

“Evaluation Post Devolution: Challenges and Opportunities”
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There are various incentives for doing evaluation. Knowing that there is very little that you can do about changing or improving something is not one of them. So it may not come as too great a surprise that in the days prior to the devolution settlement in Wales at least, evaluation was not such a priority. This is not to say that it didn't happen but it was more likely to be rather ad hoc, uncoordinated, and focused more on establishing accountability than on 'what works'. This is certainly true in Wales, and may be more or less true of Scotland and Northern Ireland; where this paper gets more specific then it is largely based on experiences in Wales rather than elsewhere in the UK.

Of course, this description may be familiar to those working in other Government departments too. Steve Martin (2001) argues that the

“challenges associated with evaluation [...] following devolution need to be seen as bound up with, and intimately connected to, wider policy debates”.

For example, the rationale for a distinctive focus to evaluative activity in the devolved administrations will tend to mirror the wider rationale for devolution itself. The challenges, costs and scope associated with developing a distinctive approach are likely to echo the problems presented by devolution more widely. Evaluation is likely to reflect also the differences of rationale, challenges, costs and scope associated with devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The historical, social and cultural contexts within which devolution has happened in each of the three Celtic nations will inevitably shape how evaluation develops in each country.

This is all very inward looking. Perhaps more than all these factors, just as the place in which Wales, Scotland and NI are located within the UK, Europe and internationally influences life and policy making in the devolved countries, so too could it be argued that such context will inevitably shape the future of evaluation at a devolved level.

Greater attention to evidence based practice, on-going needs for demonstrating value for money, and wider developments in 'modernising government', and requirements of European programming, are affecting how all Government departments and agencies address, plan and fund their use of evaluation. The future development of evaluation at a devolved level will be strongly influenced by, and need to take account of, developments outside of the country. The issues for evaluators in devolved countries are therefore the same as those elsewhere: developments in evidence based policy making; operationalising wider concepts of stakeholder participation; issues over which evaluation methodologies are the most appropriate and effective in different settings; and whether to evaluate single programmes or groups or clusters of programmes together.

To understand how evaluation fits within the newly devolved administrations it is necessary to place it in this context. As such it is important to reflect on the intended principles and language of the constitutional reforms in each country, acknowledging the differences in the context and meaning of these reforms, in order to grasp the particular role evaluation might play.

Running through the discourse of devolution are hopes for it to improve democratic processes, accountability, engagement and participation, along with making each country a better place to live, work and get ill in. There are now specific aims, goals and programmes for more policy development in Wales, Scotland and NI, along with a greater need to justify public spending through demonstrating value and effectiveness.

Inevitably, such concerns are shaped at a political level in terms of wanting to show success, evidence the effectiveness of some policies over others. Evaluation has a role to

play here, and not one necessarily which fits happily with the concerns or principles of evaluators.

“The renewed emphasis in government on evidence- based policy making is open to cynical interpretation as ideological – part of the project to legitimize partisan policy making with reference to the authority of science” (Ian Sanderson, 2001).

More optimistically it could be read as a genuine attempt to improve the capacity of policy making systems to deal with increasingly complex economic and social systems. Sanderson notes how as such it provides an indication that the ‘modernist’ faith in social progress informed by reason continues to maintain significance and value.

Sanderson argues that as a ‘modernist’ project, the notion of evidence-based policy making rests upon a number of key assumptions. These can be considered in terms of three key propositions:

- Social and economic systems can be changed or ‘steered’ by government action to achieve improved social outcomes
- Evaluation helps us to understand how policies work and how this is affected by conditions of implementation
- Policy makers, practitioners and managers in public sector organisations learn from evaluation, resulting in action to achieve improvement.

Sanderson goes on to critically appraise these propositions against an assumption that social systems and organisations are complex and open to challenge, but eventually comes out in favour of a social realist agenda which asserts that a coherent basis can be provided to rescue the modernist project and the position of evaluation as a key driver of evidence-based change.

It is of course difficult to assert clearly that any of these three assumptions hold true. Globalisation means that social and economic systems are not influenced so directly or greatly by government as in the past; evaluation is not always deployed to understand

how things work rather than measure attainment through performance management; and, policy makers often spend little time learning from evaluation.

Devolution can be viewed as one of the complicating factors in such a post-modern world where traditional paradigms are fundamentally challenged. Where globalisation makes UK control over policies less clear, devolution works to complicate the picture further. Where it is difficult to understand the effectiveness of policy making and implementation ordinarily, divergent policies and systems brought about by the devolved administrations mean there are further differences in policy design and in the conditions of implementation.

However, the political context, and balance of powers in the devolved administrations means that the role of evaluation may in fact flourish in that provides a platform to move beyond party political point scoring. Or at least this may hold true in circumstances where consensus over 'effectiveness' may be more easily agreed if evidence exists to support or refute, if the task of government is clearly to trial new ways of working and learn from mistakes, if this is communicated openly. Lots of ifs I know – but some hope nevertheless.

There are other factors which the role and scope of evaluation in the devolved countries is predicated upon: size and proximity of people and organisations; better knowledge of the needs of policy makers and citizens in Wales; greater sense of common purpose and joint action between tiers of government, and between public, private and voluntary sectors; the need of policy makers for rapid input to policy decisions (eg, spending £1bn of structural fund money in Wales); limited resources and capacity; failure to integrate different tiers of government; inadequate prior systems and skills and networks (eg 'new' politicians); the response from the centre to devolution; initial momentum and belief in 'making it work'.

These factors influencing the shape of government in the devolved countries can be both constraining and constructive, challenging and confusing. So, how do these map out in relation to evaluation?

The following list highlights some of the opportunities that devolution may present in relation to evaluation:

- Develop research and evaluation that is more closely attuned to the particular needs of policy makers and the citizens of the devolved countries;
- Cultivate closer and more meaningful interactions between stakeholders than is possible in the larger, more diffuse policy community in the UK as a whole;
- Achieve a greater sense of common purpose and purposive joint action to solve problems – between the different tiers of government and between the public, private and voluntary sectors;
- Encourage the voluntary and not for profit sectors to be more evidence based, to increase organisational learning and ability to evidence effectiveness;
- Ensure that better use is made of existing data about the economy, society and environment of Wales;
- Encourage a greater capacity for holistic evaluations that are able to address cross cutting issues by taking account, and promoting better understanding, of the interactions and synergies that exist between different policies, programmes and domains – including pan UK studies;
- Pioneer more effective mechanisms for disseminating and learning from the findings of evaluative activity;

Some of the potential threats to realising these benefits may include:

- The potential conflict between policy makers' needs for rapid input to policy decisions and the need for rigorous, longitudinal evaluation;
- A focus on a narrow range of approach(es) to evaluation (validated by the Treasury or European Commission Directorates);
- Limited resources and capacity – financial, institutional and evaluation expertise;

- Lack of effective mechanisms for co-ordinating collective evaluation efforts by (often competing) units based in academic, research and consultancy units;
- Failure to integrate evaluations commissioned by different tiers of government – local government, non-governmental public bodies, the Assemblies or Scottish Parliament; UK government and the European Union;
- Inefficiencies in duplicating policy research and evaluation;
- Data deficits (at sub-UK and local levels);
- Inadequate networks or mechanisms for disseminating and learning the lessons of evaluation and research – within the political institutions and in other sectors.

If this ‘diagnosis’ is at all accurate it suggests a number of areas for possible action to encourage evaluative activity in the devolved countries, and to enhance capacity for evaluation, learning and implementation that can contribute to the achievement of ‘better government’ and delivery of improved services. We would highlight the opportunity to develop more holistic, citizen-centred evaluation focused on the aggregate outcomes of policies.

This will require:

- A balance between meta-evaluation and individual programme evaluations;
- Joint (inter-organisational) approaches to specifying policy objectives and evaluation criteria (eg, evaluation of Entrepreneurship Action Plan in Wales between Welsh Development Agency, ELWa, and National Assembly for Wales);
- The development of mechanisms for sharing data and data collection costs between organisations and between studies (eg the Economic Research and Evaluation Unit being set up at the National Assembly for Wales);
- Training and development to foster evaluation expertise among researchers (across different disciplines) and those who commission and use evaluation (eg, National Assembly for Wales evaluation training for policy makers);
- The need for improved methodologies for assessing the aggregate impacts of groups of policies and understanding the nature of the interactions between them;

- Ways of ensuring greater comparability between evaluation methodologies in order to allow aggregation;
- Mechanisms for reconciling the different timetables associated with different evaluations, including perhaps efforts to establish an overall strategy and forward planning of key evaluations (eg, National Assembly for Wales forward evaluation planning process).

REFERENCES

Steve Martin (2001) *'Evaluation post devolution: Opportunity or threat?'*, paper to UKES seminar 'Evaluation Post Devolution', Cardiff University.

Ian Sanderson (2001) address to UKES Conference, Belfast.

DRAFT – not for quotation – comments welcomed