

**Review: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Public Services
AQMeN Conference at ESRC Festival of Social Science**

3 November 2011

**Reviewed by Ally R. Memon, PhD Student
University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education**



I was eager and motivated to get a place at this event as it is difficult to find events being held on such specific topics which can gather the best speakers from around the U.K. I found this to be a major knowledge contributor on the topic of evaluating in the public-sector. With a coalition government in place and the biggest spending cuts in decades, the future of public services in the U.K. currently attracts a keen interest and so, this conference was well-timed. Brilliant speakers were present who covered various aspects of evaluating in the public sector and highlighted some of the pressing issues and challenges faced in public-sector evaluation.

The first half of the day saw Dr. Louise Scott's talk on evaluating the government under SNP administrations. This was very informative, covering the past directions of the SNP administration and what it envisioned ahead. From a researcher's perspective, the talk was useful in informing how evaluation practice might develop in the future with a shift towards an outcomes based approach. Dr. Erica Wimbush talked about public health policy evaluation which highlighted shifts in evaluation practice at NHS health Scotland towards more theory-based evaluations and addressed concerns related to data collection. Dr. Rhys Andrews shared his experience of public management research elaborating on quantitative data collection techniques, statistical methods used and the challenges faced due to regional variations in the UK. Aspects of devolution of service provision and how best to design quantitative evaluations in such a scenario was discussed. Professor Peter Elias talked about data needs for quantitative methods when evaluating national service delivery and proposed useful tips and frameworks that can help researchers and practitioners access resources and gather data for evaluating national service delivery in the wake of on-going regional variations. He also announced the launch of the ESRC's Secondary Data Analysis Initiative later this year, which will be relevant to many researchers in Scotland and could be used as a vehicle for developing evaluation research.

In the second half of the day, Professor Anna Vignoles talked about evaluating school effectiveness using large scale data sets, demonstrating a creative and robust approach to evaluating relative performance in primary and secondary schools. Dr. Susan Pardon communicated the challenges of attaining comparable data and suggested that it was difficult to evaluate locally varying programs just using statistics and encouraged combining statistical approaches with good process evaluation via the theory of change. Steven Marwick from Evaluation Support Scotland gave an insight into evaluating programmes in the voluntary sector and demonstrated how evaluation could be and should be made easier by encouraging self-evaluation practices among organizations and understanding evaluation as a continuous process embedded into routine work practices. Rikke Iversholt also gave

useful tips and guides on visualizing data for effective evaluation and demonstrated how data presentation could be made more appealing and easier to understand for the reader.

As a PhD student, I have taken away much important knowledge from this course about the past, present and expected future of evaluation of public service delivery. I got an opportunity to understand the many challenges faced in evaluating public services due to factors such as data availability, comparability of data, devolution and regional differences in governance and policy making. Most importantly, this event let me learn from experts that both quantitative (i.e. statistical techniques) and qualitative (i.e. process and change theory) methods must support one another for public-sector evaluation to become more effective and consistent.

The event was extremely well organized and managed with impressive lunch and coffee breaks held throughout the day. I would like to thank AQMeN for holding such an informative event that has helped researchers like me to gain valuable insight and connect with other researchers interested in the evaluation of public sector services.