



## Evaluation and Research in Social Policy

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# **EVALUATION AND RESEARCH IN SOCIAL POLICY**

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by Peter Saunders and Michael Fine

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Tony Eardley  
Editor

## **Abstract**

Evaluation has become part of the fabric of policy-related research in Australia. Program evaluation is now an in-built feature of all Commonwealth programs and is integral to the Financial Management Improvement Program (FMIP) introduced in 1987. This growth in the importance and significance of evaluation reflects the increased interest in ensuring that public programs are appropriate, efficient and effective. This paper explores how the 'new age' of evaluation might influence the development of policy and, more particularly, how it has affected the nature of the work of the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC). Following a discussion of the definitions of evaluation, of other policy-related research, and of evaluative research, changes in the program of research undertaken in the SPRC over the last five years are described and the question of how the emphasis on evaluations has affected the broader profile of research and funding of the body of research undertaken at the Centre is considered. Following this, a number of examples of SPRC research in the fields of social security and community support which illustrate the nature of its contribution to the evaluation of government social programs are reviewed. Drawing on this evidence, it is argued that despite the emphasis placed on evaluation by the Department of Finance and other bodies, the approach is likely to remain only a limited part of the policy process. Other forms of research will undoubtedly continue to complement the contribution made by evaluative research, but these activities, too, are also unlikely to dominate the formulation and implementation of policy.

# 1 Introduction

Evaluation has become part of the fabric of policy-related research in Australia. Program evaluation is now an in-built feature of all Commonwealth programs and is integral to the Financial Management Improvement Program (FMIP) introduced in 1987 (Department of Finance, 1987). The growing significance of evaluation reflects the increased attention devoted to questions of public sector effectiveness and resource allocation in an environment of fiscal constraint and against a background of a general loss of confidence in governance and governability. Increasingly, public sector activities have had to document their achievements as a requirement of funding and to confront the issue of whether or not they are best located inside or outside of government. In all spheres of public sector activity two key questions have been asked: can this activity be better handled outside of government and should bureaucratic decision-making give way to market processes? These are big questions and the growing role and importance of evaluation is part of an attempt to answer them.

This growth in the importance and significance of evaluation reflects the increased interest in ensuring that public programs are appropriate, efficient and effective. Nowhere has this growth been more rapid and its consequences more profound than in relation to social programs. Some within government have welcomed this change. Thus, for example, Bowdler (1991) has commented in relation to the role of evaluation within the Department of Social Security (DSS), that the emphasis given to effectiveness has ensured that: ‘... the role of evaluation has been strengthened, is more clearly defined and is becoming better understood’ (Bowdler, 1991: 48).

Others remain less convinced that an appropriate role for evaluation in the overall policy framework has yet been achieved. Peter Baume, for example has argued that:

Society requires evaluation within government in considerable part to help satisfy the need for trust in government: the community needs to know whether government deserves to be trusted, and part of that knowledge derives from evaluations of the success rate of government programs. What constitutes ‘success’ is

itself a political issue, and no amount of fancy managerial footwork can disguise the fact that evaluation is intended to help clarify political options, not just measure organisational efficiencies. (Baume, 1991: 35)

It is this feature of evaluation - its combination of technical analysis and value (or political) judgements - which makes its application to areas of social policy, much of which is premised on the same combination of technique and values, both interesting and informative within the broader context which defines the scope of public policy.

In this paper, we explore how the 'new age' of evaluation might influence the development of policy and, more particularly, how it has affected the nature of the work of the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC). In order to do this, we need to spend a little time discussing the definitions of evaluation, of other policy-related research, and of evaluative research. This we do in Section 2. In Section 3, we proceed to describe how the program of research undertaken in the SPRC has changed over the last five years and how that has changed the broader funding and research profiles of the Centre as a whole. Attention is focused on the extent to which these changes reflect the growing importance of evaluation, as compared with other factors. We then go on to discuss in Section 4 two examples of SPRC research which illustrate the nature of its contribution to the evaluation of government social programs. Our main conclusions are summarised in Section 5.

## **2 Evaluation, Research and Evaluative Research**

The Australian Government defines program evaluation as 'a systematic assessment of program activities with the intention of assessing the continued relevance of objectives, assessing outcomes against those objectives, assessing alternative ways of achieving the objectives and deciding on the level of program resources' (Department of Finance, 1987: 3). It is clear from this definition that the scope of program evaluation extends far beyond what is included in conventional definitions of research. In particular, evaluation involves making political choices which fall outside of the scope of research. There are also value issues involved in evaluation which, whilst not absent from much social research, are

generally agreed to be kept separate from issues of research design, methodology, technique and interpretation.

Defining research itself is no easy task. Over time, it has become difficult to distinguish between research and what is better described as consultancy activity. Although most consultancies require the consultant to seek information and engage in problem-solving activities - both of which are legitimate components of most research endeavour - the fact that these exist does not, of itself, identify the work as research in the academic sense, any more than 'shopping around' for the best deal (which involves gathering information in order to solve a problem) constitutes research in its academic or scientific meaning.

Problems also arise in distinguishing between different types of research. There is a crucial distinction here (which is becoming of increasing significance in light of the funding trends within government) between commissioned research and sponsored research. These differ in the extent to which the specific research questions, the general research strategy and its detailed methodology (though generally not the topic of the research itself) are determined by the researcher rather than by the funding agency. Unlike consultancies, in competition for commissioned or sponsored research it is the inherent quality and merit of the research itself which generally determines who receives the grants.

These issues became apparent during the conduct of the recent review of the research effort of the Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing and Community Services with which one of us (Saunders) was involved (DHHCS, 1992a). Reaching an agreed definition of research occupied a good deal of the time and effort of the review committee which comprised both academics and bureaucrats. In the end, the committee settled on the definition which has been developed by the ABS which defines research as an investigation characterised by a systematic approach, with originality being a primary objective.

The review went on to note that:

The outcome of such research is new knowledge with or without a specific practical application of new or improved materials, products, devices, processes or services. This includes research undertaken for the express purpose of policy or program evaluation in

terms of effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness with the potential for modification of that policy or program. ... research and evaluation are part of an interactive relationship between consumer needs, policy and service delivery and may be undertaken at any stage in the cycle of the innovation, development, operation, evaluation and modification of a program or activity. (DHHCS,1992a: vii)

The fact that research and evaluation are explicitly acknowledged as distinct but overlapping and interactive activities is the **first** point to which we would want to draw attention. There is much more to research - even in an area like social policy, which focuses on empirical and practical issues of direct relevance to policy - than just evaluation: in the same way as there is a lot more to evaluation than just research. The experience we describe below is intended to illustrate the significance of these comments in the context of the evolution of the work of the SPRC since the late 1980s.

The **second**, and closely related issue we would like to address is the extent to which evaluation and policy-related research influences the formulation and implementation of policy. This concern with the roles of evaluation and research in the policy and reform processes reflects a dilemma which is at the heart of the new age of evaluation: to what extent can decision making become a purely technical process, placed (and left) in the hands of qualified researchers?

We would argue from our own experience that despite the Department of Finance's directives to use evaluation to improve the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of government programs (Department of Finance, 1994: 1-14), the formulation and implementation of policy in Australia, especially in the social policy field, continues to be a highly political process. Unless political rights are to be surrendered entirely to technical experts, this is perhaps as it should be in a democratic society. Understanding the continual dilemma of political decision-making is important if we are to be aware of the limitations of evaluation and other policy-related research. Research has an important role to play in identifying the weaknesses and limitations of current policies, thereby contributing to improvements in policy, but it is misguided to think that research has the ability (or capability) to replace the political aspects of policy formulation.



### 3 The Structure of the SPRC

From its inception in 1980, the SPRC has had a close relation with government, particularly with the DSS, the Department through which the Centre receives its core funding. The Centre's mandate and structure is set out in an agreement between the Commonwealth and the University of New South Wales which spells out the scope of the Centre's research and other activities. The nature and operation of the agreement is reviewed every five years, a process which acts as *de facto* evaluation of the Centre's performance. Re-negotiation of the contract then follows, and is guided by, the review itself.

The scope of the research mandate covers a very broad area of social policy research, including research on the effects of social and economic changes on the nature of Australian society and the need for social programs, on the provision, administration, funding and coordination of social programs, on their effectiveness and on the social welfare aspects of the operation of other government and non-government programs. It is noticeable that while the identified areas of research have relevance to the evaluation of social programs and policies evaluation as such is not identified as a separate category of research.

In light of its core funding by the Commonwealth, a strong relation between the Centre and government is to be expected. Since 1990, that relationship has become closer, reflecting changes to the Centre's funding arrangements. Prior to 1990, an annual core grant was received each year to fund the Centre to undertake research and related activities (publications, conferences and postgraduate supervision ) as spelt out in the agreement. For the five-year agreement period between 1990 and 1994, 12.5 per cent of the total core grant was allocated for research on specific topics in the field of social security which were negotiated and agreed each year between the Centre and DSS. Under the new agreement, which began operation in 1995, that percentage has been increased to 20 per cent and the Centre has also been expected to raise external contract research funds equivalent each year to 20 per cent of the base grant from DSS.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The base grant covers that component of the core grant which is not allocated for commissioned research on social security.

Together, these changes represent a shift away from core funding to an element which is akin to commissioned research as generally understood. The main difference is that the actual allocation of funds each year for the commissioned research is guaranteed under the terms of the agreement. The changes have altered the funding profile of the Centre, as well as the nature of its overall research program. Any other outcome would be surprising. Over the six years to 1994, contract research funding has varied from around 22 per cent to almost 60 per cent of the core DSS grant. The average over the entire period is just under 35 per cent.

Over the period 1990 to 1994, a total of 35 separate projects undertaken within the Centre were funded externally.<sup>2</sup> The amount of funding received for these external contract projects has varied enormously, with project grants ranging from less than \$2,000 to over \$400,000 - although this latter grant was in support of a project which continued for almost four years and included funding from several separate sources. The 35 projects can, with some admitted blurring at the edges, be separated into three broad categories: projects involving research in the general area of social policy; projects which are closely related to policy in their focus and conception; and projects which are formal program evaluations as such.

An example of a project in the first category is the study of social and economic inequalities, a large four-year project funded by DSS with supplementary support from the Sidney Myer Foundation and the AMP Society. An example of the second is the study on the development of service benchmarks for use in the Home and Community Care (HACC) Program, funded by what is now the Department of Human Services and Health (DHS). An example of the third category, formal program evaluations, is the evaluation of the Community Options Projects in New South Wales, also funded by DHS.

If this approximate three-way classification is accepted, the number of projects which received funding in each of the three categories is 23, eight and four, respectively. Thus, only about ten per cent of all externally funded projects have been formal evaluations. Most have been of general

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2 This number ignores those projects commissioned by DSS, as well as those which have received annual funding from the Department of Human Services and Health (DHS) as part of a program of research on topics of specific interest to that portfolio.

research interest and only about one third have had any direct and immediate relevance to policy development.

However, when the level of funding is considered, as opposed to the nature of the research project itself, a very different picture emerges. This may come as no surprise to the audience at this conference, but it was so for us and, we think, for our colleagues also. The average grant for those projects which were evaluations was far in excess of the average for the other projects - even after adjusting for differences in the duration of each project. Indeed, as a general rule, the average grant size increases as one moves from the first to the third of the three categories described above.

The four projects which were formal program evaluations were:

- the evaluation of the Community Options Projects (COPs) in NSW, as mentioned above;
- the evaluation of the Individual Needs Analysis (INA) pilots;
- the evaluation of the Community Organisation Support Program (COSP); and
- the evaluation of the Demonstration Projects in Integrated Community Care in NSW.

The first and last of these were funded by the NSW Government, while the remaining two were funded by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health. The first three evaluations are complete and the fourth is currently entering its second (of three) years. Some of the features of this project will be described later.

In addition to these four projects, in the late 1980s one of the authors (Saunders) was also involved in the First Triennial Review of the HACC Program (HACC Review Working Group, 1988). This review could also be seen as an evaluation, even though its focus was primarily on the administrative aspects of the program and establishing guidelines for its medium-term development. Because of both the nature and timing of this review, which was established along the lines of a national administrative inquiry in 1988, it will not be considered in the subsequent discussion.

What general lessons have been learnt from the SPRC experience of the last five years? Together, the total funding for the four evaluations listed

above exceeds \$650,000 - a not inconsiderable sum, particularly in an era where funding of university-based research has been severely constrained. But for the purpose of this discussion, the nature of the projects is of greater interest than the level of funding. The first point to note is that all the evaluations are in the general area of research on the community sector, and on community care in particular, and not in the social security field from which we generally receive the majority of our funding. Why is this?

In trying to answer this question, it needs to be remembered that the Centre receives its core funding through DSS and has established its main reputation in research relating to the concerns of that Department. This having been said, it also needs to be emphasised that a conscious effort was made in the late 1980s to build up the Centre's expertise in research on community care. However, the main reason for the Centre's success in attracting funding for evaluations in the community care field appears to relate more to the nature of research in that area than to the nature of the SPRC itself - at least that is our working hypothesis. This reflects two factors.

The first concerns the fact that research on community care lends itself more to the conduct of evaluations by organisations like the SPRC. This reflects the fragmented nature of community care in Australia which encourages the establishment of a series of new, localised and generally small scale experimental pilot projects (Saunders and Fine, 1992). In contrast, in the field of social security, where there is a long tradition of national schemes which both embody and respect individual rights, the scope for small scale experimental policy innovations is much more limited - both by considerations of equity as well as by the formal requirements of the *Social Security Act*. In the field of social security, policy changes have to be large, almost by definition. Where evaluations are conducted, this requires organisations which have access to far greater resources than research centres like the SPRC.

This factor is reinforced by another, which is that the provision of what is now referred to as 'human services care' is undertaken by both State and Commonwealth governments. This has made it all the more easy for the SPRC to establish its presence in the field in New South Wales and become an attractive place to locate some of the evaluative research which, in the community care field, can be conducted at the State level yet still be claimed to have national significance.

All this having been said, it is also important to emphasise that in the field of social policy, single holistic evaluations of new policy initiatives are relatively rare. Much more common is the situation where an entire body of research in a number of different areas is brought to bear when considering the success of an existing policy, or the design of a new one. It is from this perspective that one can begin to grasp the contribution of other SPRC research to the evaluation - in this less formal but equally important sense - of Australian policies in the income support area. This is what we mean when we refer to evaluative research, as distinct from evaluations which involve research.

Over the last five years, the Centre has submitted tenders to several formal evaluations of new DSS policies, to date without success. This may reflect partly on the nature of our expertise, which has tended to be more at the academic end of the income support research spectrum. It also probably partly reflects our size, and possibly the (incorrect!) perception that we are seen as being too close to government. Such perceptions can be crucial in the circumstances where independence (real and perceived) is central to the legitimacy of the entire exercise.

The main point to emerge from this discussion is that the Centre has undertaken a body of research which has been of relevance to the evaluation and effectiveness of social security policies, even though these have not been policy evaluations in the formal sense of the term. We now turn to a more detailed consideration of some of this research.

## **4 Evaluative Research at the SPRC**

### **Social Security Research**

Looking back over the last five years, there has been a clear sense of purpose in the body of research which the SPRC has undertaken for the DSS under the commissioned funding arrangement described earlier. This was not always apparent at the time, and it has to be acknowledged that the processes have at times been frustrating for all concerned. This was almost inevitable, given that it was the first serious attempt to bring together researchers and bureaucrats to agree on a program of research with a pre-determined budget which had to be co-ordinated with the existing research programs of both institutions. The need to respect confidentiality

associated with new policy initiatives also meant that the negotiations were, at times, not as free and open as would have been desirable.

Despite these problems, a case can be made in support of the claim that the arrangement has, overall, been beneficial for both parties. From the SPRC perspective, it has brought us closer to the policy process (if only marginally) while it has begun to bring home to the public servants a better understanding (again, if only marginally) of the meaning of academic research and the importance of methodological issues which can too often be seen as of secondary importance in the policy process. The main practical problem has been the perennial one, that the officials with whom one has to deal keep changing, so that one always has to be prepared to go back to first base and start the whole discussion again.

If there is one theme which has featured very heavily in our DSS-commissioned research, it is the issue of the effects of the social security system on incentives to work. Of the 17 separate projects undertaken since 1990, about one third of them have been concerned with aspects of the work incentive issue. In the early years, a good deal of research was undertaken on the issue of the benefit replacement rate - the extent to which the benefit system was replacing the work incomes of those on benefit - and what this implied for policy. At the time, this work represented a natural extension of research which had been previously undertaken for the Office of the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC) on replacement rates (Saunders, Bradbury and Whiteford, 1989) and the related issue of the poverty trap (Whiteford, Bradbury and Saunders, 1989).

This work thus built on expertise which already existed in the Centre and generally was the result of an original suggestion made by the Centre. The research on benefit replacement rates - of which the most recent example is the study by Bradbury (1993) - is best described as assisting DSS to keep abreast of the issue and alerting it to areas where problems were likely to be most acute. It cannot be claimed to have helped shape the development of policy because the most significant reform in the area, the 1987 family package, pre-dates most of the research, although the subsequent extension of income-related family payments can be seen as a response to problems identified in the earlier research on replacement rates.

Whether the research has prevented changes which might otherwise have occurred is not something that we are in a position to comment on. What does seem clear is that the research has helped to clarify the concept itself, assisted in identifying the replacement rate issue as a policy concern and has developed a methodology for calculating replacement rates which others can replicate.

More recently, the SPRC program of DSS commissioned research has focused on the work disincentives facing the wives of those in receipt of benefit. A major survey of DSS clients was undertaken in 1993, the main results from which are shortly to be published by the Centre (King, Bradbury and McHugh, 1995; King and McHugh, 1995) following the release of one aspect of the results in Bradbury (1995). The whole question of how the existence of means-tested benefits assessed on the basis of the circumstances of the family unit as a whole has affected the labour supply behaviour of secondary earners (normally wives) has been a major research and policy issue, not only in Australia but also in many overseas countries (Saunders, 1995).

Over the last few years, our research in this area has concentrated on surveying DSS clients to try and understand their motivations and the factors which influence their labour supply behaviour. The research has often tended to be too small scale to allow any firm conclusions to be drawn, although it has shed some new light on the nature of the underlying processes. A key feature of the research has been that it has involved interviews of representative samples of DSS clients - an approach which has been made possible as a result of the closer links between DSS and the SPRC under the Centre's post-1990 funding arrangements. Without those new arrangements, it would have been much more difficult, and perhaps impossible, for us to have gained (indirect) access to DSS administrative data to the extent that has actually occurred.<sup>3</sup>

This increased use of administrative data for research purposes has not been unproblematic, particularly in the area of client confidentiality, where major problems still exist in achieving a balance which is consistent with the provisions of the *Social Security Act* but allows legitimate research to be pursued. However, there is now a greater appreciation within the Department of the value of its administrative databases, a development that

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3 It should be emphasised that enormous effort has gone into ensuring that privacy provisions have not been comprised in any way.

is a major advance which can be linked to the Department of Finance's broader evaluation strategy (Department of Finance, 1994: 2).

The following discussion focuses in a little more detail on two of the recent DSS commissioned 'work incentive' projects. The first of these is the study, which has already been referred to, of the employment behaviour of the wives of unemployed men. The second is a longitudinal survey of women married to male DSS clients, designed to track their labour supply responses to the package of social security reforms announced in last year's *Working Nation* White Paper and introduced in July this year (Australia, Prime Minister, 1994). This latter study has only just commenced its fieldwork stage, the first wave of interviews having taken place in August. At this stage, the plan is to follow the same group of clients over the next three years with six waves of interviews conducted at approximately six-monthly intervals. This will begin to fill one of the biggest gaps in our current social security research base - the longitudinal study of the living circumstances, attitudes and behaviour of DSS clients and other low-income individuals.

The view that the pre-1995 benefit structure acted as a severe work disincentive for women married to unemployed men has long been regarded as a self-evident truth by some policy analysts and commentators, including many within DSS itself. We have tended to be less convinced that the available evidence allows such a clear conclusion to be drawn. Certainly, most of the evidence is circumstantial, depending as it does on statistical associations rather than on rigorous analysis of the data within a framework which allows cause and effect to be identified and distinguished.

Although it is true that the employment rates of the wives of DSS clients are lower than those of wives generally, it does not follow from this that the reason for the difference is to be found in the structure of social security benefits. Other factors may be responsible - in part if not in large part. The research task thus involves identifying these factors so that they can be controlled for to see whether the association with the benefit system still remains important.

In this context, SPRC research reported by Bradbury (1995) has produced evidence which suggests that a good deal of the difference between the behaviour of the wives of employed and unemployed men existed before



the latter have had an opportunity to become acquainted with the way that the benefit system operates. Such evidence suggests that there is a need to consider the issue more systematically.

This was the main objective of the study by King, Bradbury and McHugh (1995). Part of that study involved the analysis of DSS administrative data extending over a three year period from June 1991. The basis for the initial sample was the more than 6,700 men who commenced receipt of unemployment benefit in the six weeks prior to mid-June 1991. By the beginning of 1994, when the last wave of data was analysed, the number had fallen to 1,685, or only 25 per cent of the original sample. The study identified a range of effects which might explain the differences in the observed labour supply behaviour of the wives of this cohort of men. The conclusion reached was that while most of the identified characteristics affected the employment decisions of some of the sample, their combined net effect was small.

In its final stage, a group of 75 women were interviewed directly during November and December 1993. Most of the women who were interviewed were over 40 and had dependent children. The 'bottom line' of the survey results was that while most of the variation in the employment rates of these women could be related to either their own characteristics or the employment status of their partner, these effects largely offset each other. This does not mean that each effect was itself unimportant, only that their combined effect was. Changing the structure of benefits could thus lead to substantial net effects. The nature of the survey and the size of the sample prevented any firmer conclusions being reached. However, the study also concluded that employment behaviour was more responsive to the experience of labour market disadvantage than to any disincentives related to social security provisions.

This suggests that the most important aspects of the White Paper reforms introduced this year are likely to be those associated with the enhancement and extension of labour market assistance, rather than the changes to social security provisions for married women. This issue is being addressed, if only indirectly, in the longitudinal survey of DSS clients which the SPRC has recently commenced. The main focus of this project is on the extent to which a group of married women have knowledge of, and adjust their labour market behaviour to, the *Working Nation* reforms, specifically the introduction of Parenting Allowance, the extension of the Partner

Allowance and the changes to the income test which lie at the heart of the social security component of the package.

It would, of course, have been preferable (at least from a research perspective) to report that this study had been conducted **before** the reforms had been introduced, not afterwards. The reality, unfortunately, is all too often that the research gets done afterwards, if at all. An important consequence of this is that research can become a threat to governments, particularly if it identifies shortcomings in policies which have already been implemented. This means that the political aspect of research can dominate its underlying scientific merit, in the eyes of both researchers and the government.

This is not to suggest that governments should wait until researchers have resolved all of the issues before policy is reformed. If they adopted this position, they would, we fear, be waiting for a very long time - almost certainly longer than the electoral cycle: probably even longer than the life cycle! The fact of the matter is that many of the crucial research questions, at least in the area of social policy, will not be resolved because of the nature of social research itself.<sup>4</sup>

At our recent Social Policy Conference, the Prime Minister observed that the policy reform process has no end. It is not a discrete task which can be completed and moved beyond, but rather an on-going and evolving process which must be constantly grappled with. The same is true of the social policy research which can inform - but should never dictate - policy. That at least is one of the lessons which we have learnt as a result of the program of policy-related social security research described here.

### **Research on Community Care**

As mentioned earlier, in the field of community care there has been a somewhat greater emphasis on the conduct of formal evaluations of both projects and programs. But here, too, the links between research and commissioned evaluations, and the implementation of further policy decisions have often appeared tenuous.

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4 One of the best known of the recent examples of this is probably the US negative income tax experiments which cost US taxpayers an enormous amount without providing much of a return to them in the form of a tax system which caused fewer disincentive effects.

Possibly the most dramatic example of policy decisions being made independently of the relevant evaluation occurred during the conduct of the evaluation of the Community Options Program in New South Wales (Graham, Ross and Payne, 1992). Community Options is the term used in most Australian States to describe what, at the time of its introduction, was an innovative program involving the brokerage of services by case managers allocated an individual budget for each of a limited number of community care clients considered at risk of institutionalisation. At the time the SPRC was commissioned to undertake the evaluation there were 18 pilot projects operating in the State. Within weeks of the evaluation commencing this number was increased significantly, reaching 48 projects in New South Wales. Clearly, policy makers were not waiting for the results of the evaluation to tell them whether or not to expand the program.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss the importance of such evaluative activity. The *National Evaluation of Community Options Projects*, which drew together the results of separate evaluations of the Community Options Program conducted in each of the six Australian States, observed:

Community Options projects have not stood still since the evaluations and some observations may no longer be valid for all projects. ... Developments have [also] occurred in both the residential and community care sectors. For these reasons the results and conclusions presented in this report should be appreciated within the limitations imposed by the scope of the evaluation exercise. The report will be used immediately as the basis for the development by the Federal and State and Territory Governments of new guidelines for existing community options projects. ... It is hoped the report will provide information to assist HACC service providers to further develop integrated assessment

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5 It was not the inadequacies of the planned evaluation which caused policy makers to make crucial decisions before the results were known. The evaluators acknowledged that the nine months allowed for the conduct of the evaluation was inadequate to introduce a longitudinal study design which could inform decisions on the outcomes for clients, and lamented the absence of a controlled experimental design for the evaluation which could have permitted the evaluation to compare the effectiveness of this form of service provision with others (Graham, Ross and Payne, 1992: 5).

processes and more co-ordinated service delivery arrangements. The report will also assist the development of case management more generally in the areas of community and residential care. (DHHCS, 1992b: 2-3)

The evaluation of Community Options, therefore, seems to have been at once both more and less significant than is often allowed for in the classic paradigm of the policy innovation process (Baume, 1991). While it fell short of being the single decisive voice on the suitability of a new policy initiative, evaluative activities provided policy makers and service planners with much needed detail on the daily operation of the program in a range of different settings. The evaluation also confirmed, by and large, the appropriateness of most of the decisions associated with the program's introduction. It was also considered likely to provide leads for other service providers struggling with the issue of a fragmented system of service delivery. In this sense, the evaluation appears to have operated as a relatively cost-effective alternative to the traditional form of bureaucratic accountability. A short but rather intense burst of evaluative activity thus provided an alternative to reliance on a permanent, costly and very cumbersome hierarchy of command to supervise the daily operation of a range of independent agencies.

Experience with the conduct of the evaluation of the Individual Needs Projects, developed on a pilot basis across Australia (Mitchell and Graham, 1993) was rather different. The evaluation found that for a variety of reasons few of the projects had achieved their objectives. This was, apparently, welcome news for the national policy makers, as it had been decided not to proceed with further expansion of the program in its current form well before the evaluation was completed.

The evaluation of the Demonstration Projects in Integrated Community Care for frail older people and people with disabilities in New South Wales, an evaluation project currently underway, gives a rather contrasting example of how the policy agenda is moved along by features other than the fine detail of information carefully collected and analysed as part of the evaluative exercise. To overcome the problems of the existing fragmented system of provision in the field of community care, and to enhance the effectiveness of service provision to people remaining in their own home, a series of demonstration projects in integrated community care have been

developed over the past three years. Both the Demonstration Projects and their methods of implementation represent an exciting, innovative and economically responsible approach to policy development, which is likely to attract considerable attention from service providers and policy makers throughout Australia and possibly beyond. These trials, based on a grass roots reform process, are quite distinct from the managerialist approach so often proposed by enthusiastic politicians and senior public servants. For government, which has encouraged and sponsored the reforms, as well as for the SPRC evaluators, the implementation of the projects has been a roller coaster ride of patient waiting and urgent deadlines.

The state of play at the time of writing this paper is that the preliminary work has been completed and final arrangements are being made for the start of the trials in nine separate regions of the State. Suddenly, the national agenda of the new Council of Australian Government (COAG) program, which promises to introduce three new streams of 'coordinated care' to replace over sixty programs which currently operate in the fields of medical and community care (DHS, 1995), threatens to overtake the carefully developed trials. Like the NSW Demonstration Projects, the COAG proposals are said to be intended to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service provision by developing a more coordinated approach to the provision of care. Amongst their numerous other features, the COAG reforms are distinguished by their even more ambitious scope and by the requirement that a system of funding be introduced which is based on the control of a capped budget for the purchase of services, an 'envelope of funds' in the COAG terminology. Although the COAG proposals also call for carefully evaluated trials, the new initiatives threaten to diminish the impact of the NSW Demonstration Projects, with the potential to undermine the impact that a carefully planned innovation and evaluation might have had on the development of policy.

## **5 Conclusion**

It is clear that evaluation and policy research are playing an increasingly important part in the development and implementation of policy decisions. If, as the Department of Finance has indicated, there is to be a continuing concern with the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of government operated or funded programs, it seems likely that the

importance of program evaluations and of policy related research will continue to grow.

This 'new age' of government reliance on evaluation and research may reflect the new structures of governance that are emerging, in which direct provision by government agencies is increasingly less important. Or it may simply be a by-product of the financial pressures experienced by government, or represent the application of new more effective techniques to the ever more technical and complex nature of policy that is emerging in Australia as in other comparable economies. However, despite the emphasis placed on evaluation by the Department of Finance and other bodies, the approach is likely to remain only part of the policy process. Other forms of research will undoubtedly continue to complement the contribution made by evaluative research, but these activities, too, are also unlikely to dominate the formulation and implementation of policy.

Although evaluations can assist in achieving efficiency, and enhancing the cost-effectiveness and appropriateness of government social policy programs, the development of new responses to social and economic problems continues to be a matter which eludes scientific prediction. This is a problem familiar to social scientists, although perhaps a little less familiar to colleagues in the clinical and biological sciences. As in most other areas of social life, the development of new policy responses continues to be too complex, too multifaceted and too unpredictable to be neatly summed up in generalised scientific statements or laws.

In the absence of such an understanding, often the best that can be done is for policy makers, those responsible for the implementation of policy and researchers to draw on research and other relevant experience to propose a particular intervention and monitor how this works out in practice. Achieving this will involve the various parties in engaging in a dialogue over their respective roles in, and contributions to, the evaluation process. The results of a rigorous evaluation may hopefully then reveal whether that particular intervention was successful or not. It is not, however, possible to be certain whether the intervention would have been equally successful if, for example, a different approach had been taken. Attempts to rigorously evaluate policy initiatives and determine the efficacy of specific interventions for particular target groups generally amount at present to little better than a series of educated guesses and systematic attempts at trial and error. In short, despite the increased importance of evaluations

and applied research, policy development remains very much an art, rather than a science. Moral, and even more so, political and financial decisions which influence the agenda for decision-making continue to be a prominent and probably inevitable element of policy making in this field.

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