

Framework for the evaluation of
The Smith Family's
Learning for Life scholarship program
(Short version)

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Note

The Learning for Life framework is closely modelled on the framework developed by the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC) in the USA.¹ Consequently, there is no author for it. However, responsibility for the contents of the *Learning for Life* framework document and this shortened version of it is taken by Adrian Beavis and Maree Murray of the Research and Development Group, Strategic Research and Social Policy within The Smith Family, Australia.

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¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999). Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health MMWR 1999; 48 (No. RR-11), available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr4811a1.htm>, viewed May 2006.

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Overview of the framework for the evaluation of The Smith Family's Learning for Life scholarship program

The objective of this framework is to facilitate an effective evaluation of *Learning for Life*.² Effective program evaluation is a systematic way to improve and develop a program using procedures that are useful, feasible, ethical, and accurate.

i. Main questions addressed	<p>The framework addresses three main questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is the best way to evaluate the program?2. What is being learned from the evaluation?3. How should the evaluation be used to further develop the program? <p>This framework helps answer these questions by suggesting strategies that are useful, appropriate, feasible and ethical.</p>
ii. Judgements about Learning for Life.	<p>The evaluation of <i>Learning for Life</i> involves making judgements about the program, referencing its:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. merit (that is, quality)2. worth (that is, cost-effectiveness)3. significance (that is, importance).
iii. Six main questions	<p>Judgements regarding a program imply the following questions have been answered:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What will be evaluated? (That is, what precisely is the <i>Learning for Life</i> scholarship program and in what context does it exist?)2. What aspects of <i>Learning for Life</i> should be considered when judging program performance?3. What standards (that is, type or level of performance) must

² Throughout this document unless otherwise specified, *Learning for Life* is taken to mean the *Learning for Life* scholarship program.

	<p>be reached for <i>Learning for Life</i> to be considered successful? And related to this: What measures can indicate these standards?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. What evidence will be used to indicate how <i>Learning for Life</i> has performed? 5. What conclusions regarding program performance are justified by comparing the available evidence to the selected standards? 6. How will the lessons from the evaluation be used to improve and develop <i>Learning for Life</i>? <p>This framework for evaluating <i>Learning for Life</i> is designed to help answer these six questions <i>as part of the evaluation process</i>.</p>
<p>iv. To answer the six evaluation questions, there are six steps which need to be taken.</p>	<p>To answer the six evaluation questions, there are six steps which need to be taken. The framework sets out the six steps that must be taken. They are starting points for tailoring the evaluation to the particular context of <i>Learning for Life</i>. Earlier steps provide the foundation for subsequent ones. The steps are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Step 1: engage stakeholders Step 2: describe the program Step 3: focus the evaluation design Step 4: gather credible evidence Step 5: justify conclusions Step 6: ensure use and share lessons learned. <p>Adhering to these steps in this order will facilitate a deeper understanding of <i>Learning for Life</i>'s history, setting and organisation. This, in turn, should ensure that the evaluation is well conceived and conducted and well accepted by stakeholders.</p>

v. The framework provides standards

The framework also provides a set of standards for assessing the quality of evaluation activities. These standards are organised into the following four groups:

Standard 1: utility

Standard 2: feasibility

Standard 3: propriety

Standard 4: accuracy.

These standards help answer the question, 'Is it likely that this evaluation will be effective?' and are planned as criteria for judging the quality of the evaluation efforts.

vi. Risks

From this Overview, two global risks are identified. The first is seen as especially important.

1. Risk: the evaluation cannot establish any positive outcomes or, it establishes that *Learning for Life* is low in merit, worth or significance, leading to the conclusion that the program ought to be abandoned.
2. Risk: the principal evaluator or other key members of the evaluation team leave the project.

Step 1: Engaging stakeholders

An evaluation begins by engaging stakeholders – the persons or organisations having an investment in what will be learned from the evaluation and what will be done with the knowledge.

vii. There are three main groups of stakeholders.	Identifying and engaging the following three principal groups of stakeholders will be critical for the evaluation of <i>Learning for Life</i> : <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. those involved in program operations (for example, sponsors, collaborators, partners, administrators, managers, and staff)2. those served or affected by the program (for example, <i>Learning for Life</i> scholarship holders, family members, neighbourhood organisations, sceptics, and staff of related or competing organisations)3. primary users of the evaluation.
viii. Standards for engaging stakeholders.	Each of the four standards give rise to a specific question that must be addressed when considering the engagement of stakeholders: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Utility: Who will use these results?2. Feasibility: How much time and effort can be given to stakeholder engagement?3. Propriety: Which stakeholders need to be consulted to ensure the evaluation is conducted ethically?4. Accuracy: How should stakeholders be engaged to ensure an accurate account of <i>Learning for Life</i>?
ix. Risks	The following are seen as potential risks to Step 1: <ol style="list-style-type: none">3. <u>Risk</u>: stakeholders do not engage with the evaluation process.4. <u>Risk</u>: insufficient stakeholders are able to be engaged, or as a group, not usefully representative of <i>Learning for Life</i> stakeholders.

Step 2: Describing Learning for Life

A description of *Learning for Life* should convey its mission and those of its objectives being evaluated.

Stakeholders might have differing ideas regarding the goals and purposes of *Learning for Life*. If the evaluation is conducted without agreement on what constitutes *Learning for Life* then it is likely to be of very limited use.

x. Statement of need – the problems that <i>Learning for Life</i> addresses.	A statement of need describes the problems that <i>Learning for Life</i> addresses and implies how it responds. Important features for describing need include: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. the nature and magnitude of the problems2. which groups are affected by these problems3. whether the need is changing and, if so, in what manner the need is changing.
xi. Standards for describing <i>Learning for Life</i>.	Each of the four standards give rise to questions which need to be addressed when describing the <i>Learning for Life</i> program: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Utility:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Is the level of detail appropriate or is there too much or too little detail?b. Is the description intelligible to those who need to use it?2. Feasibility:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Does the description include at least some activities and outcomes that are in control of <i>Learning for Life</i>?3. Propriety:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Is the evaluation plan comprehensive and balanced in assessing key aspects of <i>Learning for Life</i>, including its strengths and weaknesses?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">b. Does the description include sufficient detail to examine both strengths and weaknesses, and unintended as well as intended outcomes? <p>4. Accuracy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Is the description of <i>Learning for Life</i> comprehensive?b. Has the context of <i>Learning for Life</i> been documented so that likely influences on it can be identified?
xii.Risks	<p>The following are seen as potential risks to Step 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">5. <u>Risk</u>: differing stakeholder perspectives prevent one coherent description of <i>Learning for Life</i> being established.6. <u>Risk</u>: suitable comparator programs may not be located or accessible.7. <u>Risk</u>: attempts to connect <i>Learning for Life</i>'s components to their effects are too general or inaccurate as the knowledge base at this stage of the evaluation is not strong.

Step 3: Focusing the evaluation design

The evaluation should be focused to assess and include the issues of greatest concern to stakeholders while using time and resources as efficiently as possible.

xiii. Users	Users are the persons who receive the evaluation findings. User involvement is required for clarifying intended uses, prioritising questions and methods, and keeping the evaluation on course.
xiv. Uses	Uses are the specific ways in which information generated from the evaluation will be applied.
xv. Questions	Questions establish boundaries for the evaluation by clarifying those aspects of the program to be addressed.
xvi. Agreement between stakeholders.	<p>Agreement between stakeholders should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. summarise the evaluation procedures and clarify roles and responsibilities among those who will execute the evaluation plan and with those who authorise the evaluation2. describe how the evaluation plan will be implemented with respect to resources (for example, money, personnel, time and information)3. state what safeguards are in place to protect human subjects and, where appropriate, the ethical or administrative approvals that have been obtained. <p>Agreements include statements concerning:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. the intended purpose2. users3. uses4. questions5. methods. <p>Agreements include summaries of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">6. deliverables

	<p>7. timelines</p> <p>8. budgets.</p> <p>The agreement for the <i>Learning for Life</i> evaluation should be made between the primary users, any providers of financial or in-kind resources, and those persons who will conduct the evaluation and facilitate its use and dissemination.</p>
<p>xvii. Standards for focusing the evaluation.</p>	<p>Each of the four standards give rise to questions which need to be addressed when focusing the evaluation of <i>Learning for Life</i>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Utility<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. What is the purpose of the evaluation?b. Who will use the evaluation results and how will they use them?c. What are special needs of any other stakeholders that must be addressed?2. Feasibility<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. What are the program's stages of development?b. How amenable to measurement are the components in the proposed focus?3. Propriety<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Do the focus and design seek to adequately detect any unintended consequences of the program?b. Will the focus and design include examination of the experiences of those who are affected by the program?4. Accuracy<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Is the focus broad enough to detect success, progress or failure of the program?b. Is the design able to respond to the questions – such as cause or attribution – that are asked by stakeholders? If not, why not?

xviii. Risks

The following are seen as potential risks to Step 3:

8. Risk: in focusing the research design of the evaluation it may be difficult to ascertain whether *Learning for Life* is developing or maturing, if some elements of the program are at different stages.
9. Risk: in focusing the research design and related methodology there appears to be a poor fit between the available resources and the best design.

Step 4: Gathering credible evidence

The evaluation of *Learning for Life* will strive to collect information that conveys a well-rounded picture of the program so that the information and subsequent analyses are credible to the evaluation's primary users.

xix. Quality of the data

Quality refers to the appropriateness and integrity of information used in the evaluation. Because all data have limitations, the intent of a practical evaluation is to strive for a level of quality that meets the stakeholders' thresholds for credibility. High-quality data are reliable, valid and informative for their intended use.

xx. Standards for gathering credible evidence.

Each of the four standards give rise to questions which need to be addressed when gathering credible evidence for the evaluation of *Learning for Life*:

1. Utility

- a. Have key stakeholders who can assist with access to participants been consulted?
- b. Are methods and sources appropriate to the intended purpose and use of the data?
- c. Have key stakeholders been consulted to ensure there are no untoward preferences for, or obstacles to, selected methods or sources?
- d. Are there specific methods or sources that will enhance the credibility of the data with key users and stakeholders?

2. Feasibility

- a. Can the data methods and sources be implemented within the time and budget for the project?
- b. Does the evaluation team have the expertise to implement the chosen methods?
- c. Are the methods and sources consistent with the culture

and characteristics of the participants, such as language and literacy levels?

- d. Are logistics and protocols realistic given the time and resources available for data collection?

3. Propriety

- a. Will data collection be unduly disruptive?
- b. How will issues of safety of respondents or confidentiality be addressed?
- c. Are the methods and sources appropriate to the culture and characteristics of the respondents – will they understand what they are being asked, and will they feel comfortable giving fully honest answers?

4. Accuracy

- a. Are appropriate quality assurance procedures in place to ensure quality of data collection?
- b. Are enough data being collected to support chosen confidence levels or statistical power?
- c. Are methods and sources consistent with the nature of the problem(s), the sensitivity of the issue(s), and the knowledge level of the respondents?

xxi. Risk

The following is seen as a potential risk to Step 4:

- 10. Risk: in gathering evidence for the evaluation it becomes apparent that some desirable data are not extant, or not forthcoming..

Step 5: Justifying conclusions

Justification of conclusions is fundamental to sound evaluation. The evaluation conclusions are justified when they are linked to the evidence gathered and judged against agreed-upon standards set by the stakeholders.

xxii. Standards	Standards reflect the values held by stakeholders and those values provide the basis for forming judgments concerning the performance of <i>Learning for Life</i> .
xxiii. Interpretation is the attempt to understand the evidence.	Interpretation is the interrogation and summary of what the findings mean. It involves considering such questions as <i>How much is enough to be indicative of success? On what dimensions does change need to have occurred?</i> Interpretation is part of the overall effort to understand the evidence gathered in an evaluation.
xxiv. Judgments	Judgments are statements concerning the merit, worth or significance of the program. They are formed by comparing the findings and interpretations regarding the program against one or more selected standards.
xxv. Standards for justifying conclusions.	Each of the four standards give rise to questions which need to be addressed when justifying conclusions for the evaluation of <i>Learning for Life</i> : 1. Utility a. Have the perspectives, procedures and rationale used to interpret the findings been comprehensively described? b. Have stakeholders considered different approaches for interpreting the findings? 2. Feasibility a. Is the approach to analysis and interpretation appropriate to the levels of expertise and resources?

	<p>3. Propriety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Have the standards and values of those less powerful, or those most affected by the program, been taken into account in determining standards for success? <p>4. Accuracy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Can the conclusions be explicitly justified?b. Are the conclusions understandable to stakeholders?
<p>xxvi. Risk</p>	<p>The following is seen as a potential risk to Step 5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">11. <u>Risk</u>: stakeholders do not accept conclusions and seek to stymie or censor these.

Step 6: Ensuring use and sharing lessons

Lessons learned in the course of the evaluation of *Learning for Life* will not automatically translate into informed decision-making and appropriate action. Deliberate effort is needed to ensure that the evaluation findings are used and disseminated appropriately.

Dissemination should focus on relevant audiences and be full and impartial.	Dissemination is the process of communicating either the procedures or the lessons learned from an evaluation to relevant audiences in a timely, unbiased and consistent fashion. The goal for dissemination is to achieve full disclosure and impartial reporting.
Standards for ensuring use of the evaluation.	Each of the four standards give rise to questions which need to be addressed when ensuring the use of the evaluation: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Utility<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Have significant interim findings and reports been shared with users so that findings can be used in a timely fashion?b. Has the evaluation been planned, conducted and reported in ways that encourage follow-through by stakeholders?2. Feasibility<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Do reports clearly describe the program, including its context, and the evaluation's purposes, procedures and findings?b. Is the format of the reports appropriate to the evaluation's resources and to the time and resources of the audience?3. Propriety<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Have the evaluation findings (including the limitations) been made accessible to everyone significantly affected by the evaluation, and others who have the right to receive the results?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">b. Has all care been taken with respect to privacy and confidentiality in all the reporting processes? <p>4. Accuracy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Have all reasonable attempts been made to avoid the distortions that can be caused by personal feelings and other biases?b. Do the evaluation reports impartially and fairly reflect evaluation findings?
Risks	<p>The following are seen as potential risks to Step 6:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">12. <u>Risk</u>: stakeholders choose not to use the evaluation findings.13. <u>Risk</u>: stakeholders or others seek to modify, censor or distort evaluation findings.