Facilitated Panel Discussion: Measuring the effectiveness of mentoring interventions.
YMN Conference 2013

1. *Given the push at government and policy level for evidence-based programmes and assessing programme effectiveness, what in your view constitutes good evidence?*

There are many different things that contribute to creating good quality evidence so it's incredibly important as an evaluator or as someone evaluating an evaluation to carefully consider the complex picture that lies behind the evidence. We often get caught up in arguments over which evaluation designs are superior to others, for instance this idea that a randomised controlled trial is the gold standard and the only means of obtaining good evidence about programme effectiveness or that quantitative methods with large samples are superior to small-scale qualitative studies. I believe that various types of research designs can contribute in different ways to our understanding of whether a programme is effective but a research design, in and of itself, does not produce good evidence. We really need to look past this when evaluating the quality of programme evaluations and assess the quality of the evaluation's implementation.

We need to ask things like: Did the evaluation process go as planned?; What types of participants are represented by the findings?; What types of participants are not represented?; Are these findings likely to be applicable to other types of participants?; Is the quality of the data obtained from participants' good?; Are we able to triangulate the findings or see that the results are consistent across different information sources?; Is the quality of the analysis good?; Is the interpretation of the findings comprehensive? Are alternative explanations considered in light of the complexity of the programme context? Are the limitations clearly outlined and carefully considered?

It's also important to look beyond outcomes when considering whether a programme is "evidence-based". I think, first and foremost, the programme design should reflect ideas that are supported by research. I would also look to see if a clear rationale for the programme was articulated –this should justify the importance of various programme strategies or activities in connection to desired outcomes. The rationale should also be supported by good quality research.

2. *What would you recommend that programmes/evaluators do to improve research quality?*

As mentioned above, I think many things can be done to improve research quality but one thing that I'll touch on here is the need to be creative in thinking about ways to really engage participants in the research process and to show participants that there is a genuine interest in hearing their voices. I would hope that this would increase the participants' motivation to share their experiences and provide good quality information.

I think we do this much better with qualitative designs than we do with lengthy standardised questionnaires but it's certainly possible to incorporate more engaging aspects in these types of approaches.

We need to also remember that every mentor-mentee relationship reflects a unique intervention because every relationship is different. While average effects are useful in discerning whether an overall programme model works well for the average participant, I see great value in in-depth explorations of different mentor-mentee relationships to better understand how the relationship dynamics impact outcomes for both mentors and mentees. I feel that in focusing only on average effects for an overall mentee group, we overlook important pieces of the puzzle.

3. *How do programmes establish a research agenda / research culture?*

Working together as an organisation to make explicit a theory of how the program is presumed to work is a great starting point. This could entail:

- specifying or reviewing the program objectives
- considering how the objectives are tied to the desired outcomes
- thinking about which programme processes drive those outcomes
- discussion of how those outcomes could be effectively captured
- reviewing relevant research literature to see if it supports the programme logic

This can help focus the research on realistic outcomes and on questions that are important to the people involved with the organisation.

There are many useful resources one could draw on to begin thinking more carefully about these questions and many are easily found through an Internet search. Here are a few:

http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2010/w-k-kellogg-foundation-evaluation-handbook.aspx

http://www.cdc.gov/eval/framework/index.htm

http://ctb.ku.edu/en/default.aspx

It may be useful to bring an evaluation researcher on board to facilitate some of these discussions, ask the hard questions and prompt critical reflection about the programme.

4. *What is more important evaluating programme processes or evaluating outcomes/effectiveness? How are these different?*

The outcomes are the desired results and the processes represent how to achieve them. Personally, I think the most interesting evaluations are the ones that look at the links between processes and outcomes because that is where the most meaningful learning occurs. To only look at outcomes tells little about what worked or did not work. If the findings suggest a programme does not work it is difficult to identify the source of the

problem – it could be in the programme theory, or the delivery or it could be a problem with the measures and research design.

5. ***What role does culture play in research?***

In my view culture plays a big role in all human interactions and experiences. It influences how a researcher views a programme, the methods they choose, and the interpretations they make. It influences how programme sponsors or funders view the programme and the research - what they consider counts as "good" evidence and/or "valuable" outcomes. Culture also influences how participants experience a programme or how they engage with a mentor. These should all be considered when conducting research.

6. ***Given the cost associated with good quality research, what advice would you give to programmes to help minimise these costs?***

Two recommendations:

Build research protocols (including ethics protocols) into current processes so information can be collected as part of the day-to-day programme operations. It may be that you are already collecting useful information thus a stock-take of information that has already been collected could be a good starting point. A researcher could then be brought on board to assess if it can be analysed in a meaningful way.

Try partnering with universities to involve postgraduate students in completing pieces of work for their research qualifications. Recognise that these partnerships may come with trade-offs (i.e. longer time frames, academic publications of the work).