



REVIEW OF THE QUALITY AND USE OF DFAT EVALUATIONS: 2024-25 – MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Background

DFAT has undertaken regular reviews of the quality and use of its evaluations since 2012. In 2023, the Australian Government committed to strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) approaches in the International Development Policy (IDP). The Performance and Delivery Framework, which underpins this policy, includes the indicator “Our development cooperation is informed by monitoring, evaluation and learning”. DFAT has committed to conducting an annual review of the quality and use of its development evaluations, and to publicly report on the findings as a measure of this indicator.

Summary of the 2025 review

The annual review explores different aspects of evaluation quality and use. The 2025 review focused on the quality of evaluation plans. This addressed a key finding from the 2024 review: DFAT staff were least confident in reviewing evaluation plans and assessing their quality in line with the DFAT Design and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (DMEL) Standards.

The review assessed the quality of 20 evaluation plans for DFAT-led evaluations completed in 2024–25, along with a sample of nine related evaluation reports with low-, medium-, and high-quality evaluation plans. It investigated common strengths and weaknesses and the relationship between plan and report quality.

The review found that 8 of 20 evaluation plans assessed were of adequate quality or above when reviewed against Standard 9 of DFAT’s DMEL Standards.

The three strongest areas across the evaluation plans assessed were purpose and use of evaluation, roles and responsibilities and evaluation questions. Common weaknesses included evidence generation processes, activity planning and scheduling and GEDSI considerations.

There were high-quality evaluation reports linked to low-, medium-, and high-quality plans, suggesting a limited correlation between plan and report quality at the macro level. However, more detailed analysis showed that higher-quality plans were linked to evaluation reports with stronger evidence. This was especially the case for plans that were well-tailored to the context and demonstrated stronger analytical approaches.

This review made three recommendations.

- 1. EVS to consider focusing on weaker elements in plans for additional support and training. These areas (listed below) could be elaborated on further through existing tools and mechanisms. It is recommended EVS discuss the topics and create an Action Plan for implementation.**
 - Enabling collaborative approaches to evaluations
 - Developing Key evaluation questions (KEQs) and sub-questions
 - Developing appropriate sampling strategies
 - Demonstrating strength of evidence within evaluations
 - Aligning limitations, findings and conclusions
 - Defining approaches to data analysis and judgement-making
 - Embedding GEDSI considerations throughout the evaluation cycle

2. EVS should clarify and communicate expectations for DFAT staff and contractor use of DMEL Standards. This could be part of the Action Plan from Recommendation 1.

- Outline strategies to clearly define and communicate DFAT’s expectations for contractor use of the DMEL Standards. This could include industry briefings
- Support DFAT staff to apply the Standards when reviewing Terms of Reference (ToR), plans and reports
- Communicate how DFAT staff can draw on support to put these improvements in place
- Work with DFAT procurement to identify ways to ensure contracts further embed the Standards.

3. EVS to consider revising the DMEL Standards to improve clarity and to emphasise focus areas.

- A number of Standards are noted for revision under Terms of Reference (Standard 8), Evaluation Plan (Standard 9), and Evaluation Report (Standard 10), with details included in the report.

Management response

Given the small sample size, DFAT notes the report’s finding that the conclusions and recommendations are indicative rather than conclusive. We agree that the analysis provide valuable insights to guide actions and recommendations nonetheless.

DFAT accepts all recommendations and is developing an action plan to implement the findings. The plan will outline how these issues will be addressed through existing tools and mechanisms, including the Design and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Standards, the International Development Programming Guide, the Development Evaluation Helpdesk, Performance and Quality Network, workshops and training for evaluation managers, guidance notes, good practice guides and examples, supplier engagement and internal communications channels. The Development Evaluation and Assurance Section will implement the plan, in collaboration with relevant areas of the department, over the course of 2026.

Bluebird Consultants completed this review. None of the evaluations in the sample were completed by Bluebird although some limited support was provided by a helpdesk supported by Bluebird. DFAT was satisfied that this did not impact on the findings of the review. Further, this review was undertaken within Bluebird’s contract to support DFAT implement its Evaluation Improvement Strategy. Some of the recommendations will be delivered through a reprioritisation of the current work program, within the existing agreement limit of the contract.