



Research Evaluation and Innovation

A Study of Sydney-based Community Organisations

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The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a partnership between the business schools of the University of New South Wales, the University of Melbourne, Swinburne University of Technology and The University of Western Australia. It brings together the committed hearts and business heads of the philanthropic, not-for-profit, private and government sectors in pursuit of social innovation. It provides socially responsible business management education and research in the common cause of building a stronger civil society for Australia.

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Introduction

As the ideas of evidence-based practice and accountability frameworks permeate the community services sector, so does the need for improved documentation. The sector is taking on more research functions and more research staff to be able to provide evidence for results for both government and potential philanthropy. Research documentation is crucial for service development and social innovation. The need to undertake a more rigorous approach to evidence has created some dilemmas for the sector, particularly for smaller organisations. A major issue for the sector has been the need to be able to measure social impact in the face of different reporting requirements and lack of investment in funding for the sector. This small study finds that the sector could benefit greatly from resources made available by the Centre for Social Impact, such as access to university databases, short courses, and capacity to conference on research and social innovation.

Background

In the early 1990s, I conducted a small study into an emerging phenomenon that I had observed amongst some of the larger Sydney based community service organisations (CSOs): that of an increase in the amount of resources devoted to research, broadly defined. The study focused on eight organisations with four having begun to employ research staff, and the other four articulating that they wished to do so. Some of the reasons cited for the fledgling emergence of a research culture included: the need to monitor government policy and be able to provide submissions on relevant policy areas, as a response to funding models; concern that innovation or innovations were not being recorded or discussed in the professional arena; and internal evaluation of the effectiveness of programs or external evaluation by consultants. A further driver was that research and development increased the capacity of an organisation to raise its profile through contact with the media, and provided information for use in fundraising literature. One further reason given for a drive towards research was a desire to emulate Melbourne's Brotherhood of St Laurence, which had been doing research since 1942 and had successfully gained a strong public profile due to its excellent research work (Keen, 1993).

Through years of monitoring the growth in research and policy activity among CSOs, I became aware that the number of research staff within CSOs had grown considerably. Further, for several years research managers from the larger Sydney based CSOs and research coordinators from small organisations and peaks had formed an informal research network to meet the emerging need of a forum where discussion of common problems relating to research and evaluation could take place. In mid-2009 this network had approximately 25 organisational members, including large and small social assistance providers and peak bodies. Four CSOs had appointed research staff in 1993. The researcher estimates that around 40 would have research staff today. This study does not attempt to enumerate the total number of research staff in Sydney based CSOs since it works from a limited sample.

In the intervening period to 2009, research has become even more central to the work of CSOs because of the need to develop a solid evidence base. Research and evaluation are now recognised as vital for building the capacity of practice-oriented organisations to (a) establish innovative programs that meet local needs; (b) ensure that programs are working well; (c) provide monitoring information to funders, both public and private; and (d) establish the credentials of innovative programs to ensure continued public support and convince donors of the efficacy of their work. This bears little difference to the environment in 1993, however, the size of research activity has experienced significant growth. A research and development function is now critical to the development of evidence-based practices

and it also contributes to a sense of legitimacy and credibility about the work of CSOs. Further, this points to an enhanced capacity of CSOs to conduct research for the systematic review and development of programs for social innovation.

I was engaged by the Centre for Social Impact at the University of New South Wales to undertake a scoping study to better understand the goals and drivers of this growing research capacity, the problems that CSOs were encountering in achieving their objectives, how research related to institutional developments in the wider social policy field, and, particularly, the extent to which these research efforts were being used for social innovation and what institutional developments might direct and enhance these efforts towards that goal.

Studying Sydney-based CSOs: Method

This study focuses mainly on the Sydney region, and as such cannot be considered to be representative in the wider context. In all, a small number of fourteen organisations provided input to this scoping study. A purposive sample was chosen to reflect the diversity in size, mission, and role in the sector. There were two peak organisations, four large organisations, and eight small organisations included in the study.

For the purposes of this research, two different kinds of research method were employed: desk research and interviews with research managers of a selected sample of Sydney based CSOs. Desk research involved examining the websites of selected CSOs with a particular focus on web pages or research papers that reflected the keywords: research, evaluation, policy, advocacy, and innovation or innovative.

Recent submissions to the Productivity Commission (PC) on the Contribution of the Not for Profit Sector were particularly useful since the PC addressed innovation and research in its Issues Paper (Productivity Commission, 2009). Many of the key CSOs provided submissions to the Commission's study, and the data provides a rich source of information for this study.

Further to the desk research, interviews were conducted with research managers to either gain a complete overview of the role of research and evaluation for social innovation in organisations (particularly the large CSOs), and shorter interviews with smaller CSOs, peaks and Web 2.0 focused organisations.

The organisations were asked about their staffing, the means of undertaking research, problems of measurement, and issues relating to dissemination and social innovation.

Research in Sydney-based CSOs

'Research' is a broad category that encompasses a good deal of activity. It involves being aware of existing research and other kinds of information on a particular area; being able to distil new ideas from multiple small and large studies; creating new information with a potentially wide range of research methods: surveys, interviews, focus groups, content analysis, and narrative analysis, being the most utilised. It might also include such activities as 'intelligence and monitoring', keeping databases of activities or clients that become potential sources for analysis.

In terms of 'research', it is important to bear in mind the breadth of the roles encompassed in this designation. Some organisations separate their research and policy staff and others combine the roles.

Further, some practitioners are also researchers, so the lines are blurred and the so-called research/policy/practice divide is, or can be, a rather arbitrary one. Some organisations have research staff also working in policy related areas, e.g. submissions to government inquiries. Research staff or practitioners may also be conducting monitoring of data for feedback to government, internal evaluation, or liaising with external evaluators, conducting policy analysis, and advocacy. Thus a variety of tasks may be involved in this broad idea of a 'research' function.

CSOs have appointed numbers of trained researchers. For example, Mission Australia report that they employ 10 researchers/policy analysts and are in the process of expanding that number to around 15; the Benevolent Society have five researchers and five policy workers and, although they treat these fields as separate they remark that there is a lot of overlap in the work that they do. As mentioned above, this study did not have the capacity to identify the number of researchers within the Sydney region. However, it would not surprise this researcher to see the number of full time equivalent researchers in the vicinity of up to 300 in Sydney CSOs alone if a full census could be taken. In terms of when this increase in research activity occurred, the most common time period cited for increased numbers was between 1999 and 2002. There is a definite trend in incorporating research and evaluation in social programs, building in-house skills and creating learning organisations, particularly among the larger CSOs, while smaller organisations are also working hard to ensure that their research capacity improves, although with more impediments to achieving this.

While a lot of research work is being done internally, there are also a number of external relationships and research grants that cut across the boundaries of CSOs and universities. ARC Linkage Grants have also been helpful in developing the research capacity of the sector, albeit with occasional problems. It is clear that the boundaries around the 'research community' and the CSOs are increasingly porous.

The Broad Context

There are some wider institutional contexts and drivers that have affected the research activity of CSOs: the idea of evidence-based policy; the accountability and measurement movement with an emphasis on measuring outcomes; the development of Linkage Grants by the Australian Research Council; and the need for knowledge collation and brokering roles.

Evidence Based Policy

The idea of evidence based policy has gained considerable traction, particularly in the United Kingdom under the Blair government, and more recently in the Australian Rudd government and the Obama administration in the United States. Evidence based policy emerged from the fields of health and education and has now made its way into the areas of children and youth. The need has arisen for clear statements of purpose of community services programs and a demonstration of their potential outcomes and social impact. For programs to be supported and funded by either the public or private sectors, an evidence base is critical.

Accountability and Measurement

Alongside this new respect for evidence has emerged an impetus for new forms of social measurement, with a particular focus on measuring outcomes and social impact. A variety of measurement tools have been developed and taken up by a number of organisations, often at the behest of government funding requirements: results based accountability, benchmarking, log frame, and social return on investment to name but a few (Paton, 2003; Zappala and Lyons, 2009). The

impetus for greater measurement is being felt across policy fields, including in human rights (Carr Center for Human Rights, 2005).

In terms of government funding, the introduction of results based accountability (RBA), a model developed by Mark Friedman, has had a major impact on organisations in New South Wales. Organisations that require funding from, for example, the Department of Community Services, need to meet the requirements of the RBA. As we will see, the impetus to enhance measurement means that CSOs need to give more attention to the measurement aspects of their services.

Zappala and Lyons observe that there are considerable resource limitations in the third sector in relation to even simple evaluation techniques, let alone for some of the more rigorous offerings such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), without resources such as 'money, time, training and the provision of external specialists' (2009:13). Currently the process of measurement is fairly ad hoc in the sector: 'Some passionately embrace it and some may be forced to ignore it because of cost, culture or lack of capacity, while most are somewhere in between' (Chapman, 2009). Yet there is increasing pressure for CSOs to demonstrate, despite the resource constraints, what kind of difference their programmes are making, using whatever measurement tools are most suitable.

There was almost universal support for some kind of standardised framework for measurement in the SAN submissions to the PC study of the Not for Profit Sector. Some of the larger organisations may receive funds from more than a dozen government departments across the States and Commonwealth with different reporting requirements.

There was some concern at the perception that government was mostly interested in measures that tapped organisational outputs, while measures that could provide important information about *outcomes* were not able to provide suitable data. One respondent stated: 'it is easy to say that we have provided a service to 20 clients – this is an output measure. However it says nothing about the quality of the service – we may well achieve better outcomes by providing a service to 5 clients than 20, but the output data is what matters.' Measurement, however, is vital for a range of reasons: for government funded programs to be able to demonstrate what has been achieved; for actual or potential philanthropic funders; for internal program development and to enhance organisational learning.

The Productivity Commission (PC) in its Issues Paper (2009:22) provided a draft overarching framework for measuring the contribution of the not for profit sector which identifies the difficulty of providing comprehensive data at the outcomes level. Thus it may be possible that following consideration of the submissions to the PC's study, a framework may emerge that is useful to the sector. It does appear that the measurement movement and particularly for Sydney based CSOs, the results based accountability framework, had impacted on their thinking about measurement.

Evaluation

The CSOs speak of both internal and external research and development in the context of evaluation. Internal evaluation is likely to be conducted with researchers and practitioners as a process evaluation to improve practice and assist in organisational learning and the capacity of researchers and practitioners (as experts in their area). External evaluation occurs where an organisation needs a fresh perspective on the work and brings in someone from an outside organisation, possibly a consultancy or a university department. Evaluation is critical to providing evidence to funders and boards of the efficacy of programs.

For an innovative program to be more widely received, some kind of rigorous evaluation system is required, along with capacity for wide dissemination. While the larger CSOs had significant evaluation capacity, for smaller organisations this was difficult to achieve.

Linkage Grants (the Australian Research Council)

The development of Linkage Grants by the Australian Research Council (ARC) has been a particular driver for more collaborative research in the sector with universities. Once these became available, academic researchers began to seek out potential partners in the community sector for projects. The actual numbers of ongoing ARC Linkage Grants among academics and CSOs was not possible to ascertain from this small research sample. One small organisation reported that their organisation found it necessary to appoint a research staff member to manage the grant relationships with universities, so as to ensure that their client base did not become over-researched. As these grants developed and became more popular, it was also important to ensure that the SAN was strategic about what projects it encouraged so as to best enhance the organisation's interests.

While there have clearly been some successful collaborations by academics with CSOs, there were also some problems identified. There have been cases where academic researchers have approached CSOs to conduct research on their clients, but have then failed to provide any feedback to the organisation about their findings, perhaps due to the work remaining unfinished as other pressures take their toll on academic time. This kind of problem can lead to a feeling among the researched that they have been used, and may create research fatigue. Universities were seen as either being very collaborative or a one-way street, often at the expense of the SAN. However, the success of the ARC Linkage for many organisations meant that research was done that would never have been achieved without that capacity being available.

There was a feeling that many more opportunities for secondments across government, universities and nonprofits would assist in breaking down barriers between nonprofits and the academic community (see Meredith Edwards, 2004, for an elaboration of these ideas from an academic/government perspective). Respondents spoke of the silos of research, policy and practice, and indicated how difficult it could be to get people to find a common dialogue. One example was given where researchers from each of the areas of youth and homelessness were successfully brought together with practitioners and policymakers with a view to breaking down the divide to co-produce policy solutions.

Research can be overwhelming for small organisations. First of all there are problems with knowing whether they are being sufficiently rigorous. The small organisations also found it difficult to negotiate with universities and some had experienced less than satisfactory outcomes where they had provided access to their client base but not received any benefit in terms of new knowledge. For small organisations, research also competes with the daily grind of things that need to be done in the service arena.

Case Study – SAN/University Partnerships

Partnerships with university staff have become common with academics accessing grants through the Australian Research Council in collaboration with CSOs. Some of these have been highly successful. Mission Australia has a strong commitment to Linkage Projects and currently has six underway with two in the funding pipeline. They are committed to these projects because they offer the opportunity for partnerships, the creation of new knowledge, and the capacity for longitudinal analysis of innovative programs. An example of a highly successful partnership can be seen with Mission Australia and Griffith University/Australian Research Council in their program, Pathways to Prevention. This began in 1999 and was focused on an urban area of South East Queensland. It is unusual in the community services context in that it was able to gain longitudinal data. This kind of program was subsequently developed by the Commonwealth Government as the Communities for Children program and rolled out around Australia.

Knowledge Collation and Knowledge Brokering

The sheer amount of information in the research areas relevant to CSOs has led to a need for intermediary organisations such as Clearing Houses and organisations capable of 'brokering' knowledge to emerge. Leigh, for example, observes that if a policymaker (or researcher/practitioner) wanted to read the 6,000 articles available on 'early childhood intervention', they would need to read 'solidly for 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year', for a period of 18 months! (Leigh, 2009:28). Sadly, however, The Benevolent Society's submission to the PC reported that their early childhood workers were likely to only have approximately five minutes a day for reading time (The Benevolent Society, 2009:9), an indicator of the importance of knowledge collation.

Clearing Houses – Clearing houses help to eliminate duplication by being able to report the efforts of researchers in a range of organisational locations. The number of times that Clearing houses were cited as very important indicates not only their use as a source of information on particular aspects of social assistance, but also the role they play in condensing or collating information for research. However, a new researcher may not be aware of the existing clearing houses, and some kind of hub may be needed for third sector research to direct researchers to relevant links. See a list of most cited Clearing Houses at Appendix 1.

Knowledge Hubs and Knowledge Brokering Institutes – As observed earlier, a need for knowledge brokering has emerged. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was cited as a kind of knowledge broker, a facility for exchanging information, bringing people together, and running workshops. Some of the key research personnel in the major Sydney social assistance industry were instrumental in the development of ARACY.

In the overseas context of the United Kingdom, there were three organisations cited as being important in assisting research: the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) <http://www.scie.org.uk/>; the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) <http://www.nice.org.uk/>. NICE contains a portal called [NHS Evidence](#) which provides access to information relating to health and social care. This quote from the website shows just how the site works to facilitate access to information: "The portal does not host any content, but searches external sources of information so that users can access it directly. All sources of content are subject to criteria to ensure relevant search results and to rule out anything that might be biased or partial." (NHS Evidence website).

Also cited was Research in Practice (RIP) – <http://www.rip.org.uk/> which supports evidence-informed practice with children and families. The Campbell Collaboration (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>) and Cochrane Collaboration (<http://www.cochrane.org>) were also considered to undertake ‘amazing’ systematic reviews. Systematic reviews have emerged recently as an important form of information collation in that they bring together small and large studies on a topic area to distil the key themes and evidence for a policy issue. Another potential network was the Aging Research Network – another global group (www.agingresearchnetwork.org/).

Undoubtedly more of these organisations will emerge to manage the amount of knowledge available on topics, and it will be important to keep abreast of developments in this area. The Centre for Social Impact could clearly assist with developing a site that might be a ‘clearing house’ for clearing houses and knowledge networks for CSOs in Australia.

Research and Development for Social Innovation

Given the importance of encouraging and realising the capacity for social innovation, understanding the relationship between the broad research function and social innovation is important. An innovative idea can emerge from reading existing research reports, from practitioners observing an unmet need from conference presentations etc. Taking that idea and researching it more fully, developing a literature review, scoping ideas for implementation, trialling a new program and subsequent scaling up are all part of the process of developing research based innovation.

Social innovation is an understudied concept that describes what is usually a new approach to an existing social problem. Historically, CSOs have provided many socially innovative ideas and programs that have often been scaled-up to the level of governmental programs. Social innovation is defined as ‘innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social’ (Mulgan, 2006:146). Existing knowledge on social innovation is limited, although it is emerging as a topic of great interest (Mulgan, 2006; Mulgan, Tucker, Ali and Sanders, 2007).

The emergence of social innovation is usually due to an unmet need identified by a person or organisation as requiring action of some kind. Often, a person who works to facilitate the development of social innovation is known as a ‘social entrepreneur’, someone who can take an idea, champion it, raise funds for it, and see it implemented (Traill, 2008; Hetherington, 2008; Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). Interest in social innovation is growing around the world and in Australia. The South Australian Government has been active, announcing a Centre for Social Innovation to be housed at the University of Adelaide, following Geoff Mulgan’s period as Thinker in Residence in 2008 (Rogers, 2009).

The capacity of the nonprofit sector for social innovation is undeniable. Many historical examples can be demonstrated: the development of the Burnside Homes for Children at North Parramatta built from 1911 entirely by philanthropy and based on an innovative idea of ‘small’ group homes¹ for children, an idea most likely diffused from the United Kingdom (Keen, 1986; Keen 1995); and the innovative ideas and programs documented in the research of the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Keen, 1996). A review of South Australian innovations in an historical context was recently developed by Manwaring (2008). Most of these examples are ones that have been developed without much in the way of government involvement, although they may indeed have received government funding in later years. What is not

¹ ‘Small’ group home in 1911 meant around 50 children. This was a huge innovation when compared to the large asylums that housed hundreds that were the hallmark of the late nineteenth century, eg the Randwick Asylum.

clear, however, is what the impact of government funding has been on social innovation, although this issue has been explored in a recent publication (Saunders and Stewart-Weeks, 2009).

In recent years, government has become the main funder of services, contracting CSOs to provide program delivery. Yet it is often in smaller settings that true innovative ideas can be generated. Programs delivered at the state level can suffer from lack of input at the provider level, or can suffer from needing to respond to indicators designated by government. Social innovation can be thwarted when CSOs become responders to government contracts rather than innovators of new ideas. Getting the balance right in government-non-government relations is of great importance. It is worthy of note that the employment services industry in Australia, a contracted environment for Commonwealth government programs, has now been encouraged to think innovatively for local solutions to long-term unemployment with the provision of an allocation of \$41million as an innovation fund (DEEWR, 2008).

In CSOs, social innovation often emerges from experience on the ground, subsequently promoted by someone internally in an organisation and perhaps with some philanthropic funding to test the idea out with a pilot. If successful, in theory, that idea might be scaled up to a wider audience. There are, around the world, many organisations in the social assistance field trialling different methods and innovations, indicating that the field is crowded with ideas and activity, and with investment of time and resources in developing these innovations. However, as Salveron, Arney and Scott (2006:38) note: 'To obtain the best return on this investment, greater attention needs to be paid to developing the conditions under which dissemination and diffusion of innovation are most likely to succeed'. Not only do we need to be aware of what will facilitate the best diffusion of innovations, we also need to be cognisant of the importance of knowledge utilisation and dissemination to the social innovation field. This makes it evident that clearing houses and knowledge brokering will become increasingly important to improve the effective capacity of learning across organisations and fields.

There are a range of social innovations currently under development or at more advanced stages of implementation among CSOs in Sydney. It is also evident that research is playing a critical role in the development of social innovations, and in the evaluation and monitoring of their success, including the value of their social impact. There were a number of innovations evident in the sample of Sydney-based CSOS, and considerable scope for corporate philanthropy to come on board to make a difference. Of course some organisations were more sophisticated at seeking corporate funding than others. For some, the idea of packaging an innovation to attract further funding had barely been considered, although the perennial idea of seeking government funding had indeed been part of the aim. One potential role for CSI would be to focus on social innovation from the perspective of research, policy and practice, perhaps through a research project that gathers examples of social innovations in the sector.

Case Study: The Benevolent Society (TBS) – partnerships in research

Domestic violence is an ongoing and difficult issue for Australian families. The Benevolent Society research *Moving Forward* focused on life for women after domestic violence, in contrast to previous research literature that focused more on the process of leaving an abusive relationship. The research, which culminated in a 54 page report, was funded by OROTON, and demonstrates the need for further government support for services to assist rebuilding, and signals the need to generate services that assist women to recover from the long term effects of domestic violence. It is a case of philanthropic funding to generate research knowledge that indicates an innovation important enough for wider scaling up – in this case, in terms of an addition to government provided services. The report was launched by the Minister for Education and Training and Minister for Women, Verity Firth, and was also reviewed by the domestic violence ministerial advisory group. A larger research project may also emerge out of this study in the future.

Social Innovation – hopes and challenges, what inhibits?

What inhibits innovation? There is more innovation going on in the sector than might be imagined. Despite the difficulties relating to time and funding, the sector is and always has been, innovative. However the perception of innovation may well be hampered by the lack of written case studies of innovation that in turn comes from time-poor capacity to undertake evaluation. From the survey of organisations included in this study, there was a rich array of activity. However, there is the potential to inspire the sector with support in terms of linking with organisations such as ASIX, and for the Centre for Social Impact to offer a space to think about how things could be done differently in terms of capacity to scale up programs or to seek alternative funding sources.

There are, however, some needs that were identified by the sector that could enhance their capacity to develop socially innovative responses to social problems. The following issues were highlighted:

Databases:

CSO researchers have as much need to be able to access academic databases as academics themselves, since the foundation of research in a new area is a literature review. The CSOs universally cited difficulty accessing university databases as a critical issue. Researchers argued that it was difficult to conduct rigorous literature reviews without access to the relevant databases. Most said that they survived since they had staff who were also students on their team, but stated that there were periods when this capacity was unavailable. Clearly it is an issue that a community service nonprofit organisation cannot afford the prohibitive expense of database access via a university library. Some researchers cited difficulties such as coming to universities to do research only to find that all the computers were being used by students, and/or parking anywhere near a campus meant a major investment in time. Even the NSW State Library which does have access to databases was cited as problematic, with researchers being unable to log on due to the limited number of licences available for databases.

The Smith Family has been able to negotiate library access through the University of Sydney, but other organisations were using informal and generally unsatisfactory means of accessing library databases. This is clearly an opportunity for the Centre for Social Impact to assist, at the same time contributing to the community contribution of the University of New South Wales.

Research Methods:

Some members of the sector identified skills issues in relation to research. Some of the larger CSOs stated that it was quite difficult to find the right staff with the right mix of skills and research motivations. On another level, the smaller CSOs were vigorous in stating that the cost of software such as SPSS (statistical package for the social sciences widely taught to students in Social Science, Psychology, and Social Work degrees) which might indeed provide the basis for future research workers, was prohibitive and meant that they could not afford site licences to use such software. This then leads to de-skilling of research staff with newly-minted skills in SPSS unable to proceed to develop their research skills and leads to a loss of rigorous research output.

Small Organisations and Tracking Social Innovation:

There is almost no funding built into some programs the sector described as innovative. One peak organisation suggested: 'We have hundreds of small organisations undertaking innovative programs but there is very little time or money to write them up or tell others about them'. This is clearly important since if innovation cannot be documented then it cannot be shared, nor cannot it be scaled. It may also mean that there is a lot of 'reinventing the wheel' going on which of course depletes the investment of time and funds in social programs.

Web 2.0 and its potential:

Web 2.0 clearly has amazing potential to transform the sector in many ways. The work that has been done by Inspire shows the capacity of a social innovation in this way. Inspire runs a web based program called Reach Out! which is aimed at young people who are in danger of self harm. Since they have been operating, the suicide rate has fallen substantially, and while they are clear that correlation is not causation, the result is encouraging.

While doing this research, it became evident that some organisations are working with models of service delivery that could easily be open to Web 2.0 applications. For example, where there are regional services that include support groups and the like, there is definitely capacity to change the nature of the way that support is conducted. Instead of someone attending a support group in person, they could have support available in a much wider setting by using Web 2.0 applications. As another example, Carers NSW stated that they wanted to grow their Web 2.0 capacity with a project referred to as the development of a communication hub.

Case Study: Inspire

Concern about escalating rates of youth suicide inspired the development of the Inspire Foundation in 1996. Inspire state that everything they do is supported by research and evaluation (<http://www.inspire.org.au>). Inspire has six research staff and is also heavily involved in research partnerships with universities, including ARC Linkage grants, evaluations, and commissioned research. One of their major developments was a program, underlined by the public health approach to mental health, known as Reach Out! Evidence is crucial to their work, both in ensuring use of evidence for programs, growing the evidence base by working with academic and other organisations, and systematic measurement of program outcomes against the goals and objectives of programs.

Government or Philanthropy?

A trend observed in the smaller organisations was to demonstrate something was working or in need of greater funding and then to be asking government to come on board with more funds. When it was suggested that they might look for funding from the corporate sector, it was clear that this had not occurred to them – hearing about corporate social responsibility made them realise for the first time that this might be a new avenue for funding for their important programs. While the larger organisations were well aware of corporate funding, they also recognised that in some areas it is only government that can provide the breadth for equitable service delivery. This presents another opportunity for the Centre for Social Impact in the provision of seminars where such ideas can be promulgated.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We are clearly in a period where there is growth in the importance of evidence in social programs. Although peak bodies exist to help in information exchange, they tend to be more involved in the policy sector areas on which they work. Something new is needed to be able to provide an exchange for research and evaluation – a context for learning and exploring and exchanging ideas for research across specific organisations. In the social services sector, conferences tend to be focused on particular issues, e.g. families, or ageing. A space is needed where a more formal network for exchange of research ideas could be helpful, supplementing the informal research group that has sprung up in Sydney to help researchers gain a wider understanding of the issues relating to research across sectors.

There is clearly scope for further research on how to build a more socially innovative culture in the Australian context. This might be a project more closely and widely studying researchers, including issues relating to their qualifications and capacity, and needs. This could then feed into CSI developing its training offerings to meet the needs of a broader community of nonprofits. There is also potential capacity for CSI to assist in other ways, as addressed in the recommendations below.

Recommendations - Role for CSI

The following recommendations are offered as a result of this study:

1. Facilitating further discussion/ workshops on measuring social impact. As the heterogeneity of the research function spreads across organisational locations, so does the need for skill development in research, evaluation and measurement for social impact. CSI could conceivably play a role in providing short courses or facilitating workshops on relevant topics.
2. Creating the capacity for CSOs to access university library databases if connected to e.g. CSI. Researchers cited the difficulty of being able to conduct rigorous literature reviews without access to the relevant databases. Most said that they survived since they had staff that were also students on their team, but said there were periods when this critical capacity was unavailable. Clearly it is an issue that a social assistance nonprofit organisation cannot afford the prohibitive expense of database access via a university library. It might be possible for the Centre for Social Impact to arrange some help here under the University's community engagement provisions.

3. Develop a conference on social innovation in Australia that incorporates research and practice. This would clearly be popular in terms of a showcase for innovation but also as a cross-fertilisation for research and policy issues.
4. Workshops bringing together small organisations with socially innovative ideas, along the lines of ASIX, but on a smaller scale.
5. Capacity to link smaller CSOs to philanthropy – a mechanism which can assist to broker socially innovative ideas and link these to potential donors.
6. A project mapping CSO evaluation. CSOs are undertaking evaluation but through poor resourcing and lack of coordination, results are rarely published or disseminated. A project that tracks the extent of evaluation, the funding sources, motivations and benefits of evaluation would contribute to the sector.
7. Skills in social research were also hampered by lack of access to tools such as SPSS. Further, researchers were keen to have assistance from the Centre if this was at all possible. A potential course for the Centre's involvement in course offerings would include Research and Evaluation in NGOs.

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Appendix 1 – Clearing Houses - Australia

Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies: <http://www.acys.utas.edu.au/>

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training: <http://www.adcet.edu.au>

Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse: <http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/>

Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/>

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute: <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/>

Australian Indigenous Health *Infonet*: <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/>

Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/index.html/>

Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse: <http://www.indigenousjustice.gov.au/>

National Child Protection Clearing House: <http://www.aifs.org.au/nch/>

National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse: <http://www.homelessnessinfo.net.au/>

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