

22. Outcome?

In considering question five—‘*What is the result of the provision of integrated research support?*’—the structured framework discussed in the previous four chapters provides a systematic approach to assessment, through questions shown in Box 22.1.

Box 22.1 Questions for Evaluating Provision of Integrated Research Support for Policy and Practice Change

Was there a clear assessment of who might benefit from the integrated research findings and how to best transmit the findings to that policy or practice audience? How well did the provision of integrated research support meet its aims and target the intended beneficiaries?

Was the systems view taken suitable? Would a different systems view have been more useful?

Was the full range of options considered for: a) what could be done through each of the government, business and civil society arenas, b) the systems view, and c) the range of organisations and individuals within each systems approach?

Within the necessary limitations, were the most worthwhile targets set for: a) the government, business and civil society arenas, b) the systems view, and c) the range of organisations and individuals? Was the balance fitting? Did any of those excluded turn out to be critical? Were any special advantages of the integrative applied research team recognised and helpfully used?

Were the framing of the problem and the results of the integrated research accurate and meaningful?

Were values considered adequately?

Were productive differences between policy makers and practitioners, on one hand, and researchers, on the other, harnessed effectively? Were potentially destructive differences well managed?

Were sufficient flexibility and iteration built into the processes of deciding on a systems view, scoping, boundary setting, framing, considering values, and harnessing and managing differences?

Were applicable methods used for providing integrated research support? Would other methods have made better contributions? Was a defensible position taken on impartiality? If appropriate, was the need for fresh thinking recognised and were suitable methods used? Were justifiable decisions made in choosing by whom and when the provision of integrated research support was undertaken?

Was the overall context for the provision of integrated research support adequately considered? Were critical contextual factors missed?

Was the authorisation for the provision of integrated research support apposite? Did it influence the provision of integrated research support in critical ways?

Did the research organisation structure or culture provide barriers to the provision of integrated research support? If so, were these effectually recognised and managed? Were facilitators beneficially mobilised?

Did the target policy and practice organisation structure or culture provide barriers to the provision of integrated research support? If so, were these effectively recognised and managed? Were facilitators positively mobilised?

As discussed in Chapter 8, developing I2S as a discipline makes peer review feasible as an evaluation process, as is the case in traditional disciplines. For this domain, those who have been involved in the provision of integrated research support for policy and practice change are in the best position to act as reviewers, employing the questions described above. Nevertheless there are particular challenges to evaluating this domain.

First, no research project on a complex real-world problem is likely to please all the groups which have an interest, so there will always be some who find fault. This raises the more general question: what are realistic aims for research that tackles controversial topics, especially when there are high stakes and the outcomes challenge powerful players with vested interests?

Another related issue is that evaluation may be difficult without input from the policy and practice arenas to complement the documentation provided by the researchers. It may be that actions that the researchers consider to be effective are not perceived in the same way by the relevant policy makers and practitioners. The opposite may also be the case, where actions the researchers thought were ineffective actually made a difference in the eyes of the policy makers and practitioners.

More particularly, the success or failure of individual actions and inactions is often difficult to assess, because the policy and practice systems are so

complicated. Indeed most policy and practice change is likely to be the result of the accumulation of a large number of activities and the impact of any one sector (like the research sector or the affected community sector), let alone any one action, will be impossible to ascertain. In addition, secrecy plays an important role in government and other policy making, so that it may not be possible to fully evaluate what occurred.

Finally, the success or failure of the integrated research support may be entirely outside the researchers' control. A political crisis, an economic downturn or the departure of a key policy maker can be pivotal events affecting integrated research impact (either positively or negatively).

Tasks for the I2S Development Drive
Gather and analyse case examples of evaluation both to improve the list of assessment questions and to develop more detailed guidelines for reviewers. Include cases that examine complexities arising from: a) opposition by vested interests, b) the requirement for multiple viewpoints to understand impact, and c) the inability to predict impact.

This text is taken from *Disciplining Interdisciplinarity: Integration and Implementation Sciences for Researching Complex Real-World Problems*, by Gabriele Bammer, published 2013 by ANU E Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.