Evaluating in complex settings: Practical theory-based evaluation

SRA – NERC 2nd course: 2 February 2022

The second course for NERC will build on the first and introduce participants to the challenges presented to impact evaluation in complex policy and programme settings. It will focus on the utility and practice of theory-based (and other 'alternative') approaches to evaluating novel programmes or initiatives with multiple external influences, and uncertainties, on outcomes and effectiveness. By the end of the course participants will:

a) Understand what constitutes 'complexity' in policy and programme settings in terms of causal configurations
b) Understand how complex settings hamper conventional 'empirical' approaches to impact evaluation and how 'non-empirical' and theory-based approaches tackle these
c) Recognise different 'layered' options for building the necessary theory-platform and how to develop the necessary content for policy-programme 'theory using the 'context-expectations-assumptions-risks' framework
d) Understand common options for 'alternative' and 'theory-related' evaluation methods and for translating 'theory' into 'test and learn' evidence needs
e) Be aware of a range of different analytical approaches to 'testing' policy and programme theory and assessing the scale and quality of outcomes against policy-making expectations.

The course will provide participants with the knowledge to contribute to and/or coproduce the 'theory-platforms' which the new Magenta guide encourages as the starting point for all public policy and programme evaluations, and how to make informed decisions about appropriate designs and methods of analysis to assess 'what works' in those policies and programmes.

Course schedule: The course is organised in a one-day intensive 'Zoom' format as below.

Evaluating in Complex Settings - Practical Theory-based Evaluation: Summary content and timetable

Time	Activity/session
09.20+	Join Zoom 'waiting room' for Part 1
09.30-09.40	Welcome and Introductions • Introduction to course; recap from course 1
09.40-10.30	Module 1: What is complexity in evaluation? • Simple vs complex in programme and policy evaluation circumstances • How does 'theory' help; theory and inductive analysis • Open Q & A
10.30-11.00	Module 2: Causal types and what fits where • Understanding causal contexts; Successional; Configurational and Generational Causality • Cause-effect relationships and handling complexity in evaluation • Common building blocks to alternative (non-experimental) evaluation methods

11.00-11.15	SHORT BREAK
11.15-12.15	Module 3: Building a theory platform • When is a theory platform needed; systems modelling vs theory building • A layered approach to theory building • Building a theory of Change; Using the CEAsR framework • Practical pitfalls to theory building; Smart expression of a ToC • Open Q & A
12.15-13.00	EXERCISE 1: Conjecturing 'assumptions' and 'expectations' for a To • Scenario based exercise; Breakout Groups (x2) for 30 mins • Feedback and discussion for 15 mins
13.00-13.45	LUNCH BREAK
13.45-14.10	Module 4: Effective collaboration for complexity in evaluation • Combining coproduction and engagement • What collaborators; when and how; Pitfalls to effective collaboration
14.10-14.50	EXERCISE 2: Making collaboration choices • Scenario based exercise; Breakout Groups (x2) for 30 mins • Feedback and discussion for 15 mins
14.50-15.15	Module 5: Translating 'theory' into evidence needs • Measurement vs understanding and evidence mixes; Getting to fit for purpose evidence (selection) needs • Methods and pitfalls to avoid
15.15-15.30	SHORT BREAK
15.30-16.40	Module 6: Translating 'theory' into evidence needs • Understanding options – the 'Alt-E' analysis pathways • Introduction to 'Adaptive' and participatory methods • Introduction to using theory-based evaluation (TBE) designs • Introduction to 'configurational' approaches • Open Q & A
16.40-16.45	Session 6: Taking it further • Available guidance; Further reading

Course tutor: The course will be led by Professor David Parsons who is a long-standing evaluation specialist, consultant and 'peer' trainer with many years' experience of advising government departments, agencies, regulators and charitable trusts on evaluation. A practising evaluator, in the last two decades he has led over 50 independent evaluations of policy and programmes using a wide range of counterfactual approaches. This has included working with policy, insight and analytical teams in seven government departments, various non-departmental agencies, devolved administrations, and for international bodies including the European Commission, International Labour Organisation, OECD and others. He is a recognised authority on cross-conceptual approaches to evaluation applied in complex settings. David leads the Social Research Association (SRA) course programme for practitioner evaluation training, and among other publications is author of *Demystifying Evaluation,* Policy Press, 2017) and a number of guidebooks on evaluation design.