

# ADDRESSING THE TENSIONS THAT EXIST WHEN MAKING OBJECTIVE EVALUATIVE JUDGEMENTS IN SMALL LEARNING AND TEACHING PROJECTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This study investigates the practice of evaluation in small learning and teaching projects in higher education, an area of research that is under reported in the literature. A pragmatic, mixed methods approach is taken, using reflection on what works and what does not work in evaluation practice. Data includes project documentation, interviews and focus groups with university staff leading small learning and teaching projects.

Findings demonstrate that complex interactions between various evaluation sub-systems exist. The contextual factors that influence evaluation praxis (the alignment between practice and theory) are described along with a number of barriers to successful evaluation practice. These barriers can create tensions and conflicts for evaluators.

This study provides empirical evidence to support a conceptual model for the interaction between three of these tensions: expectations of the stakeholders; resources available to support the evaluation; and competencies (knowledge and skills) of the evaluator [1]. Drawing on the evidence from this study, together with the literature, each component part of Bergman's model is discussed in detail and corroborated.

A key finding of this study is how evaluation is conceptualised. Three issues emerge: the conflation of the terms evaluation and research; difference in conceptualisation between different roles within a project; and evaluation purpose, in this case as an accountability exercise vs. a learning process. The impact of these misconceptions will also be discussed by introducing conceptualisation as a new component part of the Bergman Model.

Strategies for addressing the tensions that have been identified by this research study are presented and form a step towards a quality evaluation agenda in the learning and teaching project space.

Keywords: Project evaluation, conceptualisation, learning and teaching, competencies, expectations.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is the process of judging merit or worth of an entity [2]. We are all familiar with informal evaluation through the choices we make in our daily lives. In an education setting evaluation is enacted through systematic inquiry be it of our teaching, of student's learning, of our programs or our projects. 'Evaluation is an analytical process that is intrinsic to good teaching' [3, p. 209].

There have been many research studies into educational evaluation and in fact whole journals dedicated to the topic. Common areas of investigation include usage of evaluation findings; involvement of stakeholders; and prescriptive theory [4]. However, there is some evidence in the literature that evaluation is not always carried out as systematically as we would hope and in fact there is growing evidence of misalignment between evaluation practice and theory [5], [6], [7]. Further research on the practice of evaluation has been called for [8], [9], [10], in order to examine what influences this praxis.

In the Australian higher education sector, funding opportunities to support the design, implementation and evaluation of learning and teaching innovations are available through a number of sources. Larger grants (in the order of \$40-\$200K) have been offered through government organisations such as the Office for Learning and Teaching (2011-2015). Similar opportunities are available in other countries such as The National Science Foundation in the USA, and the Higher Education Academy in the UK. Institutions also have their own internal funding opportunities with grants offered for smaller learning and teaching developments (often in the range of \$2-\$10,000 but could be up to \$40,000). For more details of both these types of grant funding see [7]. This study has investigated these small, internally

supported grants and projects whose aim is to introduce a change to learning and teaching practice and thereby improve the student experience.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

Previous research by the author has investigated the types of projects funded through such internal grants and specifically the approaches to evaluation used. An extensive review of the literature focussed on scope, definition or approaches to project evaluation was conducted. Minimal published work on the evaluation practices in the small project space in higher education was found [8] and this study was designed to fill that gap. The details of the methodology and findings have been reported elsewhere [7], [11], but are summarised here to complete the background to this discussion paper.

The study was broken down into three phases, each underpinned by a pragmatic approach, asking what works, for whom and in what context. The first phase used an action-research approach and the three research questions that guided the investigation were: 1. What evaluation forms and approaches have been used in funded learning and teaching projects at one university? 2. What is the project leaders' understanding of evaluation? And 3. Is there alignment between evaluation theory and practice?

Fifteen project leaders were interviewed and two rounds of coding, Initial Coding followed by Focused Coding [12] were carried out on the data. This resulted in four themes: conceptualisations, particularly with the conflation of the terms evaluation and research; capability building within the sector; resourcing (time and money); and an action oriented approach to evaluation. From this, a number of strategies were identified and discussed in light of implications for evaluation practice in the sector and future research. Recommendations included: building in a time allocation for evaluation; developing models of how evaluation can be incorporated into the research cycle; offering constructive feedback on evaluation reports; and networking opportunities to disseminate learnings from the project evaluations.

In phase two, a case-study approach was used to investigate in more detail, some of the findings from phase one. There were two research questions for this phase: 1. What specific strategies can be used to overcome the barriers to successful evaluation implementation? And 2. How does a project leader's perception of evaluation affect their praxis? The same analysis method and coding techniques as phase one were used on the data which this time consisted of three learning and teaching projects conducted over 18 months. This produced six themes which were then discussed in the context of higher education: meeting the needs of and directions from stakeholders; contextual challenges and impacts; the value of evaluation; internal factors that influence practice; external factors that influence practice; and future proofing (or sustainability). Phase two concluded with four recommendations for evaluation practice: that support mechanisms need to be made more explicit; development of an evaluation Community of Practice (CoP) to support collaborative reflection; grant applicants to identify how their project builds on previous work or other projects; and development of a flexible framework for evaluation planning.

A third phase was then carried out whereby an evaluation planning tool was developed and piloted using an action research approach. This tool is freely available at <http://tiny.cc/evalplan> and more can be read about its development in [13].

## **3 DISCUSSION**

This three-phase study has produced new findings for the field of small learning and teaching project evaluation in higher education. Each of the phases was self-contained with findings and recommendations discussed in the corresponding published papers. In this section, the findings from across the three phases are synthesised by drawing upon the literature and by returning to the original research questions for the study. I frame this discussion through the introduction of a conceptual model [1] to illustrate the interrelationship between existing tensions and issues in evaluation practice.

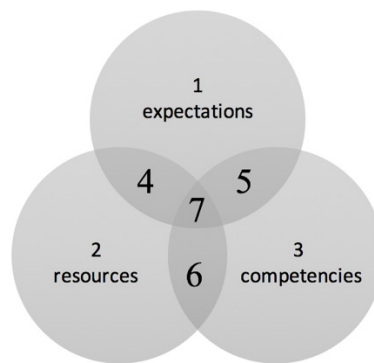
### **3.1 A conceptual model**

The practice of evaluation in small learning and teaching projects has been investigated in this study. Findings have revealed several barriers to successful evaluation practice. These include:

- conceptualizations, particularly with the overlap between evaluation and research;

- lack of skills in evaluation within the sector;
- lack of understanding of evaluation terminology
- lack of resourcing in terms of time and money;
- a need for more stakeholder inclusion;
- negative perceptions of evaluation
- contextual challenges
- previous experience of conducting evaluations,
- networks and influence
- sustainability of project outcomes

These barriers have been coined tensions and conflicts by Bergman [1]. Three of the tensions he discusses and uses to construct his conceptual model are: expectations of the stakeholders, resources available to support the evaluation and competencies (knowledge and skills) of the evaluator. Bergman’s model is proposed as a way to conceptualise the tensions apparent when making an objective evaluative judgment (see Fig. 1).



*Figure 1. Interrelationship between sites of tension in evaluation [1]*

The findings of this study contribute the affirmation and empirical evidence to support Bergman’s abstracted conceptualisation. Drawing on the evidence, together with the literature, each component part (or section) of Bergman’s model (numbered 1-7 in Fig. 1) will be discussed in detail and corroborated. Furthermore, the central core, or overlap of the three main tensions in the Venn diagram (Fig. 1 section 7) is labelled as conceptualisation. This will also be discussed.

### **3.2 Section 1: Expectations**

In phase one of this study, an important implication from the findings was the need for the funding bodies (which in the case of small learning and teaching projects is usually the Institution, Faculty or School) to provide constructive feedback on evaluation reports. If a funding body mandates evaluation then they should hold a responsibility to provide guidance on expectations about evaluation (over and above just conducting it). Some of the tensions reported in phase one of the study were linked to perceptions about the expectations of an evaluation process. Some participants perceived evaluation as an accountability measure and therefore would hold back on reporting anything that placed their project in a ‘negative’ light [7]. Others held the perception that in order to be awarded future grant funding, project outcomes needed to align with what the university wanted to see. Therefore, an evaluation approach may be influenced by the tensions generated by perceptions of what is expected of an evaluation process. Stufflebeam identifies these as socio-political tensions.

Unless the evaluation design includes provision for dealing effectively with the people who will be involved in and affected by the evaluation, these people may well cause the evaluation to be subverted or even terminated [14, p.111].

Expectations of stakeholders can only be met if the evaluator is able to correctly identify and engage with these stakeholders. Phase one of this study found that many participants could not differentiate between stakeholders and study audiences. A call was made in the discussion of that phase to

provide more up-to-date information on possible contacts for both categories to facilitate and encourage such interaction.

In phase two, a key theme extracted from the data was meeting the needs (or expectations) of stakeholders. Findings showed that the project managers were more influenced by the needs of stakeholders than the project leads (in each of the three case studies examined). It is important that all members of a project team '...share a common and well defined view of the nature of evaluation. Otherwise their activities won't complement each other toward achieving some shared objectives of the evaluation' [14, p.105].

### **3.3 Section 2: Resources**

Several resourcing tensions exist in the practice of evaluation and two important issues have been identified by this study, funding and time, or in fact the lack of both.

#### **3.3.1 Funding**

Funding opportunities for learning and teaching developments and initiatives are growing scarcer and this at a time when economic pressures are rising along with the growth in student numbers [15]. This lack of national funding has a flow on effect to institutions who may reduce or remove altogether internal funding opportunities.

One of the implications that comes from a lack of funding for evaluation is the limitation of the range of data collection strategies that can be used [1]. In the small L&T project space, evaluators tend to use methods they are familiar with, for example, use of funding to incentivise participants to attend focus groups and generate evaluative data. When funding is limited, this valuable source of feedback (formative evaluation activity) is often cut leading to missed evaluation opportunities as was seen in one of the cases in phase two of this study [11].

Phase one of this study found that many project leaders perceived that there was a need to single out money, a lack of financial resources, as a factor that inhibited their ability to evaluate their projects. Some participants felt that if they had a budget for it then they would pay for an experienced evaluator to help them on their project. This practice derives from the larger funded projects which often mandate evaluation and where project leaders 'buy-in' this expertise [16]. Whilst some studies support the specific funding of evaluation activities (see for example [17]), there is no evidence in the literature to demonstrate that such specific funding leads to achieving better evaluation praxis for anyone other than the evaluator. It likely restricts the ability to develop evaluation capacity unless the external evaluator uses a form of participatory evaluation. In the case of smaller projects, this expertise can be developed in-house or projects can make use of a critical friend (as in one of the cases in phase two of this study). In such a scenario, development of evaluation capacity within an institution is thereby supported, and may lead to successful evaluation.

Phase two of this study identified several potential strategies that could enhance the praxis of evaluation of learning and teaching projects. One of these was to make evaluation support mechanisms and options more explicit. This strategy may break down the perception that limited funding is an inhibitor to evaluation praxis, if other (non-monetary) support options are available.

#### **3.3.2 Timeframe**

A study of an inter-institutional grant funding scheme found that 'evaluation schedules in the [grant] proposals were often overly optimistic and ... were beyond the resource and time-scale of the projects described' [17, p. 3]. Other studies have also found that there was not enough time to implement the initial planned evaluative measures [18], [19], [20].

The focus of this study is small learning and teaching projects and often their duration is short (12-18 months). If sufficient planning is undertaken in the application stage for the grant and the early planning stage of the project, time can be allocated for formative evaluation activities, avoiding the tendency to leave evaluation until the end of the project where it becomes a summative only activity. Whilst the utility of summative evaluation is to inform decision making, formative evaluation has the power to support learning throughout the project based on its emphasis on improvement [21], [22]. This was exemplified in both phase one and two of the study. Several projects claimed to have needed more time to conduct evaluation. This may indicate a lack of capability or experience in evaluation and a need for better planning mechanisms. It is often based on fear of the grant holders/project leaders for reporting weaknesses or problems to funders [21].

### 3.3.3 Planning

Another of the strategies emerging from phase two was the need for a good evaluation plan. Other studies have also identified the importance of evaluation planning as a crucial factor to a project's success [23], [24]. If a project evaluation is well planned, the requirement for evaluation expertise could be identified and the grant funding body could allocate a person or unit with expertise to work with the project team to support their evaluation activities as 'in-kind' support, in place of financial contribution. The development of a robust evaluation plan that is flexible and responsive to a project's contextual needs is further explored in phase three of this study [13].

## 3.4 Section 3: Competencies

It has been reported in the literature that there is a need to build capacity in evaluation practice across many sectors [21], [1], [25], [26], [10]. In phase one of this study over half of the participants admitted that they and their project teams did not have sufficient skills in evaluation to correctly conduct a project evaluation. Findings from that phase indicated that some small learning and teaching projects are conducted by teaching staff new to the area and often they lack the experience and expertise to choose appropriate models and approaches to evaluation. This was evidenced through only a few participants being able to name an evaluation approach or framework that they were using in their project. We can't say definitively whether the remainder weren't using one due to not knowing of their existence but we did conclude that a person's understanding of the value, or relevance, of using a tried and tested evaluation method or approach is impacted by their perception of evaluation. Building evaluation capacity requires developing and maintaining support mechanisms. This need was highlighted in an Australian government funding body report [16]. The authors of this report reviewed the (then) Australian national project grant funding final reports and concluded that amongst other areas, support for evaluation design, quality processes and reporting within evaluation frameworks was needed.

This need for support leading to evaluation capacity development has been highlighted in other studies (see [24]), as well as through phase one and two of this study. Recommendations were made regarding a strengths-based approach whereby we can build on the skills that academics already have, for example, evaluation of one's own teaching, reflective practice, or creating rubrics for student assessment. This is supported by similar findings from a school-based study where it was found that teachers believed they didn't have the skills or the time to conduct evaluation. A proposition was posed that professional development on evaluation should incorporate the skills teachers already have (such as assessment of student work, facilitating small group discussion and interviews with parents) and show them how to develop their evaluative skills in tandem, rather than assume they have no background in doing observational searches for quality [20].

A theoretical evaluation capacity building (ECB) model has been developed for designing and implementing capacity building activities and processes [26]. Whilst the model was developed with the professional evaluator in mind, it offers a good fit with the higher education sector as it is grounded in adult learning theory and organisational learning and change. The authors discuss the need for improving attitudes towards evaluation and how to reduce stress and anxiety around evaluation, something that was also found in phase one of this study. They conclude that any attempt at ECB needs to be 'intentional, systematic and sustainable' [26, p. 457].

Phase two of this study identified a need to develop evaluation capacity and made recommendations of developing Communities of Practice (CoPs) amongst grant holders and previous grant recipients. Creating networking opportunities builds on the exchange of information between novice and expert and again leads to a learning scenario. This need for dialogue and reflection to support ECB aligns with a recommendation by [26]. There is a dearth of literature on professional learning communities and their value (see for example [27]). However, we need to be cognisant that as the larger project funding opportunities dwindle through lack of government support [15], fewer people gain the opportunity to experience being part of a larger project and therefore cannot pass on the evaluation knowledge and skills to the next generation of project evaluator. As our evaluation experts leave the academy we need to investigate new ways to pass on this knowledge, in fact, to keep it alive.

The three independent tensions of expectations, resources and competencies have been identified and discussed. However, each of these are interrelated as shown in the sections of the model numbered 4-6 (see Fig.1). The next three subsections describe these interrelations.

### **3.5 Section 4: Expectations/Resources**

These two components interact when it comes to identifying the stakeholders. One recommendation to come from phase one of this study identified a need for the clarification of who and what the roles are in the organisation along with straightforward mechanisms in which to contact these people whilst at the same time identifying the purpose of any interactions. A resource which clearly explains the difference between stakeholders and study audiences is clearly needed as many participants in this study could not differentiate between the two. Such a resource could help evaluators identify the correct person(s) in the roles of stakeholders and/or study audiences. As participants in both phase one and phase two mentioned, engaging stakeholders who are at an executive level of a university often meant that they had limited time to engage with the project. As a result, that potential link of using and promoting the evaluation results via an executive stakeholder ended as a missed opportunity.

Many participants in this study were guided in their evaluation activities (or in some cases non-activity) by the expectations of evaluation outlined in the grant application guidelines. As a key resource, the grant application guidelines, are important for setting the scene and managing expectations of evaluation. Phase one of this study called for constructive feedback to be given to project leaders on evaluation/project reporting. Phase two called for clearer explanation of the purpose of evaluation and indeed to mandate evaluation in small projects. However, mandating of evaluation is not always welcome in these small projects as demonstrated by a participant in phase three of this study who admitted that they just 'forget' to do the evaluation and no one had ever followed up on it [13]. Doing so does set clear expectations but must be followed through.

### **3.6 Section 5: Competencies/Expectations**

This study has evidenced a misalignment in the praxis of evaluation in small learning and teaching project evaluation. The perceptions of the project leader have been shown to impact this misalignment. Our perceptions are shaped through our experience and 'past experiences lead the perceiver to develop expectations, and these expectations affect current perceptions' [28, p.76]. Therefore, novice evaluators who lack the experience (or competency) may develop their own misinterpretation of the funding body's expectations. I.e. they may perceive that evaluation is to be an accountability measure or summative in nature. This was evident in phase one, [7] and phase two, case 2 [11], where non-evaluation or low quality evaluation were evidenced. The lack of deep understanding of the multiple purposes of evaluation can lead to these misconceptions. When a CoP is used for sharing evaluative skills and knowledge, expectations and understanding of requirements can be discussed and dissected to ensure everyone is in agreement or at least has a shared understanding.

This interplay between competencies and expectations can play out on behalf of the evaluators but also through the persons or groups who call for or fund the evaluation. They may (wrongly) assume that the grant holders (or project leaders) have the relevant skills to select appropriate evaluative methods or approaches when in fact as evidenced in this study, they do not. Unless they call for explicit evaluation information to be supplied in both the grant application and any formative or summative reporting, this is unlikely to occur. Similarly, novice evaluators often expect more guidance in what and how they should be evaluating when in fact grant funders are not always forthcoming in this regard.

### **3.7 Section 6: Resources/Competencies**

Whilst resources exist to support different approaches to evaluation, in today's information age, many find it difficult to navigate to the appropriate resource, one which is timely and relevant to their contextual needs [1]. Many evaluation approaches are complex and not suitable for smaller scale projects [29]. Some Institutions create and maintain their own evaluation resources, however many central units responsible for grant administration are over committed and under resourced and rely on links out to other Institutions' resource repositories. There are governmental resources such as those provided by the former Office for Learning and Teaching in Australia [30] but if these lose funding they lose the ability to be maintained. Furthermore, these resources tend to be aimed at bigger projects and not always easy to adapt to smaller projects by novice evaluators. This study has concluded that there is nothing specifically aimed at supporting these small grant holders in their evaluation endeavours and led to the development of the SPELT framework and associated online evaluation planning tool [13].

There is evidence in the literature that the lack of financial incentives is a barrier to the growth of professional evaluators in the field [31]. Whilst evaluation in the space defined in this study may not be carried out by professionals, parallels can be drawn to these findings since such perceptions influence praxis.

### **3.7.1 *Efficiencies***

Efficiency and continual improvement is what drives the economy, and keeps us at the forefront of development. Companies, Institutions, and individuals investigate and trial new approaches to save time and/or money, to find more effective ways of working. Time is a factor when considering evaluation activities with many practitioners perceiving that they don't have time to do the evaluation, that it is an extra, a luxury so to speak. A recommendation arising from the initial review of the literature [8] suggests making use of existing evaluation systems such as those used to assess teaching and course design or delivery. This would enable a more seamless integration of evaluation into embedded systems and avoid the need for additional technologies or administration to be introduced.

Learning analytics is a growing trend in universities with the New Media Consortium's Horizon report for higher education suggestion that the use of such analytics is in the one year to adoption category [32]. Many institutions now have strategies and procedures for collecting learning and teaching data. This could be advantageous for evaluation and again introduce efficiencies through use of this accessible and available data. Looking at data collection through another lens, evaluative data could also be harvested and used to identify how future projects can build on the findings of previous projects thus completing the quality assurance/quality enhancement loop. Grant applicants can be given access to such data possibly then leading to evaluation capacity building as well as deepening their learning and teaching knowledge base, as they are made aware of other initiatives and findings within their institution [11]. The SPELT framework and associated evaluation planning tool developed through phase three of this study is another channel for aggregating evaluation data within an institution to sustain this idea of building in efficiencies and strengthening the evaluation capacity of staff.

Crowdsourcing is the process of getting work or funding, usually online, from a group of people, with the principle that more heads are better than one. Crowdsourcing information to support evaluation activities is another method that could build in efficiencies and overcome the perception of needing more time for evaluation as well as contributing towards capability building. Activities could include piloting test survey items, getting feedback on reports, or even for validating analyses of data [33].

## **3.8 Section 7: Conceptualisation**

The final section of the Bergman model is where each of the tensions overlap. I propose that the conversion of tensions and issues, combined with experience, influence one's conceptualisation and therefore give this name to section 7. A key finding across the two phases of this study was how evaluation is conceptualised. Three issues emerged: the conflation of the terms evaluation and research; difference in conceptualisation between different roles within a project; and evaluation purpose, in this case as an accountability exercise vs. a learning process.

### **3.8.1 *Terminology***

The goal of research is to seek a conclusion, one that may be generalizable to many. Evaluation, whilst sharing a number of subtle similarities, is usually specific to a context or requirement and findings are judged against criteria and therefore lead to decisions [2] or actions [21]. A dominant theme evident in the data collected in phase one of this study was that of the overlap and conceptual conflation between research and evaluation. Research underpins an academic's role and is part of who they are and what they do. It is not surprising therefore that there would be overlap and conflation between the subtle nuances of research and evaluation. This was discussed in detail in an earlier paper [7] and we concluded that these misconceptions and conflation of terms impacted on the praxis of evaluation in small learning and teaching projects.

To understand further why such (mis)conceptions exist and how we can approach solutions to the issues such conceptions bring about, we can examine a phenomenographic study carried out on academics' conceptions of research [34]. Findings of that study indicate four variations in which researchers conceptualise what they do. These variations are described as domino, layer, trading and journey conceptions. Each conception type is discipline independent. Furthermore, [34] does not

format these conceptions as hierarchical such as is done with student conceptions of learning, but rather in a matrix where each variation is categorised as having either an orientation outwards, focusing on external products, or an orientation inwards, focusing on internal processes. The variations are further differentiated according to whether the researcher is in the focus of awareness or is essentially absent from it. Mapping these four conceptualisation types onto evaluative data may result in further understanding of how the conceptualisation of evaluation impacts on praxis.

A significant finding in that study was the issue of communication [34]. Whilst it was assumed there was a common language (of research), different conceptualisations meant individuals were often at cross-purposes when discussing research. 'Whenever a process of inquiry is talked about or engaged in, what is said and done is dependent upon underlying conceptions about the nature of research' [34, p. 283]. I posit that the same can be said about evaluation since it too is a process of enquiry. Practitioners' conceptions of evaluation shape what they do and how they evaluate. Others have discussed the language of evaluation [35] and how it can 'shape our perceptions, define our 'realities' and affect our mutual understanding' [36, p. 15]. There is a large body of work on improvement science and more recently leading evaluators have begun to investigate how this overlaps with the field of evaluation [22]. I propose that the simple notion of using a term such as improvement science, may in fact lower the perceived negative connotations that evaluation can often arouse, particularly in educators. This would be an area for future research.

### 3.8.2 *Role-based*

Phase two of this study found that whilst project leaders (the ones who conceptualise the project and write the grant application defining the planned evaluation strategies) were experienced and widely read in evaluation theory and practice, the actualisation of the plans were not realised. In two of the three cases investigated, a project manager had responsibility for the project and had different understandings and experience with the evaluation (compared to the project leader) and this contributed to the misalignment of evaluation praxis. A seminal study on the praxis of evaluation theorists and evaluation practitioners found a similar phenomenon and concluded that 'the gap between the common evaluator and the notions of evaluation practice put forth by academic theorists has yet to be bridged' [6, p. 34].

One of the themes from the data collected in phase two was that of the value of evaluation. There was a clear difference between how project team members valued or perceived evaluation [11]. Many small projects do not have both a project lead and a project manager, in fact many small projects are run with a team of one, in which case the different conceptualisation of evaluation within a project team is not an issue. However, having a critical friend or a colleague with which to discuss thoughts on evaluation is advised otherwise misconceptions can deepen [14].

This sharing of evaluation knowledge and practice between novice and experienced evaluators in order to build evaluation capacity has been discussed earlier (resourcing issues) and we can see that there is a need for such activity if shared (positive) conceptualisations of evaluation are to be developed.

### 3.8.3 *Purpose*

'Accountability, learning and improvement are three of the primary motivators for evaluation' [4, p. 43]. Within the learning and teaching project evaluation space, there are a number of different purposes or foci. A person's conception of evaluation (which can arise from their understanding or experience of the purpose of evaluation) can then influence their practice. Many of the cases and participants in this study have not been clear about the purpose of evaluation in their projects. This finding led to phase three of the study, the development of the SPELT framework (for the evaluation of small learning and teaching projects) to help project leaders think through their context, and choose an appropriate focus and corresponding evaluation approach [13].

If evaluation is conceived only as an accountability measure, this can lead to a negative perception.

If persons whose work is to be evaluated are not involved in discussions of criteria by which their work will be judged, methods by which data will be supplied, and audiences who will receive the reports, these persons can hardly be expected to be supportive of the evaluation [14, p.112].

Phase one of this study found that some project leaders felt their work (project) was being judged. Others declared that they did not want to evaluate or chose not to follow up with evaluation activities



so as to avoid this perceived monitoring of their work. This conceptualisation was found to be an inhibitor to conducting evaluation however, this perception actually arose from a lack of confidence in their evaluation skills and or learning and teaching expertise. There was a lack of understanding of purposes of evaluation other than accountability and therefore they did not, or could not, see the value of evaluation to them or their project.

Evaluation as a learning process has long been discussed in the literature ([37], [38]). Learning that takes place during the evaluation process can often be unintended, particularly when stakeholders are involved in the cycle of reflection and self-evaluation [39]. In a study on evaluation use, the authors suggest that 'when individuals participate in an evaluation process that is collaborative and guided by dialogue and reflection, learning occurs not only at the individual level but also at the team and organization levels' [9, p. 26]. Such an approach to evaluation 'can take organization members down a path of learning that is both intentional and transformative' [9, p. 35]. When an action research approach to project evaluation is taken, evaluators conduct ongoing (formative) discussions with stakeholders to create productive partnerships, for example in a work-integrated learning scenario [19]. This engagement and ongoing discussion with stakeholders whilst desirable, is not always practical. In phase two of this study, participants reported that stakeholders for their project were often high-ranking academics with little time to engage with the details of the project and provide the necessary feedback. What can we do to encourage this integration and support the idea that evaluation can support learning and lead to improvement?

### 3.9 Conclusion

Evaluation has at its heart the desire to judge problems or issues and find solutions. This paper has highlighted some of the issues by integrating current literature and findings from across three phases of a study on the praxis of evaluation. The issues have been framed by a conceptual model (proposed by [1]) and further developed through discussion of the overlapping sections of the model particularly the central intersection, labelled here as *Conceptualisation*.

This study has provided evidence of the complex interactions between the various evaluation sub-systems and described the contextual factors that influence evaluation praxis in higher education learning and teaching projects. The findings and recommendations that have been discussed in this paper form a step towards a quality evaluation agenda in the learning and teaching project space.

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