

The role of evaluation and research in arts, cultural and heritage organisations



Executive summary: Sector survey

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Introduction and methodology

In order to better understand current attitudes towards evaluation and research in terms of capturing and demonstrating cultural value across the cultural sector, the Centre for Cultural Value developed and distributed an online survey entitled 'The role of evaluation and research in arts, cultural and heritage organisations' between December 2019 and March 2020, in partnership with The Audience Agency, the Arts Marketing Association and Arts Fundraising & Philanthropy. This Executive Summary highlights the key findings from the online survey.

The survey was made available online from 1 April 2020 and was closed to responses on 13 June 2020. The findings from this survey will directly feed into the Centre's future plans and activity and will be repeated in four years to explore whether practices have changed and/or developed longitudinally.

Who responded to the survey?

A total of 311 people responded to the survey.

Figure 1 The illustration below shows the breakdown of survey respondents by country (in answer to: Where are you or your organisation based?) [n=311]

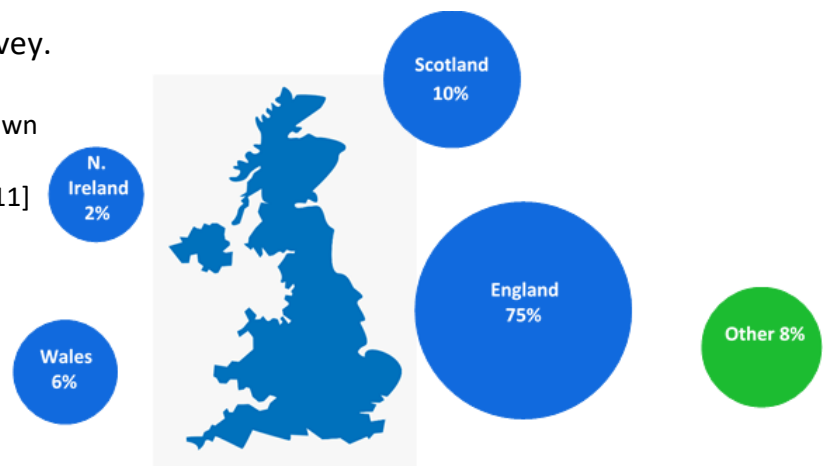
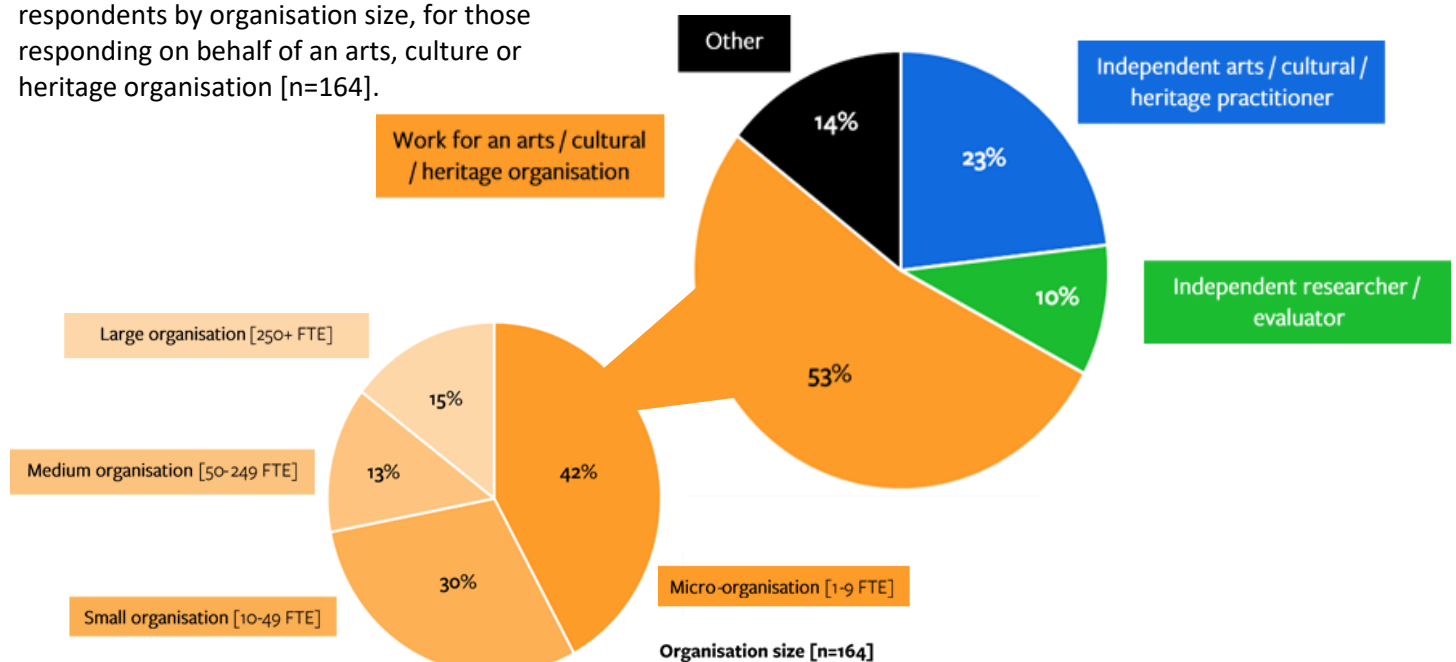


Figure 2 The graph below shows the breakdown of survey respondents by role (in answer to: How would you describe your role?) [n=311] For those respondents (53%) who answered the survey on behalf of an arts, cultural or heritage organisation, the figure also shows subsequent proportions of respondents by organisation size, for those responding on behalf of an arts, culture or heritage organisation [n=164].



Key findings

- **Defining evaluation:** 43% associated evaluation with assessing the success of their activities, 33% with evidencing their impact.
- **Shaping evaluation:** 78% felt that funders/ policymakers had ‘the most’ or ‘a lot of’ influence on evaluation aims. Explaining activity to funders was seen as the top priority for the sector (53%) and funders (73%). But 21% said their priorities matched with expected outcomes. Understanding/improving value and impact of activities was seen as the top priority for organisations and individuals (62%).
- **Effective evaluation practice:** 18% of organisations said they always share their findings (excl. reporting back to funders).
- **Research partnerships:** 58% had commissioned on independent evaluation in the past, but only a quarter of these (27%) had worked with a higher education institution. However 65% said they had plans or were very likely to work with an academic researchers in the future.
- **Engaging with research:** People are keen to engage with existing and published research, especially written reports aimed at the sector (77%), research digests (75%) and an online portal of resources (74%).

There is strong demand for strategic partnerships between academics and sector based on shared research agendas

Respondents were more likely to have worked with independent researchers as research and evaluation partners than with higher education institutions, which suggests this is an area in which the Centre can make real impact through its activities by fulfilling a much-needed brokerage role linking suitable academic research expertise with wider sector practice.

While those who had worked with academic researchers in the past had a mostly positive experience, some of the potential value of these partnerships is lost due to misaligned priorities, lack of shared research agendas, and consequently a lack of actionable insight.

“We would be interested in making strategic connections with academia through research collaborations/commissions and we also believe that there is valuable expertise within academia which could enhance the work of our organisation that we do not currently make the most of.” [organisation]

There is clearly a desire within the sector to work with academics, and not just to access resources that may be otherwise unavailable, but to build long-term, strategic partnerships and co-designed research. The Centre can offer a wealth of valuable support here, from training for researchers, through to support in co-commissioning and accessing opportunities for research partnerships.

Poor sharing of insights from evaluation

Even though evaluation is recognised as a key learning practice for practitioners, organisations and researchers alike, only 18% of evaluation carried out by organisations is shared externally, beyond funders. This represents a significant problem with knowledge exchange within the sector. There were calls for more learning and debate across the sector, and more ‘joined up’ evaluation:

“Too many evaluations are created then put on the shelf. They need to be analysed further from an organisational and delivery perspective and, crucially, there needs to be a lot more discussion, sharing of learning, and joining up of evaluations so that we can compare and contrast, look for trends, and learn through discussion and debate”
[organisation]

Within organisations themselves, there is also potential for a more holistic, organisation-wide approach to evaluation activity, including improving the communication and support provided by governance groups, such as boards.

“I think it would be useful to look at in more detail not just how evaluation is used, but what are the barriers to get people engaged with evaluation (from board level, down to practitioners). I'm doing more and more work on this at the early stages of evaluation of projects.” [researcher]

This represents key areas for the Centre to provide tailored support, provide platforms and opportunities to share evaluation insights and develop a culture of shared evaluation practice and learning within and between arts, cultural and heritage organisations.

There is an ‘opportunity cost’ of mismatched priorities

Funders were viewed as the most influential voice in developing evaluation aims, and explaining impact to funders was considered a top priority for the sector. However, there was a disconnect between funders’ expected outcomes and priorities for organisations and practitioners: only a fifth of respondents felt that their priorities matched funders’ expected outcomes. This lack of alignment results in a clear ‘opportunity cost’, not only in terms of wasted resource, but also by missing out on invaluable research and evaluation activity that may serve the needs and priorities of organisations and practitioners more effectively. As one respondent suggested, there is a need

to develop a culture of learning beyond the needs of funders and develop some sort of common language to articulate cultural value across the sector:

“[T]he real need is for a common understanding or language about cultural value that can be applied or adopted on a cross-sectoral level.” [other]

In addition, many respondents maintained through the survey that capturing value and impact in broader contexts, such as the environment, health and wellbeing, was a pressing concern:

“I think Environmental Sustainability needs to be higher up the agenda re evidence and evaluation. At the moment it feels like the focus from ACE [Arts Council England] is about reporting and mitigating our environmental impacts (more easily quantifiable) but not about how we as organisations can evidence engendering pro-environmental behaviours which I think is an important metric not to miss out right now.” [organisation]

This mismatch of priorities represents a significant challenge for evaluation practice in the sector and suggests the Centre can play a key role in bridging this gap.

There are significant skills gaps in evaluation practice, in particular in analysis and mixed-methods practice

This survey is testament to the wealth of experience and skills in the sector, across organisations, practitioners and independent researchers / evaluators, as well as the knowledge and interest in developing evaluation practice. However respondents did identify clear trends and skills gaps – for example, in analysing and interpreting data from all types of research, and in conducting mixed-methods evaluation, demonstrating a need for more training in these areas.

While respondents demonstrated clear confidence in capturing value and impact in a range of different evaluation practices, there was a perceived lack of effective evaluation in both organisational and professional development contexts. The Centre can play a key role in connecting researchers and evaluators with relevant expertise to organisations and practitioners who lack the experience and skills in-house.

Existing research needs to be made available through a range of platforms

There was broad demand to engage with existing academic research, which needs to be made accessible (and shareable) across a range of platforms. Engaging with written research such as reports and digests was highlighted as a mode of particular interest, with digital platforms as a complementary offer. Once again the Centre can play an important part here, both by providing

creating tailored content to support practice and by making existing research more freely available and digestible.

Working with independent practitioners, organisations and researchers according to their differing priorities and evaluation practices is key

It is clear from the findings of this research that evaluation is understood as a multi-faceted and contextual practice. While some respondents emphasised the impact-led, outcome-oriented ‘matching’ of pre-determined objectives and assessment of success in their definitions of evaluation, others tended to see evaluation practice as an opportunity for learning, to enhance and inform future practice and/or to deepen their understanding.

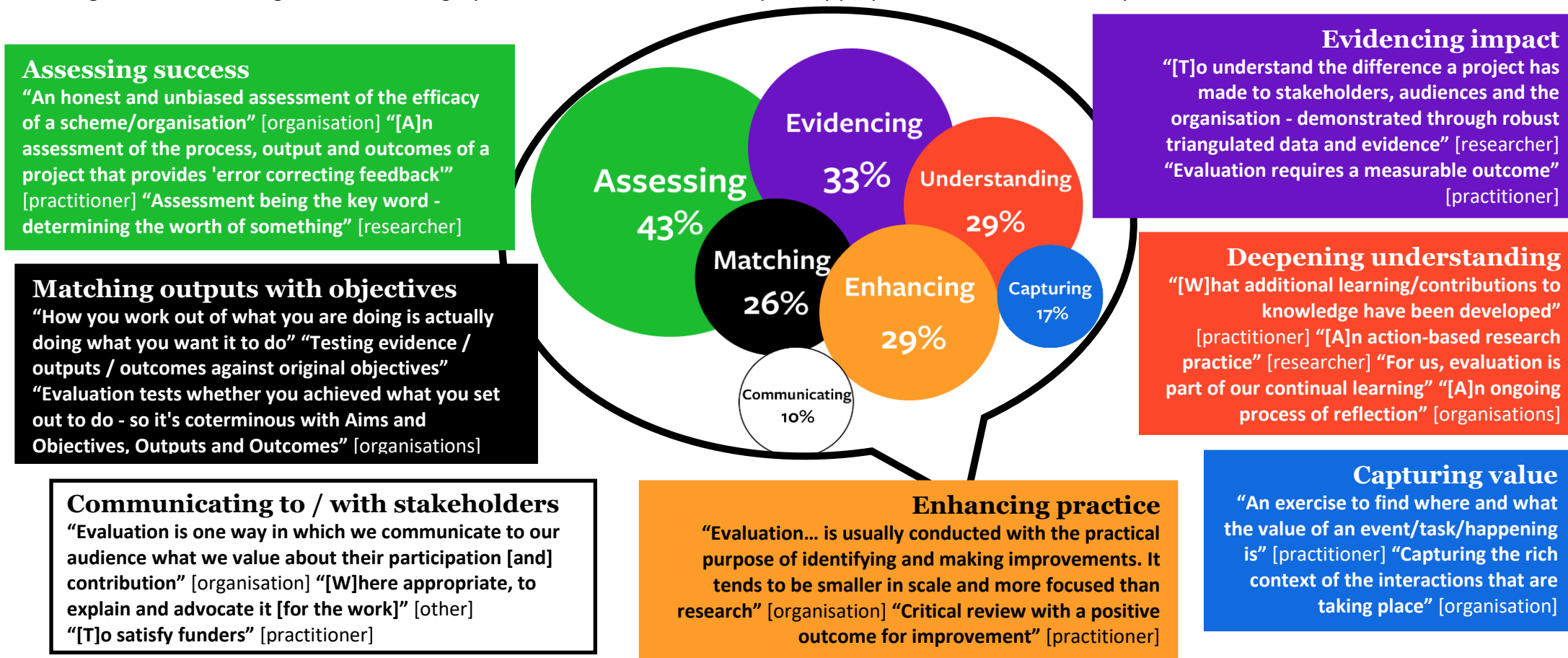
Some key insights emerged from this research from respondents with different roles in the sector, in terms of how they understood and defined evaluation as a practice, through to the type of offer and engagement they would value from the Centre. This highlights the need for the Centre to engage with the different groups represented by survey respondents in different ways, as well as to ensure their activities reflect the diversity of evaluation as a practice within the sector itself.

Respondents from organisations were more likely to frame evaluation as a way of enhancing their own practice and assessing success, with comparatively less emphasis on capturing value compared with independent practitioners. As well as developing and supporting fruitful partnerships with academic institutions and the sector, it is clear that organisations need and expect practical, actionable insight from these partnerships.

Finally, nearly all the independent researchers who filled out this survey have used academic research to inform their practice, which demonstrates a clear opportunity for the Centre to partner with independent consultants and researchers who can provide invaluable expertise and experience to bridge the gap between academic research practice and the needs of the sector.

Defining evaluation

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked to give their definitions of evaluation, and these responses were then coded according to the categories outlined in Figure 3¹. Each category refers to a distinct 'mode' or primary purpose of evaluation that respondents focused on in their definitions².



¹ Each of the individual responses [n=248] were coded according to 7 different categories which emphasise a different key aspect of evaluative practice. Respondents would often highlight more than one aspect of evaluation in their responses, and so some responses were coded more than once; percentages shown do not add up to 100%. These categories were developed through an initial coding of the data, then refined through an additional coding and analysis process to form the categories below.

² Direct quotes from respondents who work for arts, cultural and heritage organisations are labelled as [organisation], independent researcher/evaluators are labelled as [researcher], independent practitioners are referred to as [practitioner] and those that responded as 'other' as [other].

Shaping evaluation: aims and priorities

Influential voices when developing evaluation aims

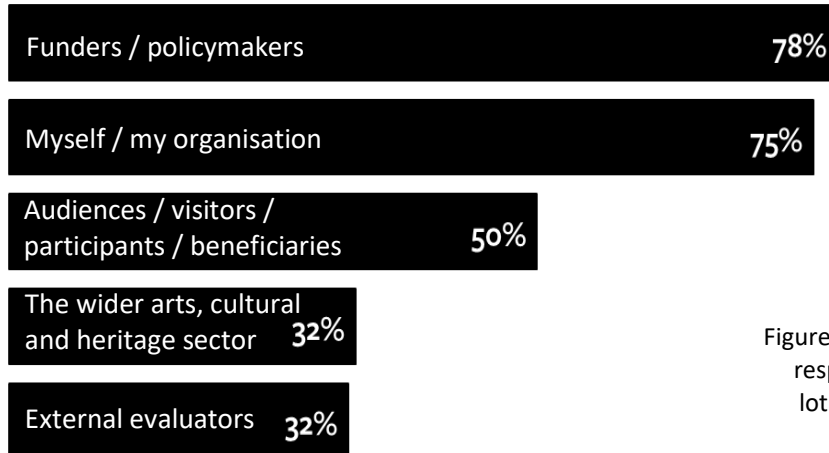


Figure 4 The graph opposite shows the groups that respondents considered to have ‘the most’ or ‘a lot of’ influence on developing the aims of their evaluations. [n=309, 309, 309, 311, 305]

Priorities for developing evaluation aims

Respondents were asked to consider the importance of priorities to themselves / their organisations, their funders, and the arts, cultural and heritage sector as a whole when deciding the aims of their evaluations.

Explaining activity to funders: a top priority for funders and the sector

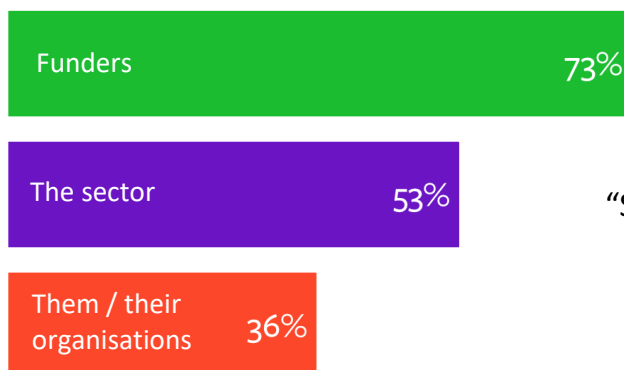


Figure 5 The graph opposite shows the proportion of different categories of respondents who considered ‘to explain activity and impact to funders’ as an ‘extremely important’ priority when deciding evaluation aims.

“Some [evaluation projects] have zero interest in reflective practice despite me encouraging this, whereas others do.

What is consistent across all of them however[...] is explaining impact to funders.” [researcher]

Understanding/improving value for beneficiaries seen as top priority for organisations and individuals

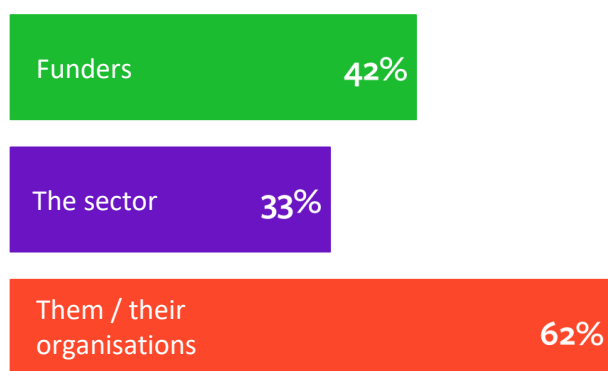


Figure 6 The graph opposite shows the proportion of different categories of respondents who considered ‘to understand and improve the value and impact of activities on audiences, participants, visitors and/or beneficiaries’ as an ‘extremely important’ priority when deciding evaluation aims. [n=306, 311, 311]

“To provide a means of feedback to audiences and participants so that they feel listened to” [organisation].

Influencing policy seen as a lower priority

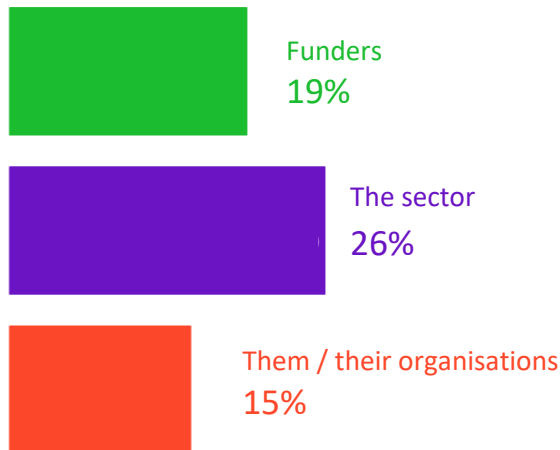


Figure 7 The graph opposite shows the proportion of different categories of respondents who considered 'to influence policy-making' as an 'extremely important' priority when deciding evaluation aims. [n=310, 311, 311]

Given the large proportion of respondents who felt that explaining activity and impact to funders was an important priority, the fact that 19% of respondents felt that influencing policy was 'extremely important' for funders highlights the ambiguous role that policy development is seen to play in evaluation.

While not given as an option, many respondents wanted to acknowledge how they felt evaluation practice was instrumentalised for political or policy aims, or to enable access to funding that they otherwise may not be able to access. For example, respondents from all categories felt that the cultural sector had to justify its own existence and the existence of its funders: **"I think we're missing 'tick box exercise' here. That's possibly different to 'to explain activity and impact to funders'."** **"A great deal of emphasis on 'proving' value in empirical ways; often seen as necessary to accessing funding"** [researcher] **"[This] might seem a little judgemental when so many are doing so much with very little resource, but so much of the sector is earnest in its need to be seen to be doing something, even when that something is not getting any better."** [practitioner]

Matching priorities and expected outcomes of funders

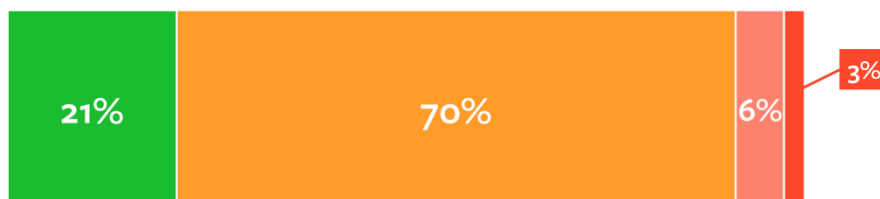


Figure 8 The diagram opposite shows to what extent respondents felt that their or their organisation's priorities matched the expected outcomes of their funders. [n=311]



The opportunity cost of mismatched priorities

Respondents explained the impact that dissimilar, contrasting or conflicting priorities/outcomes had on their evaluation practices. While some respondents did acknowledge that there are different types of 'funder', who may be interested in a broader range of impacts, many

respondents described their funders' expected outcomes to involve impacts that they believed to be less important, or useful, to their practice: **"We have to accommodate evaluation that we would not necessarily otherwise undertake or that does not fit with our organisational values."** [organisation].

Some respondents pointed out that they were unable to have mismatched priorities, it was imperative that their priorities and expected outcomes aligned: **"Any organisation that doesn't go along with its funding bodies is doomed to a 3-year life. It may be glorious, it may be thrilling, but it won't be long"** [practitioner].

Due to limited resources, some respondents described how they 'miss out' on important insights for themselves or their organisations. The 'opportunity cost' of these mismatched priorities where a rich process of learning is not taking place: **"I tend to prioritise the funder's evaluation process/objectives as I do not have capacity to do two different evaluations."** [practitioner] **"We often evaluate things which are important to Funders but miss things which are important to our organisation"; "[I]t distorts it to encompass their priorities and means we cannot act on areas we perceive to be important"** [organisations].

Some respondents detailed the type of learning that would be more useful to their practice – for example, a focus more on the process of their activity, or qualitative insights: **"The operational aspects of evaluation from the staff perspective often take a back seat compared to the user/public/customer perspective and achievements. The staff perspective on how things went, why and how improvements in delivery could be made is extremely valuable but often lost as project-based staff are dispersed at the end of an initiative."** [organisation]

As with the discussion on evaluation as a tool to justify funding, respondents once again conceded that this was in fact a structural issue, rather than simply a question of realigning priorities with individual funders. For some, this structural issue was underpinned by the lack of a long-term or strategic focus: **"Funders do not typically have a long term focus"** [other]. **"The organisations I work for tend to bid to empathetic funders but also find themselves 'bound' by delivering outcomes as opposed to maximising value. That is a result of the bidding/reporting processes [...]"** [researcher]. **"I often feel they want quick results and clear evidence of 'value for money' but much social arts practice requires long term sustainable engagement and social or economic impacts are hard to prove and evaluations often miss the point and longer term more subtle impacts."** [other]. **"Funders are changing what they are looking for [and] organisations are struggling to keep up with the changes. We are interested in long-term impacts - working in 10 year cycles with communities - funders seem to be interested in short term impacts"** [organisation]

Effective evaluation practice

Respondents were asked to assess the efficacy of their or their organisation's evaluation practices compared to the sector in general, in relation to a variety of different outcomes. Respondents rated themselves/ their organisations more effective than the sector as a whole in most contexts, in particular in organisational and professional development contexts.

Developing organisational strategies

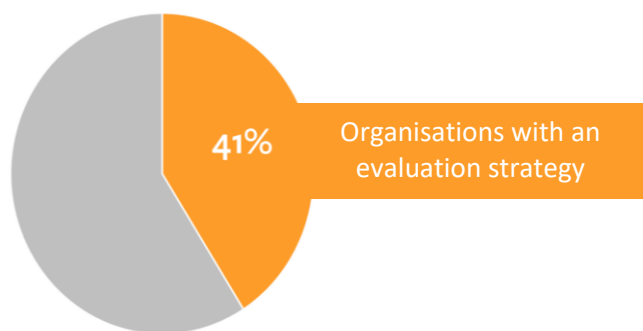


Figure 9 The graph above shows the proportion of respondents whose organisations have a formal evaluation strategy [n=181].



Figure 10 The graph above depicts those groups that respondents identified as 'the most influential voices' in developing their organisational evaluation strategies. [n=75, 75, 72, 74, 74, 75, 74, 75]

When developing evaluation strategies, respondents from micro and small organisations were more likely to cite their whole organisation as influential, suggesting that although many larger organisations do have formal evaluation strategies, there is potential for the development of these strategies to be more holistically owned across organisations. In addition, while leadership and the management team were cited by many respondents as influential, there is a comparatively low percentage of respondents who considered board and governance groups as such, indicating potential for board and governance groups to play a wider role in driving strategic evaluation practice.

Sharing findings of evaluation activity

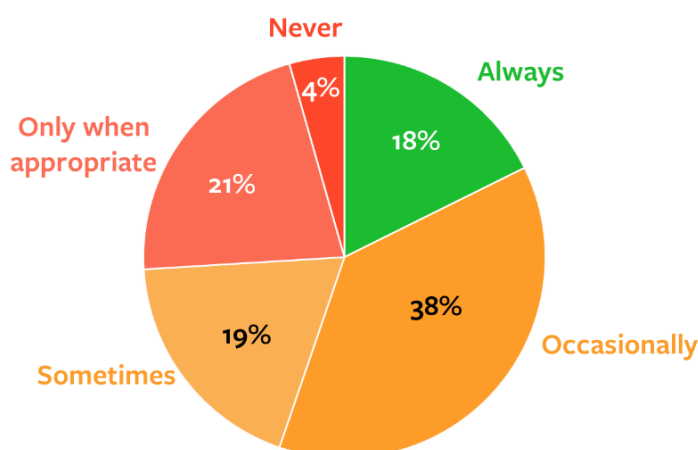


Figure 11 The diagram opposite shows how frequently respondents reported their organisation shares findings externally, beyond reporting back to funders. [n=181]

"Too many evaluations are created then put on the shelf." [organisation]

It was clear from the survey findings that few (18%) of organisations systematically share their findings from evaluation activity, beyond reporting back to funders.

Skills and confidence in evaluation

Lower levels of confidence in analysis and mixed-methods evaluation

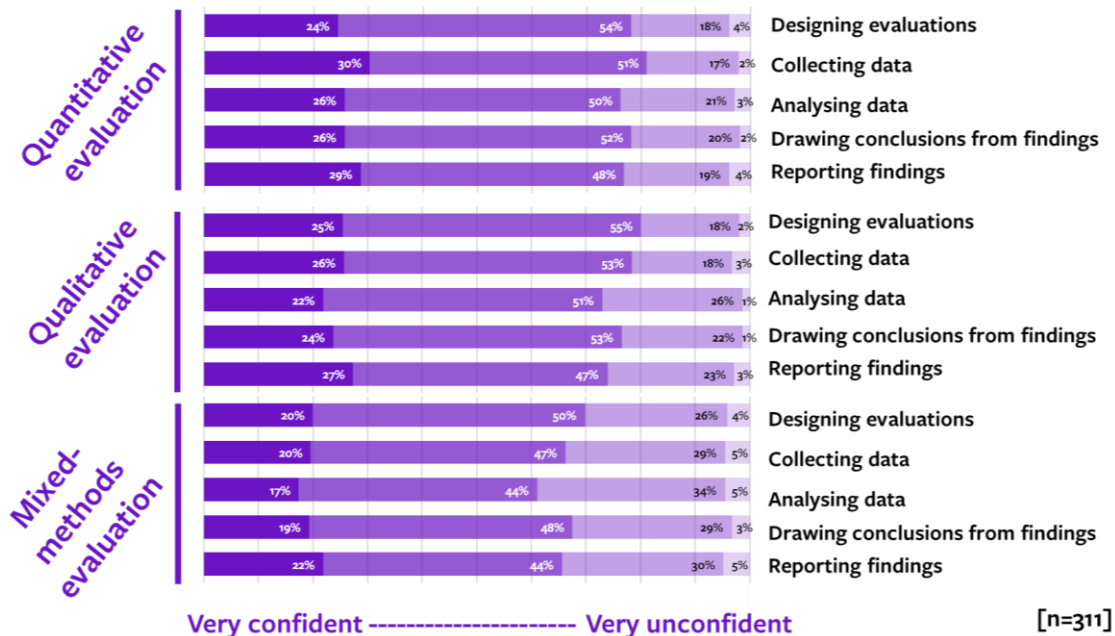


Figure 12 The graph opposite details how confident respondents felt in all stages of evaluation activity, comparing quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods evaluation studies. Percentages shown in the graph are not cumulative, reading from left to right, but relate to each category (very confident / fairly confident / unconfident / very unconfident)

Across all types of evaluation, confidence in analysis were seen to be lower than most other stages of evaluation, as well as in all aspects of mixed-methods evaluation, perhaps suggesting there is less understanding about what constitutes mixed methods, dialogue between data / between methods. On the whole respondents from organisations were more confident in all aspects of evaluation than independent practitioners, particularly in quantitative evaluation skills. This may be explained by the fact that organisations are more used to handling large quantities of behavioural data (e.g. box office data, attendance etc.), and may associate this with quantitative research design.

Research partnerships and commissions

Independent research and evaluation practice

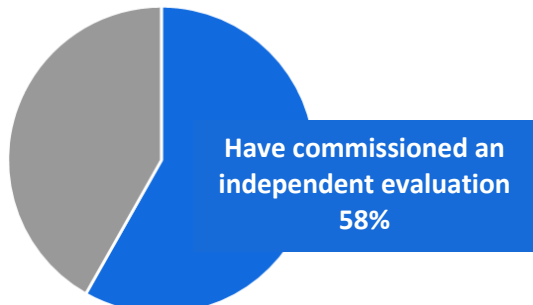


Figure 13 The diagram above shows that 58% of respondents have commissioned an independent evaluation in the past. [n=311]

73% of organisations had commissioned independent evaluation in the past, compared with just 38% of independent practitioners. In addition, larger organisations were more likely to have done this compared with smaller and micro organisations, perhaps down to a lack of available resource. 71% of those respondents who had commissioned independent evaluation in the past had worked with an independent consultant, with just over a quarter (27%) having worked with a higher education

Working with academic researchers

Those respondents who had prior experience were asked how valuable the experience was for them/their organisation (Figure 18), and whether they would work with them again in the future (Figure 19). While most respondents suggested a broadly positive experience, there was still 14% of respondents who felt the experience was 'not very valuable'.

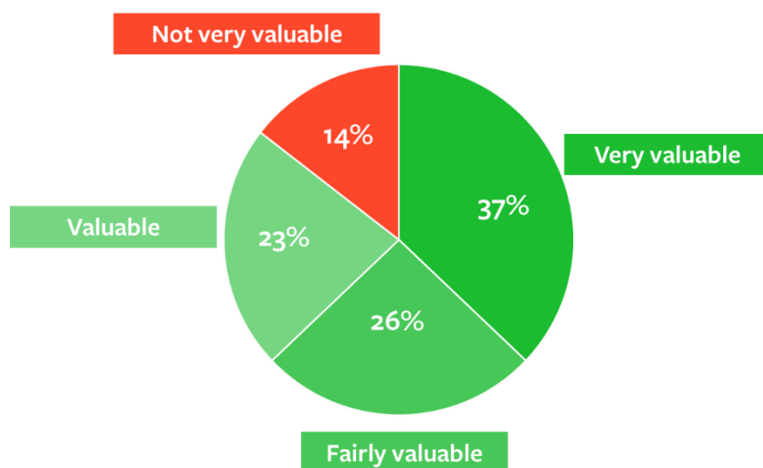


Figure 14 The chart above shows how valuable respondents who had prior experience of working with a 'higher education institution' was for them or their organisation. [n=62]

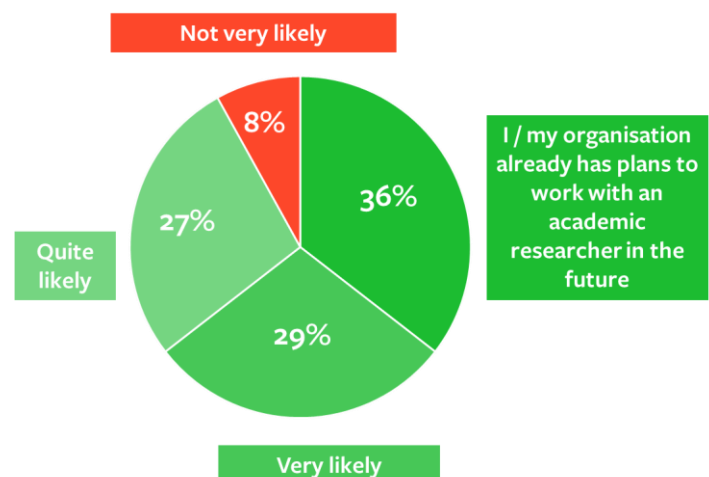


Figure 15 The chart above shows how likely respondents who had worked with academic researchers in the past were to work with them again in the future. [n=62]

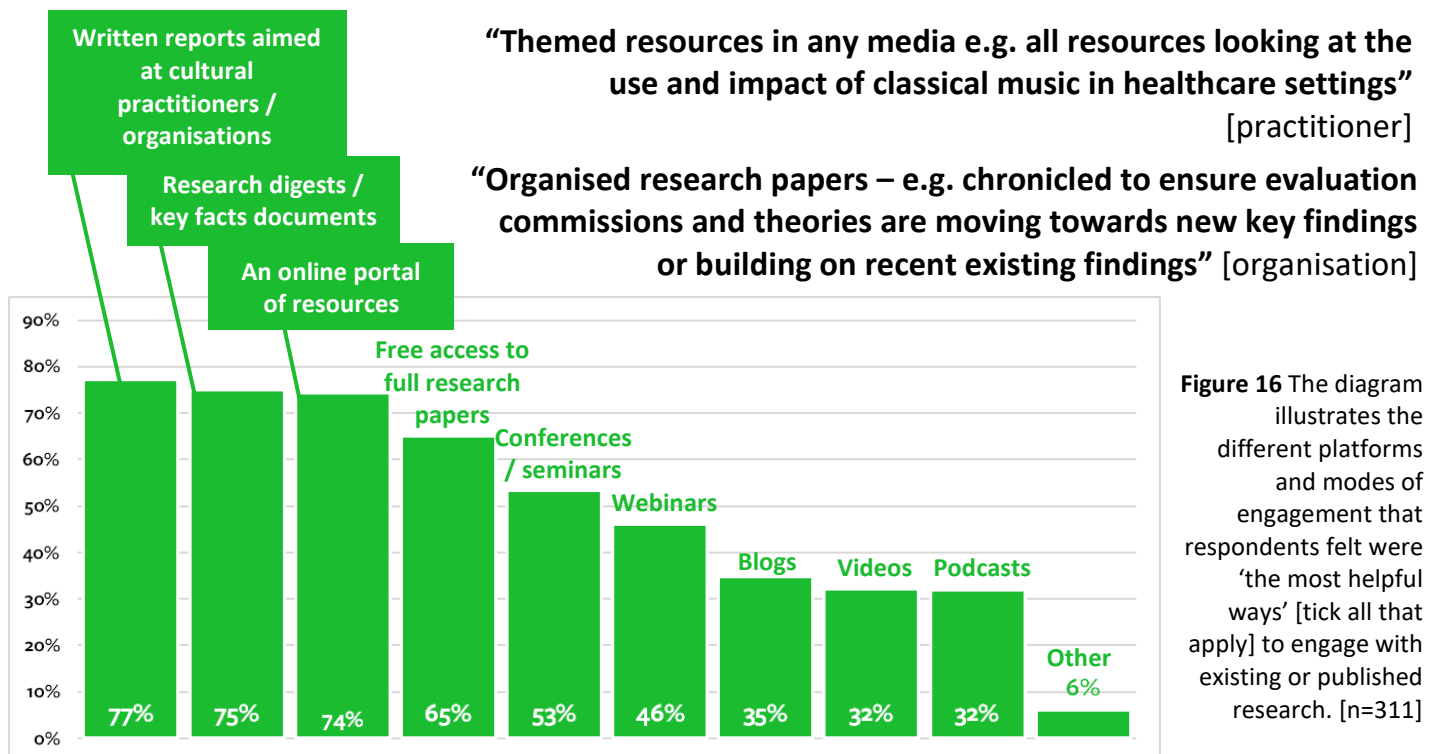
It was clear from many respondents that working with academics was valued for the objectivity and rigour that was brought to the evaluation process, as well as potential positive benefits associated with individual or institutional ‘gravitas’ or reputation: **“Academic rigour and status”** **“External eye and rigour”** **“Impartial research with high standards of ethical and contextual evaluation”**. Other respondents emphasised the methodological expertise and/or the opportunity to conduct longitudinal research as a particularly valuable aspect of working with an academic researcher or the broader contextual understanding lacking in their organisations. Some respondents also acknowledged that partnering with academics enabled access to resources (e.g. funding) that they would otherwise be unable to access.

For many respondents, who felt their experience working with an academic researcher was less valuable, the problem was a clash or lack of clarity in the aims of the evaluation, or the research being focused too much towards academic objectives and not enough to the sector. For some respondents it was difficult to reconcile the two different worlds of academia and practice, resulting in completely differing sets of practices: **“It is difficult to find an academic researcher who is objectively interested in the research you want to carry out. They are often driving the research agenda and are often doing it for purposes other than pure academic interest (e.g. internal pressure to work in partnership)”**. Some mentioned how academic research is costly, both in terms of time and money, whereas others felt that the academic they worked with lacked the experience or knowledge of the sector, or felt that the findings from the evaluation were in fact not relevant or actionable to the sector. This suggests the need to develop and support academic researchers without sector experience to better understand the needs of the sector as well as producing accessible insight: **“Mixed picture - sometimes they’re excellent [...] other times they fail to be grounded in cultural experience”** [practitioner] **“Their research rarely results in the practical actionable insight needed by the organisation”** [organisation]

One key theme that emerged from those respondents who have experience in and plan to continue working with academic researchers was the acknowledgement of the benefits of long-term, co-collaborative partnerships that allowed for more strategic and ‘joined-up’ working. This was particularly important for respondents working in organisations, with the emphasis placed on the right relationship or ‘fit’ for the organisation and the researcher: **“The learning can be greater through a more long-term approach with trusted academic partners”** [organisation]. There is an opportunity for the Centre to help bridge this gap, not only with training and supporting academic researchers, but also in providing the sector with more information on academic practice and opportunities for potential partnerships and training in co-commissioning evaluation and research collaboratively.

Engaging with existing research

86% of respondents said they had used academic research in the past to inform their practice, which demonstrates an opportunity for the Centre to develop on this existing engagement, in addition to supporting the development of productive evaluation partnerships with academic researchers. Our survey findings showed that there is broad demand for multi-platform engagement with existing research, as detailed in Figure 16 below.



Conclusion: framing evaluation

This survey aimed to capture existing practices and perspectives on research and evaluation from cultural sector practitioners, funders, researchers and policymakers, to directly feed into plans to develop resources and training that can support the sector to tell more impactful stories about its activity. There is clearly a strong desire among respondents to this survey to engage with the activities of the Centre for Cultural Value. This report concludes with a brief overview of framing evaluation practice for the Centre's key audiences.

The notion that evaluation is a multi-faceted and contextual practice underpins many of the findings of this research. While some respondents emphasised the impact-led, outcome-oriented 'matching' of pre-determined objectives and assessment of success in their definitions of evaluation, others tended to see evaluation practice as an opportunity for learning, to enhance and inform future practice and/or to deepen their understanding. Respondents from organisations emphasised the importance of evaluation in enhancing practice and assessing success and placed comparatively less emphasis on capturing value compared with practitioners. While it is unclear from the findings what role evaluation does or could play in cultural policy development, this report has highlighted some of the key foundations that fruitful partnerships with academic institutions and the sector can be built on, alongside the need for practical, actionable insights to emerge from these partnerships.

While there was a significant amount of overlap in how respondents defined evaluation, on the whole independent practitioners focused more on capturing the value and impact of their practice and less on evaluation as the assessment of success. This is perhaps not surprising considering they were also less likely to consider their priorities to 'closely' or 'entirely match' with the expected outcomes of funders. Independent practitioners are more likely to prioritise developing artistic/creative practice compared to other roles. There is therefore an opportunity for the Centre to engage with practitioners according to these priorities. Independent researchers tended to offer definitions of evaluation that were less focused on enhancing practice. However, 98% of the independent researchers who responded to this survey said they had used academic research to inform their practice, showing a real opportunity for the sector to work with independent consultants and researchers; a potential strategic partnership that would help to bridge the perceived gap between academic research practice and the needs of the sector, as well as providing invaluable expertise and experience.