



TEF Scoping Research

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**September
2020**



Theatre
Education
Forum

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Executive Summary

- The TEF Scoping research took place over two months from July-September 2020. It examined the evaluation and research activities that are taking place in Learning Departments in theatres in England, invited by the Theatre Education Forum.
- The aims of the research were to explore approaches and attitudes towards evaluation, as well as to consider recurring themes and shared interests across the sector, and identify aspirations, challenges and new lines of inquiry in the current environment.
- To explore these issues Professor Helen Nicholson and Dr Sara Reimers of Royal Holloway, University of London analysed 21 evaluation or research reports from eight TEF theatres, launched an online survey for TEF members, and conducted two follow-up focus groups.
- Learning departments work on a wide range of activities and with many different beneficiaries, as a result they must be adept at speaking about their work in a variety of ways, employing the language of different social agenda, for example wellbeing or mental health, in order to respond to funders' requirements.
- The majority of respondents (73%) were working in organisations that do not have a research or evaluation strategy, though the majority of respondents (91%) did measure their success against predetermined criteria.
- Focus group respondents reported feeling most confident at using quantitative methods in their approach to evaluation, but it was noteworthy that methodologies focussed around performance, such as practice as research, were not widely used. A number of respondents expressed concern that their methods are not suitably robust.
- Evaluation reports serve a variety of functions, including advocacy and improving practice, but predominantly served to justify the funder's investment. Given this agenda, reports tended to focus on the outcomes of activities rather than the activities themselves, which arguably restricts the reports' value in helping to improve practice.
- Three main challenges to evaluation were identified, these were:
 1. Capacity: the time and resources available for evaluation activities
 2. Funding: the cost of evaluation activities and the way in which funders' varied reporting demands result in a piecemeal approach to evaluation
 3. Methods and Scope: the absence of a strategic approach to evaluation at an organisational level and the sense that the evaluation methods available are not suitably robust
- The report authors identify three key areas that could be developed to support evaluation practice:
 1. Create a flexible national strategy for evaluation, including a three-tier evaluation framework
 2. Facilitate a more productive relationship between HE and Learning departments
 3. Instigate a more joined-up approach to evaluation in theatres

Introduction

This scoping research responds to a conversation that began at the TEF meeting on 13 March 2020, which raised many important questions about the role of research and evaluation in theatres with learning, education, or participation departments. Evaluation is a regular part of this work, often on a project-by-project basis, and findings are used to evidence the quality of work and leverage funds. There is also a significant body of academic research about theatre education and related areas – often behind paywalls – and there is further scope to bring evaluations and research into closer alignment.

The aims of this scoping research was to:

- Document recurring themes and shared research interests across the sector;
- Bring together current evaluations and existing research to clarify the distinct role of theatre for communities and young people they serve;
- Identify aspirations, challenges and new lines of inquiry in the current environment

In differentiating between evaluation and research activities, we understand the former as responding to predetermined aims, while the latter is more open-ended. Evaluation is therefore defined as reporting on whether or not certain outcomes or goals have been realised, while research is defined as activities designed to address open-ended questions, sometimes developed in practice, and usually reflecting on the unexpected or unforeseen.

Methodology

Research for this project consisted of three stages:

- Analysing existing evaluation or research reports relating to the work of learning/education/participation departments to examine common themes and practices;
- Surveying heads of learning/education/participation departments to determine existing approaches to evaluation and any challenges faced;
- Conducting focus groups to further enrich our understanding of existing practice and to consider how practices could be developed in the future.

The research took place between July – September 2020. Members of the Theatre Education Forum were recruited via email as research participants.

We received twenty-one evaluation/research reports from eight theatres, with theatres sending between 2 and 3 reports for analysis. Reports were analysed to consider their author, audience, the activity evaluated, beneficiary and funder identities, evaluation or research methodologies, and the report's findings or conclusions.

We received eleven responses to the survey and undertook follow-up conversations with five of these respondents via two online focus groups, held in mid-September. Survey responses were analysed using SPSS and NVivo software. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed and have been analysed using NVivo software.

Theatre Education Activities

The twenty-one reports analysed evaluated a wide range of projects and are testament to the variety of activities undertaken by learning and participation departments. These activities serve a wide range of beneficiaries, from early years to elders and pensioners (see Fig.1).

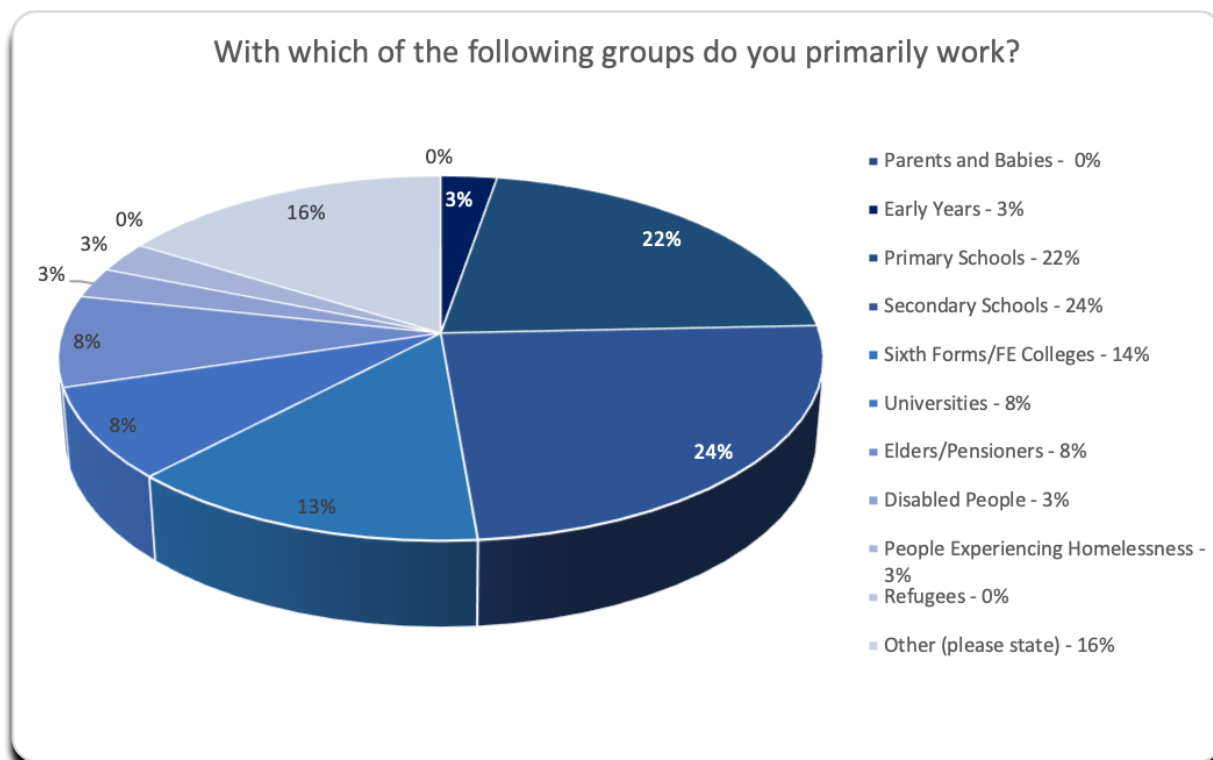


Figure 1 Activity Beneficiaries: with which of the following groups do you primarily work? Participants could select up to three choices.

The reports we received served a range of functions, roughly breaking down into four categories: internal evaluation reports, evaluation reports written for funders, evaluation undertaken by external evaluators for the organisation itself, and research in which the organisation participated conducted by a university-based researcher. Thus, learning departments do not always set the agenda for the evaluation criteria they explore and often respond to the interests or demands of funders. The functions of these reports are manifold and include securing/justifying funding, improving practice, and advocating for the value of participation. From focus group discussions it became clear that learning departments are skilled at rendering their work relevant to a range of beneficiaries and funding agendas. One participant spoke of a project which responded to a funder's call-out for projects engaging with a specific wellbeing agenda, but reflected that the activities run as part of the project were very similar to those of many other activities in the department. The bid was successful because it was presented through the lens of the funder's specific interest, rather than because the activities themselves were uniquely relevant to that particular agenda. In this way, learning and participation departments are adept at presenting their work through a variety of lenses for different audiences. As one focus group participant put it:

- FG4: One of the problems with the arts is that we are in constant slight conflict with "is it arts for social wellbeing" "is it arts for industry artistic skill" "is it arts for

personal skills and development” “is it arts for cultural capital in a community, is it an economic driver”? And that’s the problem, each time you try and evaluate something, actually it ticks several boxes, so how can you really argue very strongly about one, when actually you’re having to argue about ten? And if you do choose to do project-based work where you’ve only got one thing you’re looking at, even with that there is going to be a spectrum of impact, not just the amount of impact, but the type of impact.

Survey responses indicate that Learning Departments currently evaluate activities related to a range of social agendas.

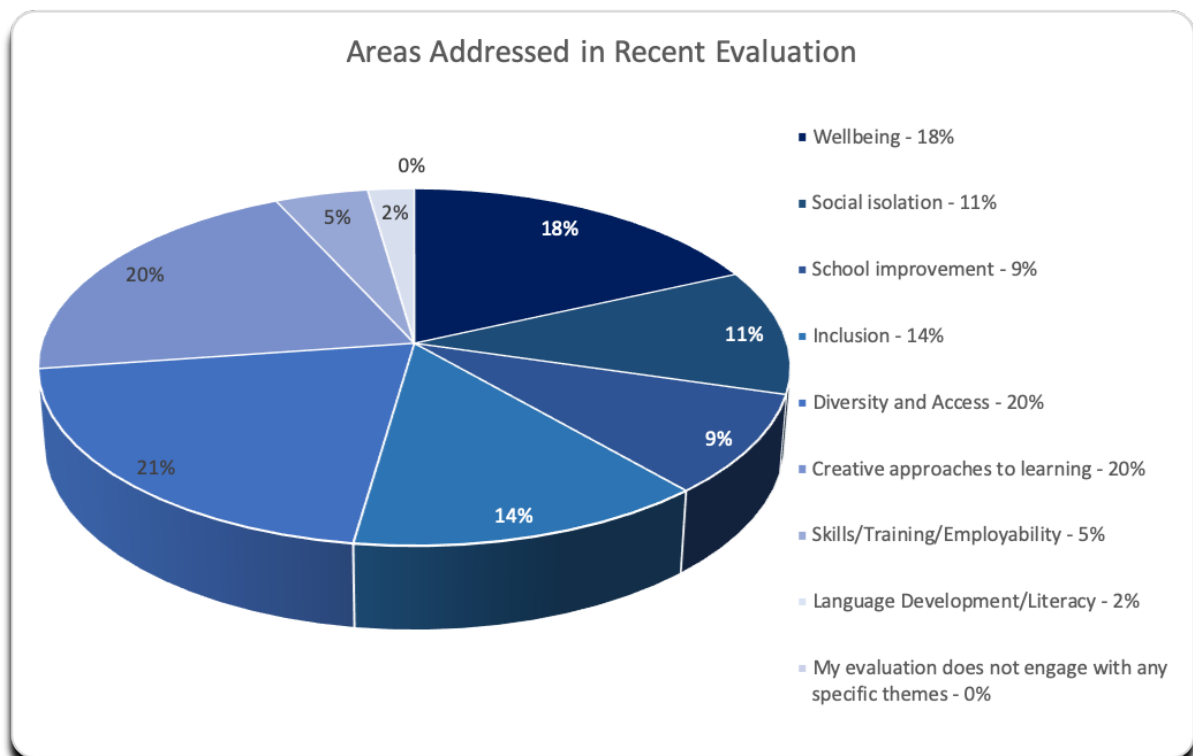


Figure 2 Which areas have you addressed in recent evaluations?

The skills and knowledge required to talk about particular social agendas take time and effort to develop. One participant expressed a degree of concern about the ways they adapt to different agendas, and whether this was sufficiently robust:

- FG2: I sometimes feel anxious about is that this is a slippery way that we talk about our work and that we use words like “wellbeing” quite glibly and how much that’s backed up. But in some ways, that’s why I’m quite interested in the idea of a more considered approach to research which does consider broad themes and that those change. [...] I’m not sure that in our programmes there is sufficient rigour in making sure we are understanding a new concept that’s being talked about. Do you see what I mean? It’s that it’s easy to adopt the language.

One possible way of countering this issue would be to collaborate with external organisations, such as charities, universities, or non-profit organisations, that have specific research or

evaluation expertise. From the reports we analysed, it is clear that such collaborations can yield valuable results. However, the language used by academic researchers may not necessarily speak to arts funders, as this survey respondent observed:

- S8: key disadvantages are that our approach to evaluation is piecemeal/ patchy, lacking theoretical basis or context except where we are working with external researchers, and while it helps us to develop the programme it doesn't always provide the evidence we need for funders or communications.¹

In cases where collaborations are not feasible or appropriate, having means to engage with existing research would be beneficial. As this focus group participant put it:

- FG4: “And to have a kind of database that arts organisations and arts and educational organisations can access and go “ok I need a bit of evidence about this, or I need some soundbites about this”, so that when you’ve got 100 words to describe something that could be a thesis, actually there’s an easy way of doing that.

Approaches to Evaluation

The wide variety of approaches adopted in the evaluation reports foreground the extent to which learning and participation departments must be adept at utilising a range of evaluation methods. Discussing this in the focus groups, it was suggested that:

- FG3: We’re all on top of the quantitative – you know, the numbers and figures that we have to submit on an annual basis – but less so in terms of reporting on quality and what that means. And because there isn’t a more robust and standardised framework for us, I think we all flounder.

The majority of survey respondents do not have a research or evaluation strategy at their theatres (see Fig. 3).

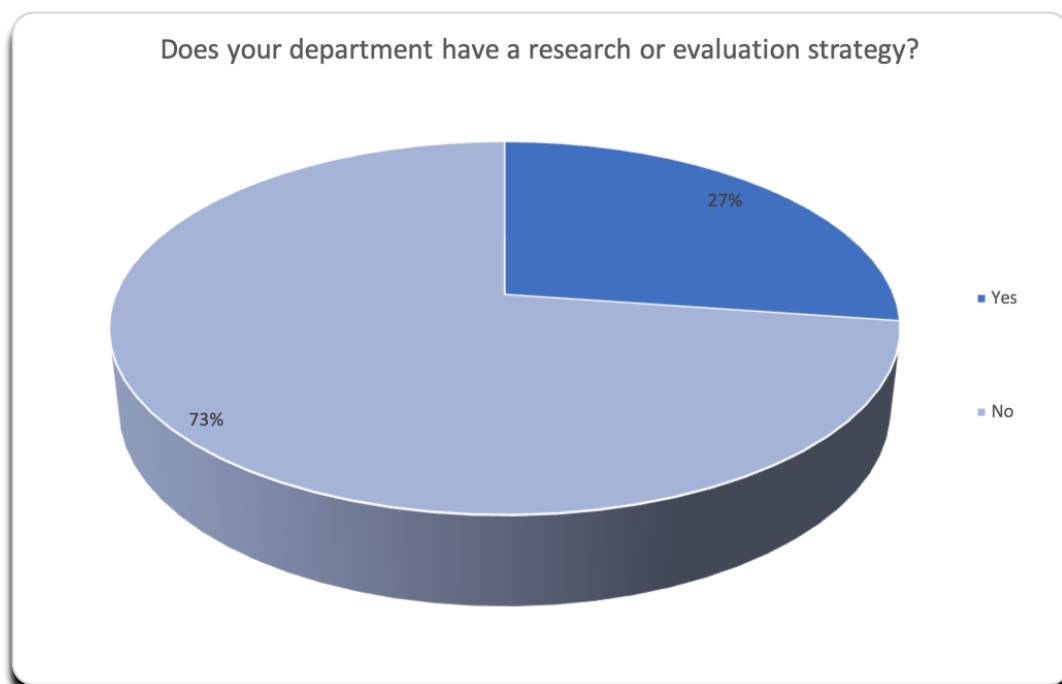


Figure 3 Does your department have an evaluation strategy?

Of the three institutions that did have an evaluation strategy, these were based around measuring the degree to which their aims and objectives have been met. Methodologies associated with these strategies include quantitative data gathering and the creation of case studies for reporting purposes, though on the whole strategies were presented as a series of aims rather than an approach or methodology.

In the reports we analysed, the methodologies used to evaluate work vary greatly, from quantitative overviews of participant attendance to qualitative approaches taken from the field of ethnography. All but one survey respondent use predetermined criteria against which to measure their success (see Fig.4).

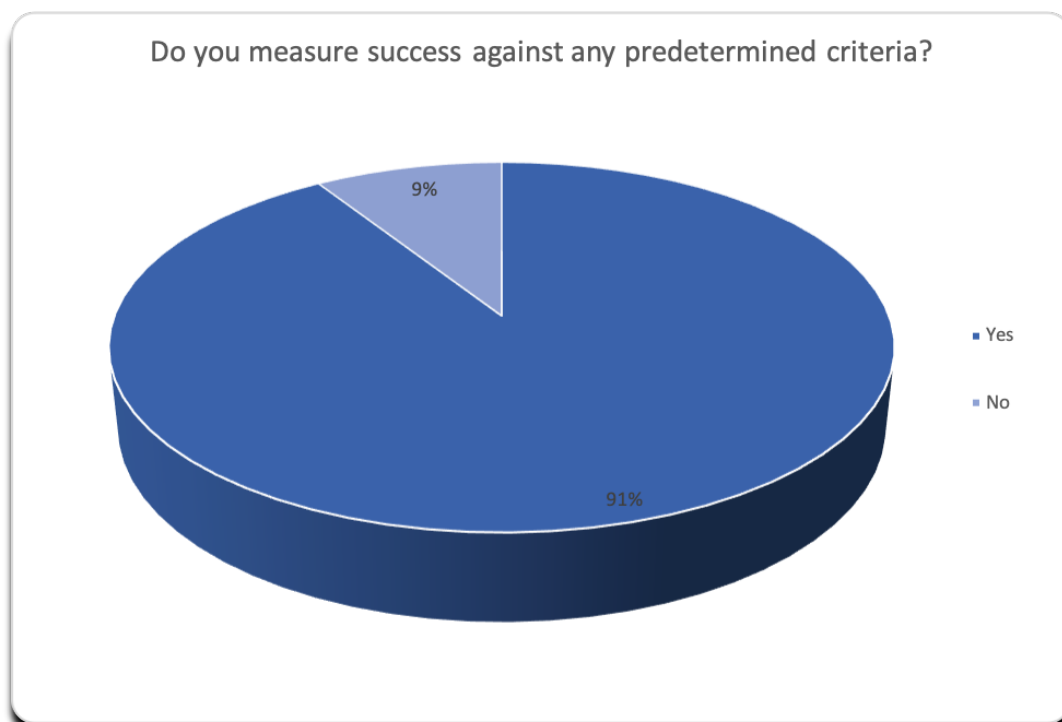


Figure 4 Do you measure success against any predetermined criteria?

The criteria used included theory of change and ACE 7 quality principles.ⁱⁱ From focus group discussions it is clear that these predetermined criteria play a valuable role in assuaging anxiety about what comprises valuable evidence. For example, concerns were raised that participant feedback is subjective and that quantitative methods are not robust enough:

- FG5: Other than what I'm saying and what the young person is saying I can't prove that. Somebody could challenge it. And that's where I come unstuck.

There was a sense from a number of respondents that without standardised guidance it can be difficult to evidence value and impact:

- FG4: What I'm not sure is whether there's frameworks to really maximise that from a robust interrogation research point of view and that always seems to be the conflict and that's where we fall down on perceptions of being a bit wishy washy and not really having the evidence behind us.

These responses suggest that departments lack confidence when it comes to research methods and rely on evaluation toolkits (such as the theory of change model) that anticipate a direct and linear relationship between input (the drama activity) and outcome or change (such as improved wellbeing, raising attendance at school and so on). Responses also indicated a hierarchical understanding of evidence in which quantitative approaches are deemed more rigorous than qualitative methods.

Audiences for Evaluation

The multiple uses – and audiences – of evaluation reports are evidenced in the responses to the survey question “How do you use the evaluation that you undertake?”. Respondents were invited to tick up to three fields – advocacy, improving practice, and funding – and all but one respondent selected all three (see Fig.5).

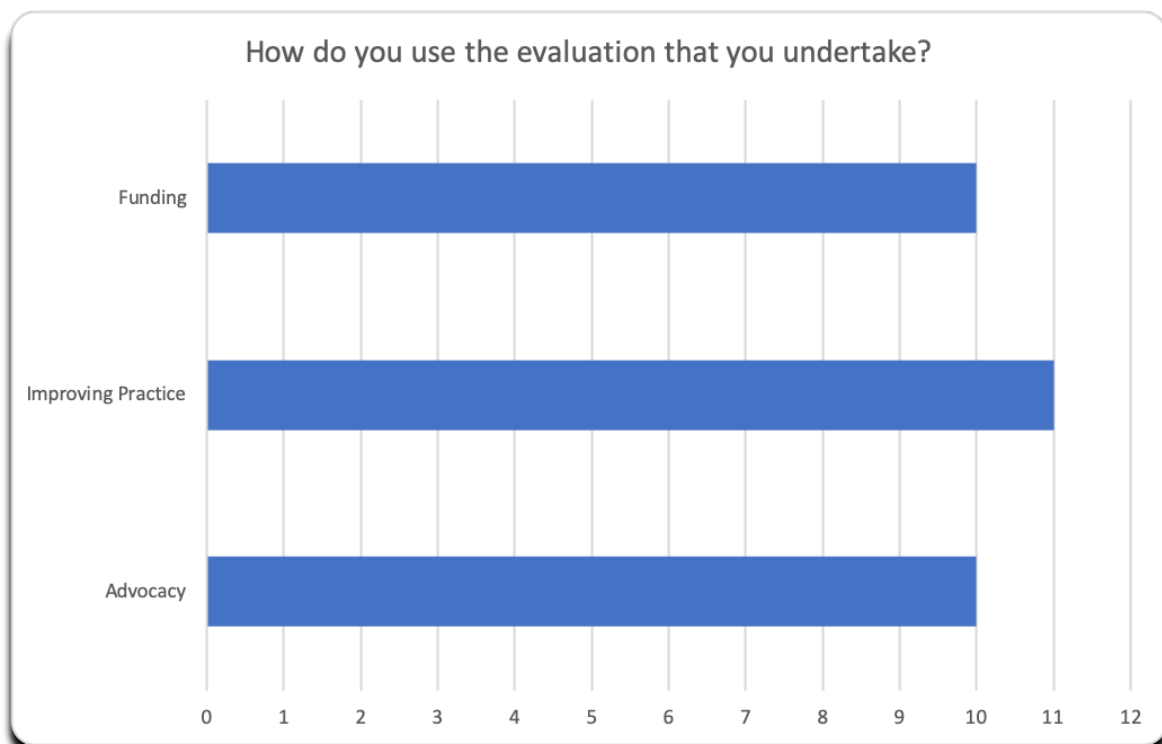


Figure 5 How do you use the evaluation that you undertake?

The audience for the evaluation reports that we received were predominantly funders, who had paid for the particular project or activity to take place. However, from the survey it became clear that funding reports are also used in departments as part of internal evaluation of activities (see Fig. 6).

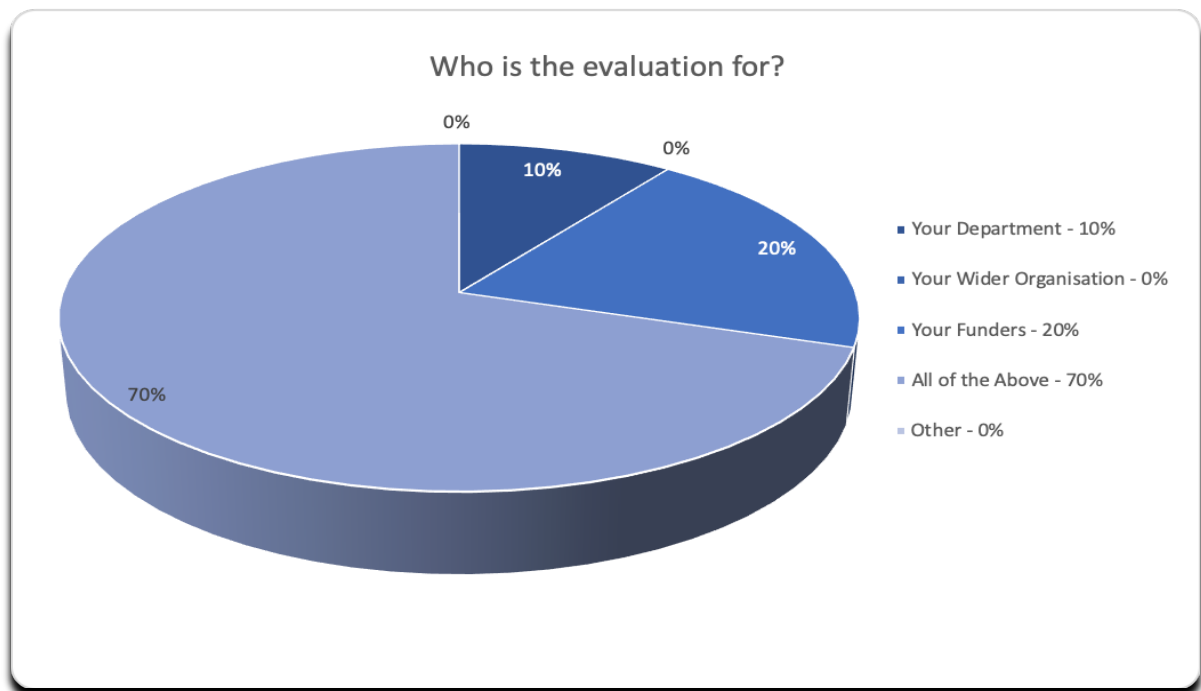


Figure 6 Evaluation Audience: who is the evaluation for?

In these reports it was striking to observe how little the practical/workshop activities themselves were described or referenced. This absence suggests that the primary reason to undertake the evaluation is to measure predetermined outcomes rather than review and analyse the project on its own terms. As one focus group participant suggested:

- FG2: You do adopt the language of the field you're working in and the language of the funder and I wonder if in doing that we're slightly under-selling ourselves and slightly under-playing the specifics of the art form [...] I sometimes daydream about a having a framework or a set of dimensions that allow us to talk about the specific impacts of theatre which is your firm structure which you can then say "and this speaks to the loneliness agenda, or this speaks to the wellbeing agenda" because of this thing, which is to do with theatre. [...] something which would allow us to speak more definitively about our art-form and its value.

The reports showed that theatre educators are adept at speaking to different audiences according to the beneficiaries of the project (e.g. teachers, health professionals, third sector charities). In survey responses no respondent felt that having to report for funders constrained their practice and one respondent felt it enabled their practice. However, it emerged in focus groups that evaluative practices depended on the funder (the primary audience for the report), and this was noted as a challenge. It was also acknowledged in focus groups that the most powerful way of advocating for the work with funders was for them to experience or witness the theatre practice first-hand rather than via written reports.

Challenges to Evaluative Practices

The challenges that emerged out of the discussions can be categorised in three core themes: capacity, funding, and methods and scope.

Capacity

Capacity issues relate to the ability of departments to be able to undertake evaluation or research activities successfully. With many evaluations taking place on a project-by-project basis, evaluation activities have to be undertaken by the practitioner leading the project, which can be a struggle, as this survey respondent highlights:

- S2: Without a dedicated member of staff who is able to be present at delivery level we struggle to get artists/practitioners to capture evidence of change or capture methodologies.

The limited time available for evaluation activities was also a recurring theme in survey responses engaging with the question of challenges:

- S3: Usually hurried and without enough staff to undertake proper research and analysis.

Understandably, organisations tend to focus on the delivery of the project, leaving the evaluation activities until the end:

- S4: We aren't always consistent, especially when projects with a short lead-in consume staff capacity with delivery; then evaluation becomes more of an afterthought (never good practice!)
- S11: perhaps overly focused on the processes of delivering activity and under focused on impact on participants.

Every survey respondent observed that there are areas that they would like to evaluate or research but that they are currently unable to do so. More than half of respondents reflected that they would like to undertake longitudinal research into the impact of their work, with a particular focus on the role played by theatre activities on a young person's development. Other themes that respondents hoped to explore included diversity, wellbeing, and enhancing learning in schools. Reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 on their department's evaluation and research agenda, increased focus on the digital, as well as on issues of access and diversity, was deemed to be particularly urgent going forward.

Funding

Closely related to the capacity of theatres to carry out evaluation and research activities is the issue of how these projects might be funded. Funding poses challenges in two ways: firstly limited financial resources means that the staff costs involved in undertaking meaningful evaluation activities are a barrier to practice, which was an issue raised in the focus groups:

- FG4: And then there's the cost of it. And, especially going forward, that money's just not there.

Secondly, the requirements of funders to report in a particular way can lead to a piecemeal approach to evaluation across organisations.

- S7: It [evaluation] is project by project and each funder or evaluation body requires different types of information or priorities. There is a lack strategic approach overall so it becomes more about reporting than using evaluation to inform and develop future practice.

A particular issue relating to the agenda of funders is the kind of approach and methodologies adopted, as raised by this survey respondent:

- S6: We are quite data led due to statutory funding reporting and would like to capture better impact through our evaluations.

The question of being led by the particular evaluation agenda of funders was also a theme that emerged in focus group discussions:

- FG4: I think in recent years it's been more about reporting to funders than actually being useful to us as a learning department. And I think part of that is there is a lack of consistency in reporting frameworks and in evaluation frameworks. So depending on where you're getting money from or what stakeholders you're reporting to it's got a different priority each time. Which means that embedded research practice within your department is really difficult because you're always responding to whatever framework is being thrown at you instead of actually becoming very good at evaluating practice.

The consequences of focussing on evaluating for funding purposes are articulated by this focus group participant:

- FG2: The problem with the way we evaluate at the moment is because it's bitty, it feels routine, it feels dull. And I think the shift that I would really love to see is for it to be a bit more excitingly focussed on change. There's lots of useful reflective practice that goes on in conversations with the team, but so much of it is about delivery and how you shift practice and what worked and didn't work of the project aims and I think it feels very quotidian and I feel we need to pull the focus back in two areas, [...] evaluation and research should be about how we're trying to be different as a sector and as organisations. And the other thing is the flip, that we are still not talking about impact [...] we are not talking in sufficiently compelling terms about the impact of and the change and the value of the work we do in the context that we need to be talking about it. And so it ends up being a little bit dull and also a sense that we are continually talking to ourselves.

Methods & Scope

Some respondents felt that the evaluation processes adopted by their organisation are lacking. For example, some respondents suggested that the methodologies utilised by their organisation do not deliver meaningful results:

- S10: Our in-house evaluation is too broad and open ended. It is hard to draw clear conclusions from as [the] work is ongoing. When do we drill down, and why, if [there is] no clear incentive [to evaluate]? No extra capacity in the same way as there is for projects with research or evaluation capacity built in.

The way in which evaluation functions within individual projects was also considered an issue by some:

- S6: In some areas of the programme evaluation hasn't been inbuilt throughout the project so we can miss opportunities to capture important or useful information or feedback.

Differences in practice across an organisation and changes in staff can also pose a challenge:

- S9: evaluation is adhoc across the organisation and where there is staff turnover, similar errors can be made a remade

The robustness of evaluation methodologies was raised as a concern in focus group discussions, and this was related to the issue of the skillset required for evaluation:

- FG4: I think we have to admit within teams that there are those who are good at facilitating that evaluation, and there are those who are good at writing that evaluation, and those who are good at digging deeper into the impact of that evaluation. That doesn't necessarily involve everyone at an organisation, or it may not be that skillset. And actually to have involvement of universities and students and suchlike where that's their bread and butter would not only be valuable for organisations in terms of research and evaluation, but also in terms of up-skilling teams as well [...T]he ideal is that evaluation and research is embedded in a very project or initiative design, it's not something that's bolted on, but if that expertise isn't there, you don't know what you're looking for and how to build it in then you can't ever do that.

Recommendations & Discussion Points

Most theatres use evaluation in instrumental ways to evidence the effectiveness of their projects. In the reports we read, the role of evaluation is almost always to make judgements about the impact on participants. There is little documented evidence of how the evaluation shaped the qualities, processes and practices of the theatre-making itself, how this fed into professional development for artists, or changed theatre practices. Evaluation reports were overwhelmingly positive about the outcomes of the work, and this raises questions about where more challenging conversations happen about the practice, and how far artists in this sector have a space for experimentation and risk-taking. This also implies that change is orientated one-way. How can research and evaluation support theatres and theatre-makers in making changes and developing their work as well as evidencing changes in participants' lives?

There is a need to speak with one voice for the sector. Current systems of research and evaluation do not support this. There are no coherent research and evaluation strategies in theatres, nor in Learning departments within theatres, and this means that evidence is scattered across the sector and usually undertaken on a project-by-project basis. One framework for evaluating all projects would inevitably be reductive, and there is significant evidence that predetermined measures of success that appear 'objective' reflect unconscious bias and can replicate existing inequalities. We recommend a National Strategy for Research and Evaluation in theatre's learning departments that would facilitate co-production of knowledge across the sector, and provide a way for existing knowledge to be shared. How might this be achieved? What would be the core themes or areas that warrant research to address new challenges (e.g. digital performance and young people; inequalities and wellbeing; creative learning at home etc; young people and the Black Lives Matter Movement)? What areas already have significant evidence that might be brought together (e.g. impact on educational attainment etc)?

There was little use of academic research that had not been commissioned by the theatres themselves. This suggests a mismatch between the two sectors that is preventing greater collaboration. Academic research is expected to be open-ended and innovative, whereas in practice evaluation is often based on existing principles and can be predictable. Is there a way for the two sectors to come together to find areas of mutual interest and benefit? Is there a need to differentiate between different purposes and frameworks (e.g. researching new areas of knowledge, analysing existing knowledge, and evaluating measures of success?) Is there a place for funders in this conversation?

From the research undertaken, the report authors offer the following recommendations:

- Develop a flexible national research and evaluation strategy to support learning/education/participation departments to evaluate robustly and to be able to advocate confidently for their value. To be suited to a variety of contexts, we suggest adopting a three-tiered framework:
 1. Metrics-driven evaluative model aimed at addressing funders' reporting requirements
 2. Embedded evaluation activities with a qualitative focus, aimed at developing practice
 3. Collaborative research for projects that warrant research as well as evaluation, which might involve working with a university or independent researchers
- Investigate ways of facilitating a more productive relationship between HE institutions and theatre learning/education/participation departments with a focus on:
 - Linking up scholars and departments that share particular interests
 - Providing departments with access to research studies that might be published in journals that are behind paywalls
 - Assisting theatre staff to become confident with robust qualitative research methodologies and approaches (such as practice-based research; ethnographic research; mixed methods; performance analysis; student-voice)

- Instigate a more joined-up approach to the activities of theatre learning/education/participation departments and the ways in which these are evaluated.
 - Find opportunities to share expertise between organisations
 - Develop joint funding bids for collaborative projects with shared research questions or measures of evaluation
 - Create a mentoring or shadowing scheme to help share and develop best-practice in evaluation

In the long-term, it would be productive to bring the work of Learning Departments into closer conversation with the wider activities of arts organisations and we suggest it would be valuable to create a national strategy which draws together the evaluative practices of all theatre departments, including audience research, repertoire, personnel, and Learning.

ⁱ Some small grammatical changes have been made to survey responses to help clarify meaning for the reader.

ⁱⁱ Arts Council England, "Quality Principles." <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/quality-metrics/quality-principles>
Accessed 26 September 2020.