Introduction: 'Evaluation for Northern Contexts'

This special 'Evaluation' issue of the Learning Communities journal was written to mark both the Australian Evaluation Society (AES) 2014 International Evaluation Conference being held on the Charles Darwin University campus, and the new 'Evaluation for Northern Contexts' area of the Northern Institute. Development of the issue offered the Institute an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and build new ones in key areas of evaluation practice and theory.

Aboriginal issues are central to much of the work at the Institute, including evaluation. Ensuring that Aboriginal community members are co-investigators rather than 'subjects' has been a long term focus of the Institute. That theme is reflected here, particularly in the offering from Tangentyere Hub researchers and evaluators.

A more recent development is the Institute's commitment to realist evaluation. In a region where new interventions are regularly rolled out and/or scaled up, a context responsive method of evaluation that does not simply ask 'what works?' but rather 'what works in which conditions for whom (and how)?' is well suited to the Institute's focus on people, policy and place.

Community safety is another policy focus at the Institute. In 2013, the Institute signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), building capacity to address community safety, crime and justice issues through policy-informing research and evaluation. A number of joint projects have already been initiated, and the articles in this issue further demonstrate the value of this relationship.

Finally, the Institute has an ongoing commitment to build regional evaluative capacity. As well as developing internal capacity through the development of a network of adjunct Fellows, the Institute has offered workshops to local evaluation practitioners and stakeholders in Darwin and Alice Springs. New partnerships have been formed, such as one with the Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education within the University of Melbourne. We are pleased to include a contribution from CPE authors.

For the journal, invitations were issued to existing partners such as Australian Institute of Criminology researchers and members of the Australasian Evaluation Society's Special Interest Group in Realist Evaluation and Realist Synthesis, as well as to Institute staff, adjuncts and partners. We made it clear that we did not want accounts of evaluation projects; those can be presented in reports or in other venues such as criminology or education journals. Instead, we asked potential authors to reflect on their recent work and identify findings that could inform evaluation methodology or theory. After some weeks of consultation, a number of potential papers were identified. We supplemented these with invitations to evaluators working in areas that seemed to be of special interest and addressing issues not often seen in the literature, such as realist design.

For the publication to be ready in time for the AES conference in September, the timeline for paper development and review had to be compressed. A number of authors were

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unfortunately unable to meet the tight deadlines; their manuscripts may be published in a future issue and/or appear in the planned 'Short Paper' series in the 'Evaluation for Northern Contexts' section of the new Institute website, due to be launched shortly. However, we are very pleased to provide the range of papers presented in this special 'Evaluation' issue.

The first paper, by Nick Tilley and other authors from Griffith University, University College in London, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and the Australian Government, combines three strands that run through the journal: evaluation in Indigenous contexts, evaluation on a community safety topic, and a realist approach. It is also exciting to be able to provide a paper dealing with a realist project at the design stage.

The next three papers also focus on realist approaches, each from a different perspective.

The paper by Hannah Jolly and Lesley Jolly discusses how they used curriculum theory to distinguish context from mechanism in a cascade of contexts and mechanisms in a curriculum change evaluation. Providing fine-grained analysis of some aspects of their evaluation to demonstrate their point, they demonstrate how evaluators can employ theory to distinguish context from mechanism in a principled way.

The Hawkins paper examines the potential for the inclusion of experimentation in realist evaluation approaches, arguing for the adoption of experimental approaches to test realist theory as well as to estimate effect sizes. Hawkin's approach requires that program theory, not the program, is the unit of analysis and requires context to be brought into the effect size equation.

The Pointing paper is also in the realist vein, but focuses on the rapid realist synthesis approach rather than realist evaluation. The paper recounts how the author first encountered realist approaches, and details his experience in using realist synthesis methods to identify theoretical bases of the impact of closed-circuit television (CCTV) to reduce alcohol-related assault, and to design an evaluation of homelessness and alcohol harm reduction in a northern Australian city.

The focus of Pointing's paper on CCTV and alcohol-related harm reduction leads naturally into the next set of papers, which all stemmed from projects dealing with crime, justice and safety issues. However, for this journal, authors reflected on their criminological evaluation experience to identify issues relevant to evaluators in many disciplines.

Brown draws out lessons from his Systematic Social Observation (SSO) experience, discussing cases in the United Kingdom where he used this method in evaluating the impact of changes in alcohol licensing laws and in evaluating the impact of environmental clean-up campaigns. Brown discusses SSO design issues and notes some problems experienced by fieldworkers using the method, but also indicates the benefits of SSO in providing data that may not be secured through other research methods.

Boxall describes 'pragmatic' evaluation, and techniques for keeping an evaluation on track in the face of the many difficulties which often arise. Using an evaluation of the Family Group Conferencing pilot project (NSW) to illustrate her points, Boxall demonstrates

how reflexive, adaptive and pragmatic approaches to evaluation that involve project stakeholders in the development of evaluation designs and research methods can help to keep evaluations on track when original plans become unfeasible for reasons beyond the control of the evaluators.

Morgan's paper focuses on the issue of collaboration with internal stakeholders when conducting independent evaluations using rigorous scientific methods, such as quasi-experimental designs. Using evaluations of multiple programs designed to prevent and reduce crime, and to respond to the needs of vulnerable populations in court settings, Morgan highlights the benefits but also the challenges in working collaboratively with program managers, staff and participants.

Willis and Tomison use an evaluation of a multi-faceted juvenile justice project in Thailand to demonstrate how applying a Participatory Action Research approach to program logic development can ensure shared understandings of evaluation in a cross-cultural, cross-language context. The authors describe how they used the approach when working with the Thailand Department of Juvenile Justice and Observation in the evaluation of a complex project aimed at improving outcomes for young offenders, and reflect on the potential application of the approach to other cross-cultural situations.

In the Northern Institute context, the most frequent cross-cultural encounters occur with Aboriginal community members. The Institute is privileged to be able to present the reflections of researchers/evaluators at the Tangentyere Research Hub on what evaluation means to them. The authors have also prepared two diagrams, one showing how they see external parties conducting evaluations and the other, in contrast, showing how they conduct evaluations within their community in a culturally grounded way. The authors express their hope that they might assist evaluators working with Aboriginal people to think differently and perhaps approach future evaluation in cultural communities differently.

Christie and Campbell, with substantial experience in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, reflect upon Aboriginal contributions to the theory and practice of evaluation. They provide an example from an evaluation of Housing Reference Groups where Aboriginal voices did appear to influence government policy and practice, although this did not appear to occur until long after the evaluation report was submitted.

Cairns and McLaren remind us that there are other populations that require evaluators to reflect on their practice and ethics. They use a case study of an evaluation with Deaf and hard of hearing students to show how an inclusive, participatory evaluation methodological framework was implemented. The authors point out that adherence to ethical standards and principles was a primary consideration in the evaluation.

Williams also looks at evaluation ethics, but this time from the perspective of institutional ethics review. With a special emphasis on informed consent, Williams contrasts the issues of ethics in evaluation with those in bio-medical and social science research. She identifies potential opportunities for improved practice in response to a recent document issued by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council on ethical considerations in evaluation.

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Finally, Guenther examines the annual reports of a number of Australian state and territory education departments to identify how the performance measures in them, typically labelled as targets and outcomes, reflect stated and/or actual education priorities. He uses two case studies to demonstrate how broader aims for education reflected in foundational documents – sometimes considered too impractical or costly to measure – can be addressed through evaluation.

We hope that you enjoy these articles. If you would like to comment on any of them or provide feedback, please feel free to address comments to emma.williams@cdu.edu. au. We are also looking to create a venue within the Northern Institute website where more public dialogue on the points raised in the articles can be presented.

One final point — we thank the authors and the many dedicated reviewers who put in so many hours and such care into this issue — if you find the occasional rough edge in the journal, please attribute it to the ambitious timeframe rather than lack of authorial or editorial rigour.

Emma Williams
Guest Editor