

Five Page Synopsis to Meet DPME Requirement

1. The Need for a Road Map: The Supporting Evidence

Since the late 1980s, evaluation associations and societies have been exploring ways to enhance professionalism in evaluation through the development of practice standards, ethical guidelines and, more recently, frameworks to identify the knowledge base, skills and capabilities required for quality evaluation. In 2009 in South Africa, the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) initiated an effort to get people talking about establishing evaluator competencies and what it meant to be an evaluator. This Open Forum included international experts and while the Forum engaged over 150 people, the effort did not gain any momentum from within the SAMEA membership, and did not have support from SAMEA's government partner at that time (the Public Service Commission).

Several years later, in 2012, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) supported the development of evaluator competencies for those that work within and for government, and the establishment of evaluation standards. These competencies were then used to vet and select service providers for work with DPME; however these competencies and standards are not formally endorsed by SAMEA or used by higher education institutions to guide their evaluation curriculum.

In 2015 there is a general agreement that a need exists to strengthen the pool of competent evaluators and improve the quality of evaluations produced in South Africa. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), at the request of SAMEA and DPME, sponsored research to inform an evidence based Road Map that would address these needs. The research includes three formal papers and seven research processes. The research papers include a (1) Literature Review (2) Benchmarking Study, and (3) Situational Analysis. The research process comprises of four stakeholder forums, one focus group, one survey, and several guided discussions on the SAMEA list serve.

1.1 Literature Review – Key Points

Globally in the past 50 years, there have been significant changes with regards to demand for evaluation and formal recognition of the field. For example, there was significant growth in regional, national, and international evaluation associations and societies around the world suggesting an increase of people interested in programme evaluation (Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006; Rugh & Segone, 2013). Second, 2015 is the International Year of Evaluation (EvalYear) which aims to celebrate the practice of evaluation globally and strengthen the demand for, and use of, evaluation. This suggests considerable support for the practice of evaluation around the world. Third, the increase of published evaluation literature confirms a growing global demand (Picciotto, 2011; Quesnel, 2010) for specialist evaluation services.

Within the South African context, notable changes have taken place since 1994, and include but are not limited to: significant shifts in Government and its related evaluation policy and practice, the stricter donor requirements for monitoring and evaluation (Podems et al., 2014; Podems, et al., 2015) the birth of SAMEA, the growing supply of evaluation training courses and academic programmes, and a more explicit social desire to improve services to the population.

Professionalising

With this growth in evaluation needs, South Africa joined a long ranging international debate regarding evaluation professionalisation. Since the 1970s, there have been multiple debates in the evaluation literature about whether evaluation should professionalise, or indeed whether it is already a profession (Worthen, 1994; Love, 1994). Some have argued that evaluation is a professionalised practice (Schwandt T. A., 1997), that it is a discipline (Scriven, 1991); or a field (Podems, 2014). These debates continue today (Podems, 2014; Jacob & Boisvert, 2010), with no consensus on whether evaluation is a profession, or whether it should be.

Defining Professionalism

The literature review noted a variety of terms that have specific meanings when discussing professionalisation. The definition used during the research focused on professionalism; this refers to the competence or skill expected of a professional, and most often respondents noted that any form of strengthening evaluators was a step towards professionalism. When most countries and associations discuss professionalisation, they are nearly always either referring to (1) some type of designation or (2) a process that does not provide a designation.

1.2 Benchmarking Study – Key Points

The **Canadian Evaluation Society (CES)** credentialed evaluator designation is a service provided by CES to its members, who may elect to become credentialed on a voluntary basis. The CES example offers five key insights for the South African process. First, the process did not focus on establishing or agreeing on a set of competencies, yet competencies are a foundational part of the credentialing process. Second, credentialing enables a longer term focus on continued education, not a “once off” type of designation. Third, the evaluation society took on the role of credentialing, not the government. Fourth, the list of credentialed evaluators is public knowledge, perhaps encouraging a certain level of peer pressure to be credentialed. Fifth, the process is not mandatory.

The European Evaluation Society (EES) has a capabilities framework, and is exploring a Voluntary Evaluation Peer Review (VEPR), which is currently being piloted through 2016. VEPR is a participatory process that adopts a new approach, focusing primarily on professional development through peer review, rather than designation. The EES framework and VEPR offer a few points for consideration. First, at the root of this process, EES has an EES Capabilities Framework. They then want to have, among other initiatives, mentoring and improved access to advice, more access to academic training specific to evaluation, and VEPR. This suggest considering a multipronged approach, as opposed to one solution or “one size fits all.” Second, if South Africa considers the VEPR approach, it also needs to look carefully at how well the VEPR principles resonate in South Africa, particularly one that underpins the entire system; self-driven self-improvement. The Situational Analysis explored this, and most respondents noted that a culture of self-driven improvement does not exist in South Africa.

The **Russian** experience provides an example of how government has strongly encouraged professionalisation by asking the Russian Evaluation Society to provide standards for evaluation, for what appears to be a generic job description.

The **American Evaluation Association (AEA)** is engaging in an intensive, participatory, focused process, led by an AEA Board Task Team. The deliberate, inclusive, relatively slow moving participatory process may provide some consideration for the development of the South African Roadmap. Finally, while the AEA is consciously developing competencies, it is only once this is completed that the next decision-making steps will be taken (e.g. to credential or offer other types of formal or informal processes or recognition or designation).

In New Zealand (**Anzea**) developed evaluator competencies in 2011 and have since moved forward with professionalisation by (1) providing evaluators with a self-review tool and professional development guide, (2) supporting the development of employment criteria for evaluator roles, and (3) providing guidance to evaluation trainers, teachers and tertiary institutions.

Research into case studies for **Mexico, Colombia, Chile** and **Benin**, which were mandated by the Terms of Reference and Steering Committee, yielded little useful information with regards to strengthening evaluators.

1.3 Situational Analysis – Key Points

Perceptions of Evaluation Practice in South Africa

When questioned about the quality of evaluations, respondents often had one voice; it is a mixed level of quality, and the quality is mostly poor. While the current cadre of experienced evaluators is small, there is a strong indication that academic programmes are increasing the number of people that have the potential to fill this gap and expand the number of good evaluators in South Africa. While field experience was highlighted as critical for moving these graduates from knowledge to solid skills, these graduates bring at the very least, a basic understanding of the field.

What Evaluators Should Know

Nearly all people that practiced evaluation listed three basic necessities to be an evaluator. First, strong research skills in some type of research are required. Research is at the core of what evaluators do; they do empirical work. Second, most agreed that an evaluator should have knowledge of at least one, if not several, evaluation methodologies. Third, most people, even those who did not self-identify as evaluators, spoke strongly about the “softer” skills. These included negotiation, facilitation, and interpersonal skills.

Professionalising or Strengthening Evaluators

Nearly all respondents spoke about an approach that would result in having stronger evaluators through some type of designation or non-designation approach. Also critical to this conversation is that not one respondent suggested that credentials, mentoring, or any other process would guarantee a ‘good’ evaluation. Global research also notes that there is no correlation between having evaluator competencies and good evaluations (Podems, 2014; King, 2014). Contrarily, most respondents who engaged in this conversation clearly acknowledged that having minimum knowledge and skills would help “root out the bottom feeders” and at least provide some sort of acknowledgement that to practice as an evaluator, minimum knowledge and skills sets are needed. Further, common sense suggests that, for example, if one person has research skills and another person does not, the one with research skills is more likely to have empirical results.

Opportunities to Improve Knowledge and Skills

At the beginning of the research process, there was an emphasis on identifying the need for evaluation capacity building programmes in South Africa. However, the research shows that multiple opportunities exist. From an emerging evaluator to a more advanced evaluator, there are various options to strengthen evaluation knowledge and skills in South Africa. There are various short and long courses, certificate courses, and an opportunity to study evaluation at the Masters and Doctoral level. There are internet courses (many of which are free), evaluation blogs, evaluation websites, downloadable books, guidelines, papers and journals. There is also an opportunity to be part of an evaluation community (e.g. SAMEA), and the list serve is free. Therefore, opportunities exist to strengthen knowledge and engage in the evaluation community.

Arguments for Setting Standards or Criteria

The main argument for setting standards or criteria is that evaluation has an important role to play in improving South Africa's poor service delivery; Poor quality evaluations lead to poor quality evidence, and South Africa cannot endure this. Thus there is a strong need for generating credible evidence to understand which social development programmes and interventions work, which do not, and how to improve them. Sub-standard evaluations (and evaluators) will not deliver this evidence. Further, sub-standard evaluations (and evaluators) "eat away at the credibility of evaluators...and people do not value evaluations because they are not finding them valuable."

While recognising potential challenges for setting criteria (e.g. it can be perceived as exclusionary; the lack of a link between setting criteria and improving evaluations), most respondents pointed out that evaluation is highly complex and challenging. Logically there needs to be basic criteria for a person who conducts something that is so critical to achieving a better society. Further, evaluation is complicated, just as not everyone can be a medical doctor, or a physical therapist, just by claiming that they are one, not everyone should be able to claim that they are an evaluator and not bring some level of requisite knowledge and skills.

Arguments for No Standards or Criteria

A few respondents noted that South Africa's history suggests that no one should be prevented from entering the field of evaluation. In direct disagreement with the preceding section, these respondents thought that anyone should be able to call themselves an evaluator and practice evaluation. While the weaker opinion comes from those who do not want set criteria and want everyone to be included, it is critical to include their voice as this voice could potentially derail any process.

Recognising the "Monitoring" in SAMEA

A final thematic area stems from SAMEA's history. When SAMEA was formed, there was an active decision made for it to be called the South African *monitoring* and evaluation association. This is unlike other associations around the globe, who do not have monitoring in their name. While the study only asked about evaluations, and evaluators, a topic that continued to emerge during Open Forums, which were mostly populated by government, related to public management challenges with evaluation and in particular, monitoring. The Road Map may want to consider a specific "road" for those that want, or need, to enhance their skills on monitoring; whether that is for public management, civil society, or other groups.

Problematizing the Issue

At the core of the research was understanding what any professionalisation or strengthening process would aim to solve. Some respondents discussed these root causes; anyone can call themselves an evaluator, for many commissioners it is not clear what constitutes a “good” evaluator, and there is “plenty of work”, all leading to very little incentive to strengthen evaluation knowledge and skills. Other respondents focused more on the problem of poor evaluations. They defined “poor” evaluation as evaluations not being usable, lacking a research methodology, lacking an evaluation approach, or all three. These respondents also linked the problem to the fact that anyone can call themselves an evaluator.

Who Should Lead the Process?

Qualitative data strongly suggested that SAMEA should lead any process moving forward, and at the same time data strongly indicated that government should not lead this process. Quantitative data reinforced this finding. Though most respondents thought that SAMEA should lead any process moving forward, a majority of SAMEA Board Members interviewed, and nearly all SAMEA Board legacy members, noted that SAMEA in its current capacity would be unable to lead this process without substantial strengthening, resources, and a stronger secretariat.

Current Reality: Readiness to Implement the Road Map

South Africa is not ready to professionalise evaluation with formal processes. Namely, in its current state, the SAMEA Board is too resource-poor and human capacity strained to manage a professionalisation, or a strengthening, process. Further, SAMEA and South Africa’s current pool of credible evaluators is too small to support a designation process, or to engage in a formal peer or mentoring process that would not be exclusionary. The research identified the need for strengthening evaluators and evaluation. It will be foundational and incremental steps that embrace the realities of South Africa’s context that will catapult South Africa forward.

At the same time, South Africa *is* professionalising evaluation; we have an Association, biannual M&E conference, internet blogs on evaluation by South Africans, and SAMEA members that publish in evaluation journals and books. There is a plethora of routes to learn about evaluation, from free courses, to books, to journals and academic programmes. For those that want to improve their evaluation knowledge, the opportunities exist. What is missing is an agreed upon understanding of what defines an evaluator in South Africa, and a formal, managed process on how to become a more competent one.

The Road Map addresses what South Africa is ready for now, and builds a foundation that will support professionalising evaluation; a robust SAMEA Board and Secretariat, and strong, knowledgeable, competent evaluators. The Road Map is rooted in empirical research and a belief that knowledgeable and passionate evaluators will form the core on which to ensure strong evaluation. It is these competent evaluators who can support a system that strengthens other emerging evaluators, and at the same time provide donors, foundations, nonprofits, civil society, and government with support to strengthen their own evaluation processes and systems. It is the beginning of a long and exhilarating road that leads to evaluations that bring about social justice.