Summary Report.

Elements of Successful Evidence Centres:

Foundations for a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence.

August 2024

Prepared by the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne

CENTRE for SOCIAL IMPACT | SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne is located on in Melbourne's east and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

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Thankyou

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CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

In May 2024, the Australian federal government announced a budget commitment of $23.3 million over four years to establish a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence from 2024-25. This study investigates evidence in relation to the ingredients necessary for effective 'evidence centres' to inform the design of the Centre of Excellence.

This report is a summary of a more detailed report prepared by the Centre for Social Impact (CSI), Swinburne University of Technology, called *Elements of Successful Evidence Centres: Foundations for a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence*. The report is available on the CSI website.

WHAT IS AN EVIDENCE CENTRE?

Evidence centres have many names but are generally established to 'generate, synthesise, and curate high-quality and rigorous research, data and evaluation with a specific objective to influence and improve the decision-making of policymakers, practitioners, non-governmental organisations, the public, and others' (Puttick et al., 2023, p.9). Broadly, they generate evidence, explain evidence for a range of stakeholders, and encourage the use of evidence to inform practice.

There is no single or agreed definition of 'evidence'. In this context, it is the information needed to answer questions, solve problems and improve practice. This information can include numerical data reported as statistics, as well as data that explores people's experiences, opinions, and attitudes, often through observation and interviews. Evidence can recognise 'different ways of knowing', for example, from a person's lived experience.

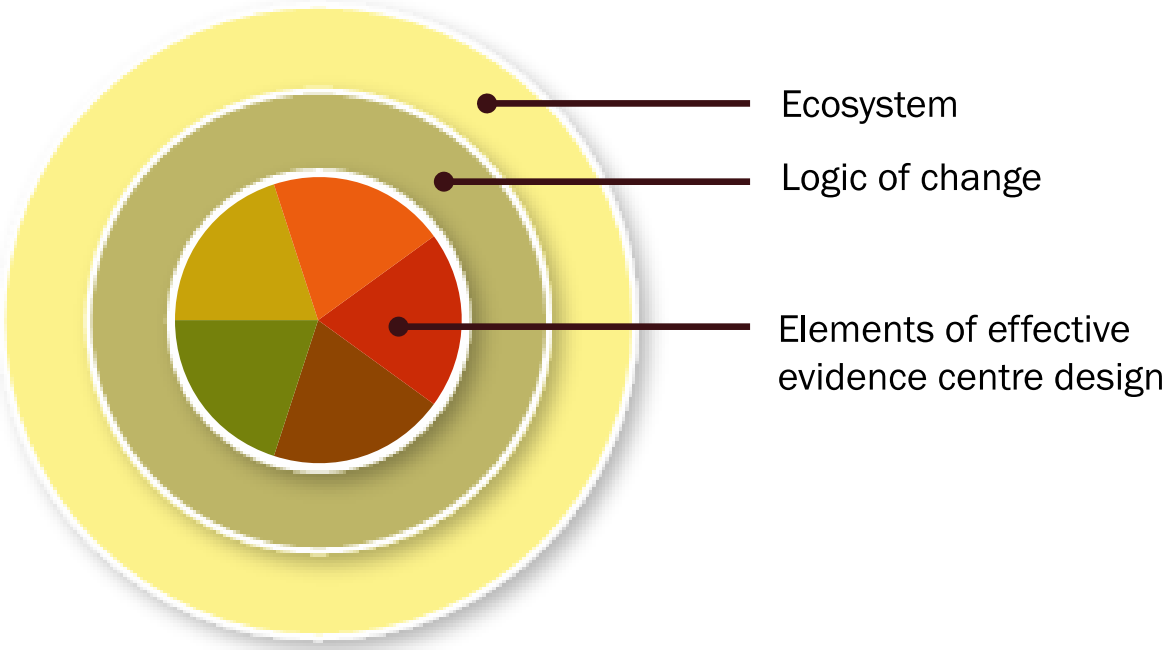
RESEARCH APPROACH

The research had five stages.

1. Review of submissions to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence Options Paper (DSS, 2023) from Disability Representative Organisations.
2. Review of the academic literature on the effectiveness of evidence centres.
3. Review of 23 existing, successful evidence centres in Australia, US, UK, Canada and New Zealand.
4. In-depth investigation of nine successful evidence centre models through interviews with key personnel and document review.
5. Creation of evidence-based insights through analysis of data (as presented in this summary).

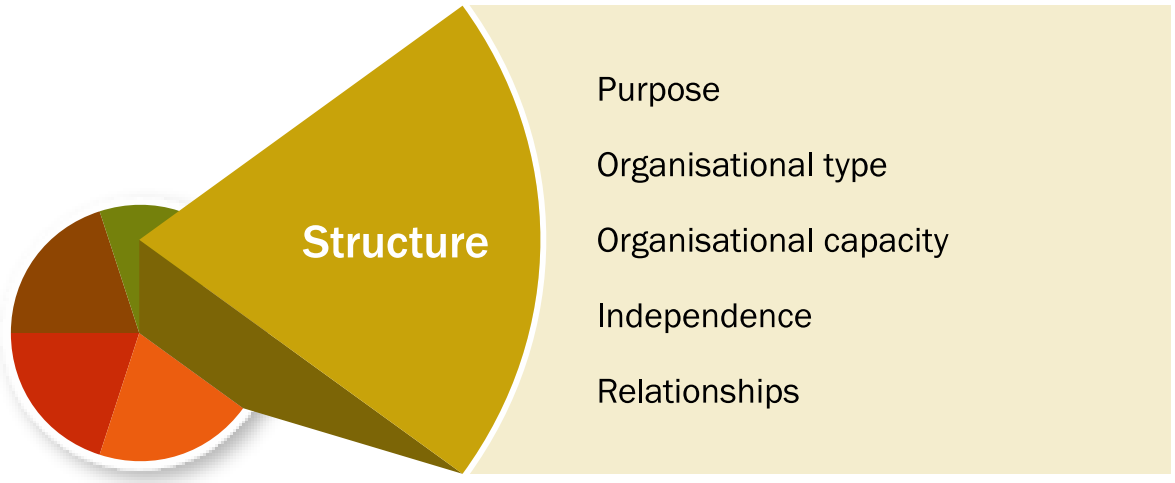
Overall, there is limited evidence as to the effectiveness of evidence centres. Most do not undertake or publish evaluations or studies to assess the impact of their work. A further limitation of this study is that it did not include a review of research from other relevant fields. For example, implementation science explains how to translate research into practice, and the field of knowledge translation explains how to get the right information to the right people. Both fields offer relevant evidence to guide the centre's activities.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE DESIGN



Evidence centres seek to drive change in a particular area and context (called an ecosystem). The design of an evidence centre needs to be based on the logic of what focus and activities are necessary to drive this change. This logic can shift and develop over time. Five core and overlapping elements of effective evidence centre design are evident from the research: structure; funding and timelines; staffing; implementation; and evaluation. Each element is described below.

Structure



Purpose

Evidence centres need a clear purpose and need to be clear about who (what actors and audience) they seek to influence. It is also important to have a clear link to an area of government that shares responsibility for the desired changes.

Organisational type

Three organisational models were common: 1. Separate incorporation, i.e. a stand-alone organisation; 2. Program within a host institution (mainly universities); 3. Grandfathering – commencing within a host institution and moving to separate incorporation over time. Most centres were hosted within institutions because this was seen as a way to access organisational infrastructure (such as legal, HR, IT and finance systems). This enabled centres to quickly focus on delivering core activities rather than building organisational systems.

Organisational capacity

Evidence centres require a strong backbone of infrastructure including finance, human resources, communications, information systems, and other technology. Infrastructure needed to be 'fit for purpose' and for the audience of the centre, including accessible online learning and communication systems. The design of these systems needs to recognise that different audiences have unequal access to technology.

‘Independence’

Centres need to be able to set their own direction (strategic independence), be seen to be a neutral advisor, and be transparent in their approach. Independence can be seen to be compromised when centres are hosted by other organisations that may have a different agenda and expectations to the centre. Independence can be increased by secure and long-term funding that enables centres to set their own agenda.

Relationships

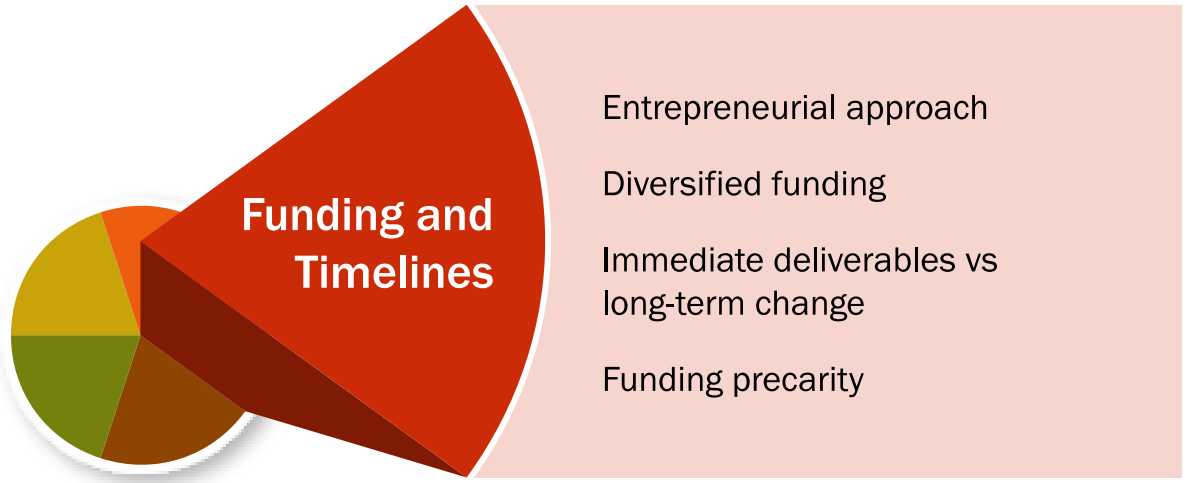
Effective evidence centres have strong relationships with key stakeholders. Key relationships are with government, the sector, and beneficiaries (the people who will ultimately benefit from the targeted change). Strong relationships can help to strengthen a centre’s independence as well as their influence. Building strong relationships requires frequent communication, shared direction setting and joint work. Managing these relationships requires dedicated resources (such as staffing) and time.

Governments are key policy actors that centres seek to influence as well as potential funders. Centres hold different types of relationships with government but need a clear link to an ‘owner’ in government to be effective.

Relationships with the broader sector, for example, the disability employment sector, are also critical to a centre’s ‘change agenda’. Centres need to engage the ‘movers and shakers’ in the field, as well as organisations and practitioners. The needs and priorities of the sector should help to inform the agenda of the centre as well as the valued resources and information that the centre provides. Sector involvement can be in centre governance as well as in delivery of centre activities.

Beneficiaries (such as people with disability) are also an important part of the sector. Centres often seek ways to access and include marginalised voices and to develop effective communication strategies with and for beneficiary groups.

Funding and timelines



Australian evidence centres have an average spend of $9.5M but are diverse in size. Secure funding increases a centre's independence and enhances a focus on core activities, but most evidence centres manage multiple funding sources and vary activities to suit these.

Entrepreneurial approach

The reality of limited budgets drives centres to innovate and be entrepreneurial in gaining funding and income. Centres usually need a range of income-generating activities and seek ways to gain access to shared resources with partners.

Diversified funding

Centres typically draw on different revenue sources including core funding from government or philanthropy, competitive grants, fee-for-service contract revenue and income from trading (e.g. fees from accreditation, income from training or sale of resources). Core funding helps fund necessary infrastructure and key centre roles. These underpin activities funded by project and other funding. Typically, centres have a number of work areas which can form their own sub-brands or sub-centres. At the same time, the clear purpose of the centre can be fractured by diverse project demands and the need for staff to capture alternate income.

Immediate deliverables vs long-term change

Extended timeframes (e.g. 10 years plus) are needed to bring about the change that centres aspire to. Some centres have extended timeframes of funding, with midpoint evaluations to unlock further funding. However, centres must also deliver change in shorter timeframes and design programs to achieve realistic increments of change. There is a time lag for a commencing centre: while there is an

expectation for rapid delivery, the advice from established centres is to build a deep understanding of sector needs in the first year in order to build a strong foundation for future work.

Funding precarity

Long term funding enables a focus on broader thinking and strategic activity. However, in most cases, centres have to divert attention and resources to fund raising in order to be sustainable. When faced with limited funding, centres respond by reducing staffing and activities.

Staffing

Staffing levels varied across centres from 5- 140 people, depending on funding models and cycles.

Roles and expertise

Centres need highly expert or 'best of their field' staff across a range of skill sets and roles including research; leadership; project management; knowledge; training and instructional design; ICT (Information and Communication Technology); grant writing and stakeholder engagement. In addition, staff need a range of critical 'soft skills' including empathy, commitment, and real-world exposure.

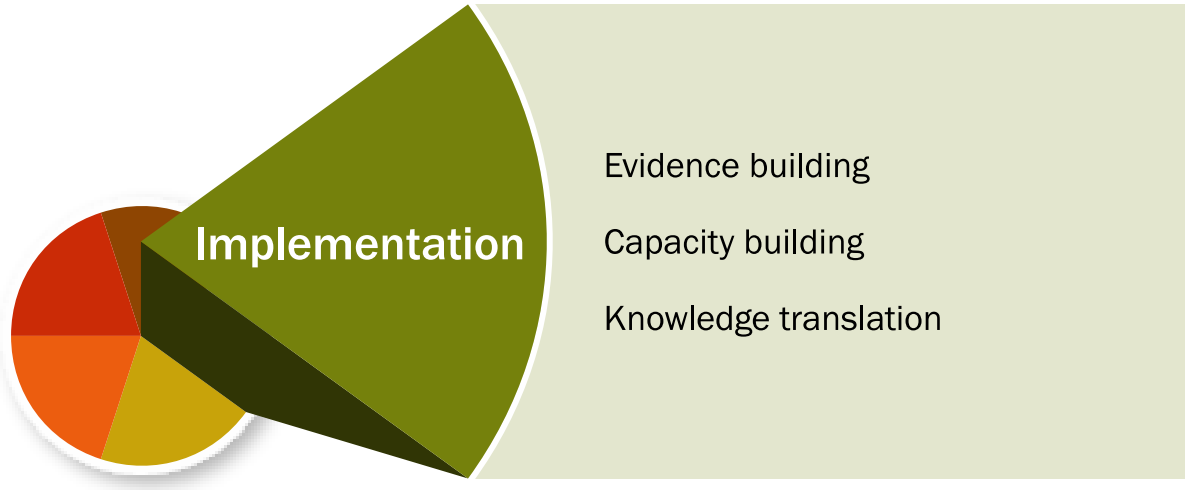
Lived experience

Lived experience was seen as a valued skill/knowledge set. People with lived experience were embedded in evidence centres in a range of different roles, sometimes comprising a significant proportion of staff.

Practice experience

Evidence centres in the field of disability employment strongly emphasised the importance of employing staff with deep practice-informed knowledge. These staff often came with experience as expert practitioners in the sector or within different communities. They also understood barriers and potential solutions.

Implementation



The implementation activities of centres were determined by their Theory of Change, with a strong emphasis on capacity building of practitioners and policy makers, along with evidence building and knowledge translation.

Evidence building

Evidence centres identify gaps in evidence, generate new evidence and synthesise existing evidence, selecting evidence relevant to their change target including using population, program, and policy data. Some centres maintain data portals and provide access to population (including cohort specific) and service data. Online evidence hubs can provide access to publications or summaries of evidence. A strong focus of centres was in the area of building the evidence base from studying existing activities (e.g. services and programs), with a focus on what works and why, often through the use of pilot projects. Effective evidence centres produce timely, actionable evidence including through monitoring and updating evidence and undertaking rapid reviews of evidence. For centres, there is a tension around whether to focus on gathering and understanding evidence versus moving evidence into implementation within the sector.

Capacity building

A core function of evidence centres is building capacity across the ecosystem, including individual practitioners and organisational capacity. One role of centres is to build the capacity of practitioners to understand, use and generate evidence. Some centres do this by incorporating different evidence skills into practitioner qualifications or by engaging practitioners in practical research projects, including pilot projects.

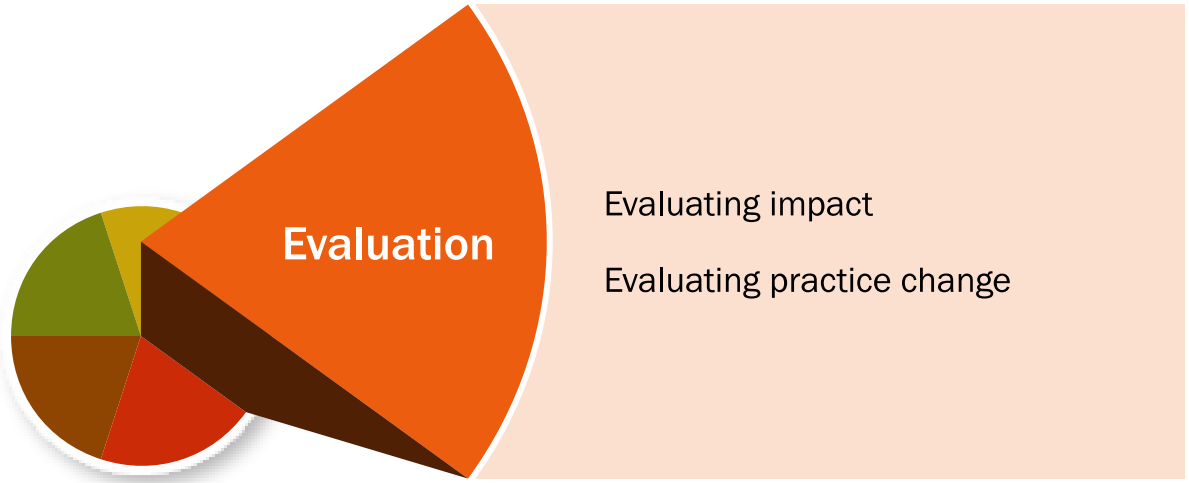
However, the major focus of centres is building the capacity of a wide variety of actors within the sector, including organisations and practitioners, to use and implement evidence. At the practitioner level, capacity building focuses on increasing the effectiveness of their practice. At the organisational level, it focuses on building capacity related to effective organisational design and management to support effective practice. US evidence centres commonly utilise Technical Assistance (TA) with experts working with organisations and practitioners in a variety of ways, with emphasis on grounded, place-based mentoring and training. All centres use a range of strategies including formal training, peer learning communities, granting programs and pilot projects.

Across all levels, barriers to capacity building and evidence uptake are significant. Major barriers exist within organisations (such as service providers): these restrict interest in and implementation of evidence-based practice. Repeated evidence internationally and in Australia, strongly emphasised the need for organisational readiness before centres can effectively work with practitioners.

Knowledge translation

Making research and other relevant knowledge accessible for stakeholders across the sector involves centres using a range of outputs and activities, such as online knowledge hubs, toolkits, guides, newsletters and blogs. In general, all outputs need to be designed to be fit for purpose and the intended audience(s), noting the barriers to access experienced by different audiences including lack of suitable technology. A strong emphasis was on grounded examples by or designed with people with lived or practical experience.

Evaluation



Evaluating evidence centre impact

Centres used three lenses for evaluating the impact of their work: users' knowledge of evidence; changed behaviours of intended users of evidence; and outcomes for beneficiaries. However, most centres have found evaluation challenging. In Australia, only 20% had external evaluations, and half used the reach of outputs (such as number of downloads of online resources) as a main metric rather than outcomes for users. Additionally, funders did not always provide clear guidance regarding impact evaluation. For many centres, inadequate data at systems level meant it was difficult to show the level of change or outcomes achieved. Added to this was the problem of needing extended timeframes before outcomes became visible. This shifts the focus back to evaluating 'what works' among the range of centre activities by gaining user feedback.

Evaluating practice change

A common method for assessing impact on practitioner behaviour is via a quality assurance or improvement approach with partners or clients of the evidence centre. Some centres use fidelity measures to check how well practice matches expected standards. However, centres recognise that this method adds a workload onto practitioners and participating organisations and suggest that the approach works best when used to encourage improvements rather than identify failure.

INSIGHTS

While a logic of change should underpin the design of evidence centres, the reality is that different models and features are as much a product of the history and opportunities available to each centre. While strong evidence for elements of centre effectiveness is missing, a list of common ingredients and advice emerged from the research.

Key elements of successful evidence centres

1. **A clear logic of change** identifies activities likely to have maximum effect for target audiences/actors and seeks to build an enabling ecosystem environment in which change can occur.
2. **Strong connections to the actors they seek to influence** are built through multiple mechanisms including governance roles, collaboration in design and/or delivery of activities, and fostering learning communities.
3. **An entrepreneurial approach** plans for and manages diverse income streams, seeking to maintain clarity of focus across diverse projects or sub-brands.
4. **Different intensities of support with evidence implementation** are offered, ranging from universally accessible guidance to intensive 'alongside' support.
5. **Multiple strategies of change and knowledge translation** are used.

Advice

As highlighted above, evidence centres require a logic of change that shapes the model design and choice of implementation approaches and activities. This logic needs to be based on a deep understanding of the needs of the sector and of the evidence about what will best achieve the desired outcomes. This study highlights that the task is not one of simple communication of evidence but of understanding what actions would drive desired change and address the substantial barriers across the ecosystem to its implementation. These barriers exist at the level of policy and funding, and within service providers and the workforce (i.e. practitioners). Any design of a new evidence centre needs to be informed by a detailed analysis of the broader context. This understanding can be used to build a logic of change with realistic goals, stages and well targeted activities.

Evidence centre personnel provided advice from their own experience. They highlighted the importance of good planning based on knowledge of sector needs; clarity of audience; highly skilled staff across a range of expertise, and the flexibility to respond to constant feedback and sense-checking from the sector.

In the start-up period, centres emphasised the importance of realistic workplans and timelines, including time to consult with the sector, supported by open communication with the funder. Trialling strategies before broader roll-out provides a valuable opportunity to learn and adapt. A robust business strategy is needed to help the centre plan for sustainability.

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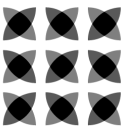

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