

# 12

## **Evaluation in the Australian Public Service: What can the case of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade tell us about an enduring challenge for public administration?**

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### **Abstract**

Since the 1970s the evaluation of policies and programs has been viewed as essential for the efficiency and effectiveness of public policy and for accountability in the Australian Public Service (APS). Despite this, evaluation has varied in its practice and influence. At the time of writing, in

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<sup>1</sup> The author was engaged over the 2012–20 period in DFAT’s evaluation function as a member of the Independent Evaluation Committee (2012–20) and as a member of the Audit and Risk Committee (2016–20). She was also a member of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) Indigenous Evaluation Committee (within the Prime Minister and Cabinet portfolio) 2018–22. While DFAT officials commented on earlier versions of this chapter, her observations do not reflect views of DFAT or NIAA officials. The author is grateful to the many people who contributed information for this chapter and commented on it. These include Stephen Creese, Helen Dickinson, Peter Graves, Vanessa McDermott, Trish Mercer, Andrew Podger, Jenny Stewart, Peter Versegi and an anonymous referee. Valuable comment was also received from participants in the Greater China Australia Dialogue workshop in February 2021 and from a number of DFAT officials.

2021, it is still underutilised as an accountability and learning mechanism and has yet to cement its role in public administration in the Australian Government.

While the trajectory of evaluation and its current state in the APS is well understood, what is less well documented is its trajectory within individual government departments. This chapter documents evaluation of the Australian development program administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) over 2006–2020. It shows that evaluation in DFAT had a different trajectory to other parts of the APS, with the increase in scope and quality of the evaluation function in DFAT up to 2018 flowing from bipartisan government concern that Australian international development aid be effective, and be seen to be effective, and bolstered by the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (PGPA) Act of 2013 (Cth). This was then followed by an abrupt decline, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support for and promotion of evaluation in the APS is often seen as aligning with the political party that has formed government, with Labor governments being seen as more supportive of evaluation, and Coalition governments less so. However, this DFAT case study shows that policy area and individual ministers can be more important than political persuasion in the level of support given to independent evaluation. It also suggests the important role played by a department's culture, its closeness and responsiveness to ministers, the skills of its officers, and the policy instruments they use.

Overall, DFAT's evaluation trajectory demonstrates that even in agencies where there are strong drivers for a robust evaluation function, evaluation is vulnerable as a mechanism for public administration accountability and learning in the APS, particularly in agencies that are close to ministerial decision-making. The chapter concludes by arguing that, given 25 years of discretionary investment in evaluation within Australian government departments has failed to sustain it, evaluation will not flourish without being removed from secretary discretion and political considerations.

**Keywords:** development evaluation; evaluating government programs; the politics of evaluation; history of evaluation in Australia.

## Evaluation and the Australian Public Service 1990–2020

Since the 1970s the evaluation of policies and programs has been viewed as essential for the efficiency and effectiveness of public policy and for accountability in Australia. From countless documents and reviews since then there has been ‘near universal endorsement of the need for evaluation, across all stages of the policy and program cycle’ (Gray and Bray 2019:7).

Evaluation is the practice of systematic measurement of the significance, merit and worth of policies and programs, undertaken to understand and improve decisions about investment. Evaluation involves the assessment of outcomes and operations of programs or policy compared to expectations, in order to make improvements (Weiss 1998).

Evaluation thus provides:

- credible evidence as to ‘what works’ and what does not work for evidence-informed and evidence-based policy
- credible evidence to inform implementation processes and their fine-tuning
- performance information to inform government resource allocation (known as performance budgeting) and
- products to fulfill government agencies’ accountability requirements to parliament and to the public.

These functions are referred to as ‘learning, management and accountability’. The effectiveness with which evaluation can fulfill these multiple roles depends on many factors including, but not limited to:

- a strong authorising environment,<sup>2</sup> including leadership and support from the departmental head, for quality independent evaluation
- good quality individual evaluations, which are dependent on factors such as skills of agency staff to commission and participate in evaluations, and good quality monitoring data and
- publication and widespread distribution of reports and findings.

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2 Under the theory of public value developed by Mark Moore, one of the tests for any public sector strategy is whether it is aligned with its authorising environment, that is, will politicians and stakeholders support the approach (Moore 2003).

To learn from evaluation, an agency needs to have a strong research and evaluation culture (PM&C 2019b:223). That is, a culture that supports and rewards inquiry, analysis and pursuit of evidence.

Despite a plethora of evaluation policies, reviews, commentaries and implementation practices, as shown in Table 12.1, while there have been bright spots of government support since 1990, evaluation has struggled to become a sustained and effective part of public administration in the Australian Government over the last 40 years (Graves 2020).

**Table 12.1: Evaluation in the Australian Public Service (APS) 1990–2020.**

Period	Government	Key events
1990s to 1996	Labor. Hawke then Keating governments.	<b>Good progress.</b> Portfolio evaluation plans were required from all departments and there was a central evaluation support unit in the Department of Finance (DOF). While there was initially pushback from some line agencies at the requirements and the level of DOF engagement, government programs were systematically evaluated every three to five years and evaluation findings were used to support new policy and savings proposals submitted to the Cabinet for its consideration (Mackay 2011).
1996–2007	Coalition Liberal–National. Howard Government.	<b>Evaluation system was deregulated</b> and evaluation languished. The Howard Government’s priority was to reduce red tape and simplify management, and with large budget surpluses there was less need to use evidence for decision-making. Evaluation requirements, particularly portfolio evaluation plans, were removed, after secretaries pushed for less oversight by, and reporting to, DOF. DOF retained little or no role in evaluation. (Mackay 2011). Some ‘islands’ of good practice remained: e.g. the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations conducted evaluations to demonstrate the improved cost-effectiveness of outsourced services for the unemployed (Jarvie and Mercer 2018). Department of Social Security published research plans.
2007–2015	Labor to 2013. Rudd, Gillard governments; Coalition 2013–2015. Abbott Government	<b>Evaluation prospects improved.</b> The <i>Public Government Performance and Accountability Act 2013</i> (PGPA Act) (Cth) was developed under the Labor Government, with the Coalition Government developing and implementing the associated PGPA Rule (2014). These elevated the importance of performance information in corporate plans and departmental annual reports and mandated a stronger role for audit committees in providing advice to the agency head on the appropriateness of the performance information. The secretary of DOF promoted the use of evaluation during his tenure (2009–2014). Detailed guidance on good performance information released by DOF (2015, 2016, 2017).

Period	Government	Key events
2015–18	Coalition. Turnbull Government.	<p><b>Evaluation prospects continued to improve.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PGPA Act implemented 1 July 2015 but slow progress in improving performance information (ANAO 2018). The independent review of the Act recommended there be a formal requirement that performance information must be 'relevant, reliable and complete' (Alexander and Thodey 2018), and that there be more effective and informed use of evaluation. Accepted by government. Opportunities for evaluation, particularly in complex policy areas, seemed to improve.</li> <li>• Indigenous policy: AUD10 million per year for evaluation and a new evaluation framework for its five-year AUD5.2 billion Indigenous Advancement Strategy (PM&amp;C 2018). Productivity Commission (PC) Inquiry to develop an evaluation strategy for all Indigenous policies and programs (PC 2020).</li> <li>• The Independent Review of the APS commissioned papers on evaluation and learning in the APS (Bray et al. 2019).</li> <li>• Greater recognition of evaluation as a profession (Gruen 2018). The establishment of <i>Better Evaluation</i> (betterevaluation.org) as an independent organisation providing resources and leadership for the profession both domestically and internationally.</li> </ul>
2018–2021	Coalition. Morrison Government.	<p><b>Evaluation retreat.</b> Continuing rise of big data and preference for real-time information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response to the Independent Review of the APS (PM&amp;C 2019a): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Government rejects key elements on enhancing evaluation and research (recommendation 25), and did not respond to suggestions that there be minimum standards</li> <li>– the Secretaries Board advises the government to reject recommendation on having mandatory requirements for formal evaluation in Cabinet process and budget rules (recommendation 26)</li> <li>– government focus on improving data and digital capability, having data champions in agencies</li> <li>– priority to reducing 'bureaucratic congestion' (PM&amp;C 2019a:11).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• New PGPA rules (Section 16EA(d), as per the PGPA Rule in 2020) do not incorporate requirement for performance information to be complete, only that a mix of qualitative and quantitative information was needed (Department of Finance 2020), reducing potential role for evaluation.</li> <li>• The government did not respond to the PC proposals to strengthen the evaluation of Indigenous programs.</li> </ul>

Source: See sources throughout table.

## Why has there been such a failure to embed evaluation into public administration in the Australian Public Service?

The reasons for such a weak investment in evaluation and use of its results in the Australian Public Service (APS) have been commented on at length elsewhere, with commentators suggesting a variety of factors:

- The lack of incentive to evaluate programs in an environment where governments and ministers were seen to want to increase their control of the public service and minimise scope for criticism (Graves 2020; Halligan 2020).
- The discretion secretaries have in choosing whether to evaluate programs or not (Gruen 2018; Graves 2020), and departments' preference for using other performance measures such as case studies and quantitative information, which are less troublesome.
- The high turnover of secretaries in the APS, which undermines the embedding of public administration reforms, added to the lack of evaluation skills (Graves et al. 2021).
- The lack of systematic learning in the APS. Australia does not have a good reputation for learning—it is better at fixing things and problem-solving and working in relatively short time horizons, than it is in investing in reflection (Bray et al. 2019). The APS is highly responsive to ministers, which also promotes shorter time frames and less reflection (Stewart and Jarvie 2017).

While the failure to embed evaluation in the APS is well understood, it is also acknowledged that evaluation use in policy and program management has varied widely between APS departments. One department that has received little commentary in the public administration literature is the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The case study (below) makes clear that elements of DFAT's evaluation trajectory did not mirror those of the broader APS, and that the interaction of broader developments in the APS with DFAT's culture, program responsibilities, policy instruments, skills, and political and policy environment led to firstly a strengthening of the evaluation function over the 2007–2018 period, and then its decline.

The DFAT case could be seen to be an outlier in the APS and raises the question as to whether insights from an such an exceptional case can lead to deeper understanding of evaluation in the APS. However, methodologically

it is well established in the social science literature that the study of outliers can deepen understanding. In particular, outliers can identify moderating factors where the ‘norm’ does not appear to apply (see, for example, Gibbert et al. 2021 with regard to management research, and Sharifi et al. 2014 in approaches to reduce childhood obesity). Outlier case studies are also used to indicate areas worthy of further research. It is in this spirit that the DFAT case is offered below.

## Evaluation in DFAT 2006–20

DFAT is a major Australian government department being responsible for foreign, trade and development policy and programs including consular and passport services and a AUD4 billion-a-year development aid program. In 2020 it had around 6,000 staff, of which approximately half were in 120 overseas posts in 84 countries (DFAT 2020a). In terms of functions the biggest change in recent years occurred in 2013 when the new Coalition Government decided to merge it with AusAID, the executive agency responsible for development aid programs and policy. This led to a major restructure, with the AusAID development programs and personnel being integrated into the DFAT geographic divisions and groups.

### A. Evaluation in AusAID to 2013

Prior to the merger with DFAT, AusAID, as a separate executive agency in the Foreign Affairs and Trade ministerial portfolio, had its own performance management and evaluation arrangements under the government’s aid policy, *An Effective Aid Program for Australia: Making a Real Difference—Delivering Real Results (Effective Aid)* (AusAID 2012a). This was a sophisticated framework, with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation at the agency, program and initiative levels and clear accountabilities. There was an annual review to Cabinet on outcomes.

#### Office of Development Effectiveness

A key element of the evaluation framework was the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE), a central unit independent of program managers, which undertook strategic evaluations and an annual synthesis of evaluation results as well as quality assurance on project-level and country-

level monitoring (QAIs and APPRs<sup>3</sup>) (AusAID 2012b). ODE had been established by the Howard Government in 2006 following the White Paper on Australian Aid (AusAID 2006), which provided the blueprint for the doubling of the aid program from AUD2 billion in 2006 to AUD4 billion in 2010. The government wanted to be assured of the effectiveness of the increased spend, not least because the aid program had assumed a more prominent role in Australia's national security agenda by delivering critical development programs in what was then known as the 'arc of instability' from East Timor through to the south-west Pacific states. ODE became the central focus and driver of the post-White Paper development effectiveness agenda, establishing a new performance management system, embarking on a more systematic and strategic approach to evaluations (including sentinel evaluations such as on violence against women, service delivery in fragile states and country evaluations on Indonesia, Timor Leste and Cambodia) and increasing the amount of publicly available performance reporting.

Following its influential initial years, changing leadership and the transfer of performance management responsibilities to another area of the department meant that ODE had had limited output and influence between 2009 and 2011, with few publications completed (Adams 2019). However, its role was strengthened after the Labor Government's 2011 Aid Effectiveness Review (AusAID 2011), which recommended that ODE continue under the auspices of an Independent Evaluation Committee (IEC).

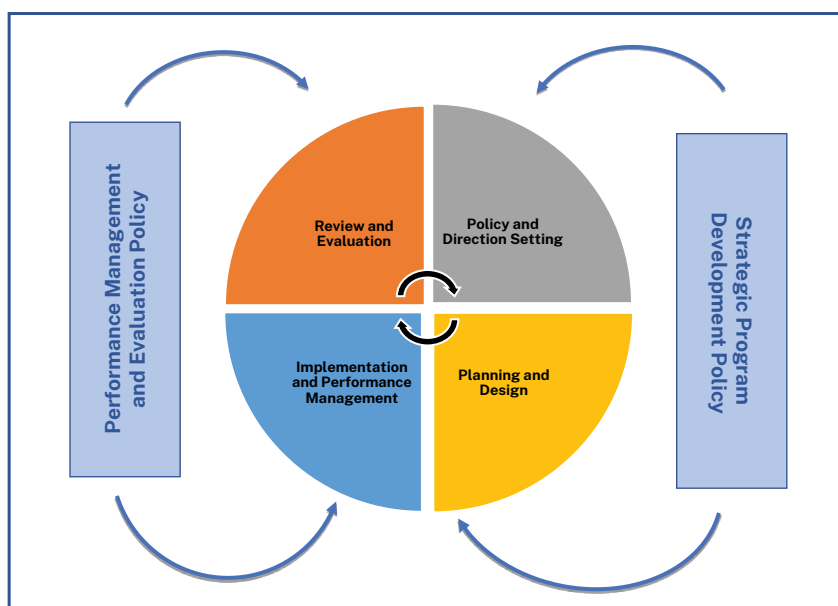
### **Independent Evaluation Committee**

The IEC was established in 2012, with Jim Adams, a former World Bank vice-president, at its head, with two other independent members as well as an AusAID deputy secretary. A senior official from the Department of Finance attended as an observer. The IEC oversaw all ODE work—agreeing on work programs and overseeing each stage of evaluation reporting, from concept note, through terms of reference, evaluation plans, and draft reports to final reports. All reports would be published. The IEC reported to senior AusAID management as well as to a Development Effectiveness Steering Committee, an interdepartmental committee of senior public servants charged with advising government on aid, thus assuring a measure of independence from program administration. The IEC and ODE communicated with the AusAID audit committee to avoid duplication and operated on similar principles, including following up on the implementation of evaluation recommendations. Within AusAID, evaluation was a part of the program cycle (see Figure 12.1).

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3 QAI: Quality at Implementation (the annual review of an initiative/activity). ARPP: Annual Review of Program Performance (the annual review covering all programs and initiatives at the country level).





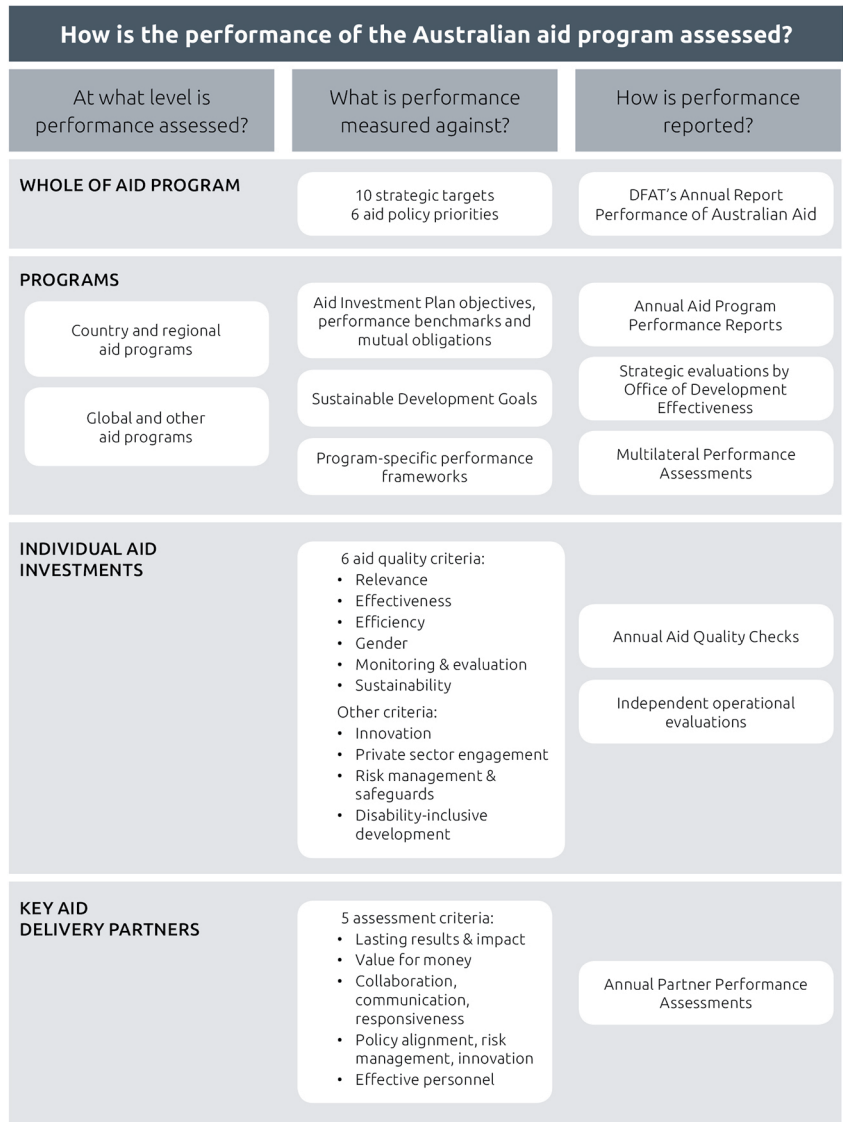
**Figure 12.1: The aid management cycle in AusAID.**

Source: Internal DFAT documents and AusAID (2012b).

## B. Evaluation in DFAT 2013–18: Strengthened role

### A new performance framework

When the new Coalition Government merged AusAID into DFAT in 2013 the evaluation arrangements continued, even though the government signalled there would be no increase in the aid budget—indeed, it cut the allocation in the 2014–15 and subsequent budgets. ODE continued, with slightly reduced staff, and the IEC chair now reported to the DFAT secretary. The new Coalition minister oversaw development of a new performance framework for the aid program ('Making Performance Count' (DFAT 2014)) which included an annual report the 'Performance of Australian Aid' (PAA; see Figure 12.2). ODE undertook strategic evaluations (at thematic and country levels), while program areas undertook program-level evaluations, occasionally in partnership with ODE.



**Figure 12.2: Performance of Australian Aid (PAA) performance framework.**  
Source: DFAT (2018b:4).

**Expanded role for ODE and the IEC**

With the PGPA entering into force in 2015 the role of ODE and the IEC was broadened to include quality assurance and the verification of performance information for the PAA, information which was also used

in DFAT's annual report. This quality assurance/verification was done on a risk basis with effort focused on the accuracy of the self-assessed Quality at Implementation ratings (QAIs, later called aid quality checks (AQC's)) through a series of independent ODE spot checks. By 2019 all AQC's done on completed projects were being verified by ODE. Effort was also focused on reviewing the evidence behind assessments made by program managers in the ARPPs (country-level assessments).

### **Evaluation policy changed from compliance-driven to demand-driven**

In 2015 ODE became responsible for the evaluation policy for all aid activities, not just strategic evaluations, and a new evaluation policy for development aid in 2016 reflected this (DFAT 2017a). The new evaluation policy sought to improve the quality, relevance and transparency of evaluations by changing from the previous compliance-driven policy—which required all investments over AUD3 million to be evaluated at least once in their life—to a demand-driven model, where program managers would choose what they would evaluate based on need. ODE would undertake larger-scale multi-country/sectoral strategic evaluations and provide technical support for operational evaluations. The new evaluation policy created a coherent framework for operational evaluations, and an annual 'Aid Evaluation Plan' for all aid activities was published, as was its implementation. The first plan was in 2017. In 2016 the new head of ODE was promoted to first assistant secretary (FAS), conveying a message that evaluation had priority in the expanded mandate of DFAT. Interest in evaluation developed in other parts of DFAT and the then head of ODE had discussions with DFAT divisions as to whether ODE could assist them with their accountability and learning functions. He found initial interest from the trade, consular and passport areas to be brought into the evaluation plan, noting that they would need support from ODE to undertake any evaluations.<sup>4</sup>

### **Stronger links with Audit and Risk Committee**

Given the IEC and ODE had to provide assurance as to the quality of performance information that went into the annual report, and DFAT's Audit and Risk Committee (the ARC) had to advise the secretary as to the appropriateness of entity performance reporting, an independent member of the IEC was appointed to the ARC in 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Versegi, personal communication.

## The new evaluation and performance reporting arrangements were seen as successful, though not perfect

- a. **ODE evaluation** output increased from an average of two per year in 2006–13 to seven per year 2014–2017. The publication rate of program evaluations went from 40 per cent to 95 per cent. The quality of ODE evaluations increased, with two evaluations winning national awards<sup>5</sup> (Slattery and Jarvie 2017). Follow-up of the uptake of ODE recommendations showed that there had been impact on aid projects (DFAT 2018d). For example, the Pacific humanitarian evaluation (DFAT 2017c) promoted localisation and use of cash transfers in humanitarian responses, and the pandemic evaluation findings that stressed the slow progress in the implementation of the International Health Regulations and the fragility of the gains that had been made in laboratories, governance and leadership, helped guide new regional health security investments (DFAT 2017b, 2019).
- b. **Transparency.** As part of their commitment to transparency and credibility, IEC and ODE members participated in biannual seminars held at the Development Policy Centre at The Australian National University, where ODE reports were discussed with academics in open forums.
- c. In **performance monitoring**, IEC and ODE were able to form supportive yet robust relationships with aid management, and so when issues arose—such as an unexplained rise in the effectiveness of aid projects in 2016—the problems were able to be sorted out (Adams 2019).
- d. **International recognition.** The arrangements were well regarded internationally, with the OECD Development Assistance Committee commenting favourably in its 2018 peer review that Australia had maintained ‘a strong, independent evaluation system that is well placed to address strategic issues and priorities’ and that the strengthened role of ODE ‘helped ensure the quality and rigour of DFAT results reporting and improved the influence of evaluation findings within DFAT’ (OECD 2018:93). USAID used the report ‘Banking our Aid’ as training for its own staff.<sup>6</sup>

5 *Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for Internal Development (AVID) Program* (DFAT, January 2014) won the Australian Evaluation Society Award for Excellence in Evaluation, Public Sector Evaluation Award, 2014 and the *Evaluation of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program Final Report* (DFAT, August 2015) won the same award in 2016.

6 Peter Versegi, personal communication.

- e. **Domestic recognition.** Domestically DFAT was seen as an evaluation leader in the APS. Australia's Aid Program was described as 'an exemplar of comprehensive and effective evaluation programs' (National Commission of Audit 2014:58). The Independent Review of the Public Service identified it as one of two agencies where evaluation was done well (PM&C 2019b). The secretary and minister made supportive statements (Howes 2020).
- f. **Weaknesses.** There were some weaknesses still—program evaluation quality was variable, with around 30 per cent of reports being of less than adequate quality (DFAT 2016, 2018d, 2018c). ODE struggled to undertake country evaluations successfully (Adams 2019). Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for many individual projects was weak, with ODE's annual spot checks of QAIs and later AQC's regularly reporting a large proportion as having unsatisfactory M&E systems. Evaluations commented on the poor quality of program monitoring data. There was a significant lack of quantitative and outcome data. For example, a review of teacher training projects in DFAT found there was no DFAT evaluation that could show the impact of teacher training on students' learning and skills (DFAT 2015; Adams 2019).

Nevertheless, in hindsight, 2014–2018 was a high point for the evaluation function in DFAT.

## C. Evaluation of development programs in DFAT 2018–20: Significant decline

Some strains first appeared in 2018. The head of ODE (a FAS) was moved to a new position at short notice and the position was filled on an acting basis for more than six months. In August, DFAT's Aid Governance Board, despite ODE and IEC's reservations, removed the assessment of the M&E arrangements for projects from the annual quality check.<sup>7</sup> The rationale was the need for streamlining and reducing workload. Strategic evaluation output from ODE declined—whereas in previous years around seven strategic evaluations were published each year, in 2019 there were only three. An expected public launch of major ODE study on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls did not proceed in late 2019, despite its positive

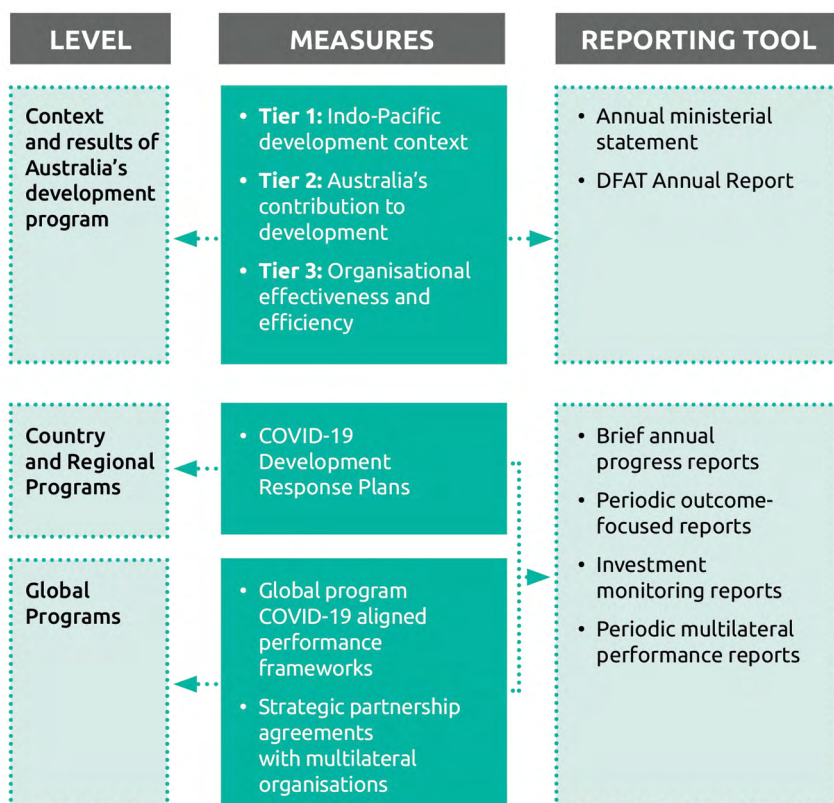
<sup>7</sup> Aid quality checks (AQC's) were annual checks done for all projects over a certain size. In 2018, program managers rated projects on six criteria—efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, M&E, gender, and sustainability. At the August 2018 meeting, relevance, M&E and sustainability were removed.

findings. Meanwhile, when Jim Adams retired from the position as chair of the IEC in May 2019 he was not replaced. The IEC continued for a few more months until it no longer had a quorum when another member's contract expired in early 2020.

Into this vulnerable situation the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020. The work of DFAT was transformed, with every resource focused on the immediate tasks of bringing DFAT officials back to Australia, supporting remaining officials and locally engaged staff, helping stranded Australians get back home, and supporting DFAT staff in Australia and overseas to work from home. The development program rapidly pivoted to help partner countries deal with the impact on their health systems and their economies (DFAT 2020a). Evaluations were halted as staff were diverted to urgent tasks, both within DFAT and in other departments. While some program evaluations were finished, no ODE evaluations were published in 2020 despite three such evaluations, including on highly relevant topics such as Pacific infrastructure assistance, being significantly progressed.

Work on the new performance framework was shifted to a framework to support Australia's efforts to partner with countries, particularly in the Pacific, to help deal with COVID-19 and its impact. The minister announced the new performance framework for aid in May 2020, which did not include ODE (Figure 12.3) (DFAT 2020b). There were to be no more strategic evaluations and ODE had been quietly abolished. The Office of the Chief Economist would be responsible for evaluation policy as it applied to the development program, with a small evaluation unit, headed at director level (below branch head) and a small team. There would continue to be a Development Evaluation Plan signed off by the secretary, with program managers (first assistant secretaries) deciding which programs would be evaluated. Unlike the 2016 evaluation policy, the 2021 policy does not publicly commit DFAT program managers to doing a minimum number of evaluations each year and there is no process for review of the strategy (DFAT 2021). The annual quality check of investments would continue, as would the final independently verified AQC for completed projects.

No public rationale was provided for the abolition of ODE and the IEC apart from in officials' answers at Senate Estimates hearings where they maintained that the decision was entirely a matter for DFAT, not ministers, and that the evaluation function would continue as before.



**Figure 12.3: Performance framework for *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response*.**

Note: Evaluation and the Office of Development Effectiveness are no longer mentioned.

Source: DFAT (2020b).

## Why was the evaluation trajectory in DFAT different to the broader APS?

The trajectory of the evaluation of development programs in AusAID/DFAT was at times at odds with broader trends in the APS. In particular, in the 2000s the evaluation of development aid programs was strongly supported by the Coalition Howard Government at a time when evaluation was languishing more broadly in the APS. Conversely, the sharp decline after 2018 under a Coalition Government occurred when evaluations in other areas of the APS (such as Indigenous programs) were continuing.

This chapter postulates that several factors specific to DFAT were at play. Four are discussed here: (i) the policy area (international aid); (ii) DFAT's culture, values and skills; (iii) resourcing pressures; and (iv) the authorising environment, including ministers and their officers.

## **(i) Evaluation is a standard management process in international development**

The policy area—international development—and the policy instruments used for it were a strong positive influence on evaluation activity in AusAID/DFAT. Rigorous M&E is very much the 'norm' in international development. Program evaluation began relatively early in international development, with the World Bank starting in 1970. This was followed by other multilateral development banks. The OECD Development Assistance Committee focused on the evaluation of the effectiveness of development assistance from the 1980s. The United Nations Development Program set up an independent evaluation office and development donor countries such as the UK, Canada, Norway, the US and Germany established evaluation systems, frequently with significant independence from government. More recent developments include China, which in 2018 established a separate stand-alone aid agency—the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)—with an M&E function. It recently released aid policy which prominently committed to systematic evaluation.<sup>8</sup> There are active evaluation organisations focusing on the evaluation of development programs, such as 3IE (the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation). Evaluation activity is continuing—in 2020 the Global Evaluation Initiative was launched, aimed at strengthening evaluation and monitoring systems and capacities throughout the world.

The heavy emphasis on evaluation is thus a feature of the international development policy landscape. The policy instruments used—project financing and technical assistance—are amenable to evaluation as they are usually discrete and well documented. Methodologies are well established, with general agreement on the standard elements of evaluations—effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, impact and sustainability—and their definitions. It is not surprising then that as Australia is an active participant

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8 'We will develop complete systems of impartial and independent project evaluation, set sound and effective evaluation standards, conduct comprehensive evaluation and special evaluation, and strengthen the application of evaluation results' (People's Republic of China 2021).



in international forums, and with strategic partner countries, it has accepted the evaluation of aid programs as a normal part of aid management and reporting.<sup>9</sup>

## **(ii) DFAT culture, responsiveness to ministers and skills at odds with evaluation**

AusAID, prior to its merger with DFAT, was to some extent arm's length from ministers and this had been formalised in 2010 when it was made an executive agency. It was staffed by a mix of generalists and technical professionals. The dominant policy instrument used was the development project, managed by AusAID officers, and increasingly, by managing contractors. The sums involved were large. AusAID officers were often content experts (e.g. in education, infrastructure) but most of all, were trained to manage projects according to the management cycle shown in Figure 12.1. While they were always alive to political environments, both domestically and in partner countries, they were able to operate with a certain level of independence from the government of the day.

DFAT, prior to the merger, was a mix of policy and service delivery activities, with the passport and consular functions requiring tight management capability. However, the dominant culture was driven by the overseas posting cycle, and the skills valued were those of diplomacy, including capacity to manage relationships and influence others. Also valued was the ability to deliver on ministers' agendas and requests (APSC 2013). Human resource management was based on the concept of the career diplomat who was a 'talented generalist' with a 'can-do' approach (APSC 2013:4), intelligent and capable enough to manage a wide range of tasks and to learn on the job. While there were specialists, such as in legal and IT areas, they had limited scope to rise in the hierarchy. The dominant training was in languages, and, if needed, 9–12 months training was provided prior to postings.

The merger of DFAT and AusAID in 2013 brought development projects much closer to government decision-making. It also brought two different cultures and policy instruments together, and people with very different skills and mindsets. While the very senior leadership of DFAT reinforced

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9 Note that in some policy areas, such as climate change, Australia has been prepared to chart a different course.

the important role that development professionals played (e.g. Adamson 2019), many former AusAID officers became dispirited by the merger, and left the department.

Many DFAT officers in charge of development projects did not understand the need for strong process management, including the need for M&E. Evaluation, particularly independent evaluation reports released publicly, was a new and problematic concept. One DFAT officer noted that diplomats ‘do not understand why you would pay someone to find what went wrong, which would then be just a headache for the minister and the department’ (personal communication). They were also concerned about creating problems with foreign governments if an evaluation drew attention to partner government weaknesses. Cultures that support evaluation must be robust enough to admit to failure. But the pre-merger DFAT culture was risk-averse (APSC 2013) with an unwillingness to admit error. Even after the merger and with the enhanced performance reporting requirements of the PGPA, DFAT annual reports continued to be dominated by case studies of success, with few records of less successful activities (see ANAO 2018). In short, DFAT did not have a strong performance culture, which is essential for strong M&E systems (DFAT 2018a).

In this, much of the DFAT/AusAID merger experience mirrors that of the merger of Indigenous programs into the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2014, where large delivery programs were brought into a department close to the prime minister and with little recognition of the cultural incompatibility of the components, driven by different skills and values (Buick et al. 2018).

The Australian experience of integrating its aid functions into foreign affairs functions also mirrored that of other countries such as Canada and the UK (Gulrajani 2018).

### **(iii) Resourcing pressures in policy and diplomacy led to pressure for aid management to be streamlined**

Over decades, Australian governments have been reluctant to provide DFAT with staffing resources to match the growth in complexity of their work and to meet the expectations of the public and minister. The Lowy institute regularly documented DFAT staffing cuts and budget outcomes,

and in 2020 noted that for decades its budget, after adjusting for inflation ‘has been not just frozen but in decline and by 2022 will be smaller than it was 15 years earlier’ (Pryke 2020).

There was temporary respite in 2013 when it was merged with AusAID. Even though total staff numbers were immediately cut by 500, the merging of AusAID functions into country teams meant DFAT had more flexibility and capacity to meet pressures from the diplomatic and broader policy work. However, resourcing pressures undoubtedly weakened program management. This was not really recognised until 2018 when an ‘Aid Health Check’ was undertaken, which found a lack of skills in aid management, including such things as the basics of contract management and monitoring.

Given the resourcing pressures and DFAT’s weak performance culture, it is not surprising that when COVID-19 hit in March 2020 evaluation activity was wound back. However, it was still possible that a comprehensive evaluation function could have been resuscitated except that a significant change in the authorising environment had occurred in 2018. The support for evaluation from government and the minister had changed.

#### **(iv) The authorising environment — especially ministers, and their offices — gave strong support to 2018 but then withdrew**

Up to 2018 there was strong support for evaluation of international aid programs from every minister, regardless of their political party. But in August 2018 there was a change of minister and prime minister (although still within a Coalition Government). The previous minister, Julie Bishop, had been a strong supporter of the need for performance measurement and public accountability. However, after the 2019 election and the return of the government, the new minister did not replace the retiring IEC chair. Meanwhile, there were strong messages from the government that the oversight arrangements for development projects needed to be streamlined, particularly given the tight resourcing environment. The new prime minister had told departmental heads in 2018 to reduce regulation and to focus on ‘congestion-busting’ to speed up activities and programs (Tingle 2019; Morrison 2019). The decision was taken by DFAT to cease to do strategic evaluations while enhancing data analysis and retaining program evaluations, and to abolish the ODE. The minister had allowed the IEC to cease.

## Conclusion

Evaluation has struggled to become embedded in the APS as a routine function that contributes to management, accountability and learning. However, for many years it appeared that evaluation of development assistance in DFAT was immune to that broader struggle. It was a leader in evaluation in the APS. Its development aid evaluation function had been established through high-level and highly consultative White Paper and Independent Review processes. It had systematic processes for evaluation of programs and strategies, an Office of Development Effectiveness, and an Independent Evaluation Committee. However, even with the positive force of the PGPA Act, when support from key parts of the authorising environment changed in 2018, and with resourcing pressures associated with COVID-19,<sup>10</sup> DFAT was unable to sustain a comprehensive evaluation program in the development aid area, let alone extend it to other parts of DFAT activities.

This suggests that even in an agency where there are strong moderating factors—policy area, international evaluation ‘norms’—evaluation in the APS is vulnerable.

More broadly, the DFAT case study challenges the notion that support for, and promotion of, evaluation in the APS is *always* aligned with the political party that has formed government, with Labor governments being seen as more supportive of evaluation, and Coalition governments less so. In fact, this study shows that individual ministers as well as policy area can be as important as political persuasion in the level of support given to independent evaluation in the APS.

In particular, it demonstrates the importance of policy area in influencing the level of evaluation activity. Around the world, international development aid has been vigorously evaluated since the 1970s. There are international standards and peer review processes, and policy instruments that are amenable to robust evaluation methodologies. It is not surprising then that in Australia evaluation of international development aid has also had a strong track record. In this respect, it is worth noting that, even after the reduction in ministerial support, in 2021 DFAT had still retained an annual

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10 Note that DFAT finally acquired additional staff—160 in the 2021 budget—and a substantial increase in the development aid budget; however the strategic evaluation function has not been reinstated.

program evaluation plan for international development assistance, and a commitment to the publication of evaluation findings, which put it ahead of many other APS agencies.

The case study also shows that a department's investment in evaluation activity could also be a function of its performance culture which, among other things, is influenced by the capabilities of its officers and its closeness and responsiveness to its minister.

All these issues are worthy of further exploration through case studies of other Australian government agencies.

This discussion prompts some broader observations.

There have now been 25 years of having evaluation as a discretionary activity in the APS, being undertaken in accordance with the priorities of the departmental leadership and under the influence of ministers and governments, and it has failed to be sustained. There is clearly a need for a different approach.

The first necessity is to move away from regarding evaluation primarily as a technical function that contributes to evidence-based policy design and program management, and to recognise that to many government decision-makers it is a political activity which needs to be controlled (see Weiss 1993). The political dimension of technical functions has also been recognised with regard to performance budgeting (Ho 2019). In the end, evaluators are criticising government activities and it is not reasonable for such functions to operate effectively within a government without formal protection. This is the case, for example, for audit and financial reporting functions.

The importance of removing this discretion and mandating evaluation in Australia has been argued before (e.g. Gruen 2018). Other countries have seen the necessity. In particular, in 2018 the USA passed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act which mandates that each agency must develop a systematic plan for identifying and addressing policy issues and designate a senior official as the Evaluation Officer to coordinate the evidence-building activities. This Evaluation Officer is also a leader on data improvement activities, thus aligning 'big data' initiatives with the evaluation function. The Office of Management and Budget is also required to provide expertise, resources and guidance to federal agencies.

There are many different ways evaluation could be mandated in Australia, such as strengthening the PGPA Act to require evaluation and reporting, or including evaluation as an essential element of a secretary's 'stewardship' function under the Public Service Act. However, it is probable that without such action evaluation is likely to continue to be marginalised, with APS agencies' limited analytic resources focusing on quantitative data analysis, disconnected from the evaluation function.

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