interviews, undertaken with nine staff representing each of the key functions within CRS, and on lessons learnt through practice. From the perspective of evaluation users, it answers the question “What has evaluation ever done for us?”

Key findings

Practices that facilitate or hinder evaluation impact span the planning, commissioning and implementation stages of evaluation – and are the collective responsibility of both internal staff and the external evaluators.

The scoping of the evaluation is a key factor in evaluation success and is primarily the responsibility of the commissioning agency. Evaluations need to focus clearly on answering evaluative questions, such as the effectiveness and efficiency of the initiative, not broader research questions. It is difficult but critical to obtain early and proactive engagement of key stakeholders, particularly senior stakeholders, and to challenge ideas about appropriate and achievable scope. It is important that evaluations do not try to do too much – our experience leads us to recommend a more narrowly focused piece of work which clearly answers the mutually agreed questions. Commissioning staff and evaluators need to work together to clarify where a commissioned evaluation starts and ends and where the internal policy analysis task starts and ends.

Evaluation design, data collection, analysis and reporting are the bread and butter tasks of the evaluators. While standards are high on average, there are instances where primary data collection design is compromised and where the reporting is too detailed without clear messages. Reports need to tell a clear story, focused on answering the key evaluation questions. A collaborative discussion prior to the analysis and write up can be beneficial for reaching a common understanding of key

focus areas, what information is already known, and the most useful report structure and format. Typically a report structured by evaluation question is most useful. Consideration should also be given to the presentation of recommendations and whether there is value in workshopping next steps.

Conclusions

The interview process uncovered a good news story for evaluation. It reveals that evaluation is often informing improvements to program delivery and process. However, there are some reasonably straightforward things that commissioners and practitioners can be doing to improve the impact of evaluation, including focusing evaluation, setting a realistic scope and working together collaboratively to obtain robust answers to the key evaluation questions.