

Social impact toolbox shines light on not-for-profit sector

1. Summary of Impact

Not-for-profit organisations are increasingly operating under funding allocation models that require them to demonstrate their social impact. Now more than ever the NFP sector faces the challenges of showing how their work is making a difference.

Unfortunately measuring social impact is not a level playing field. Many smaller NFPs lose funding because they lack the capacity, knowledge or resources to conduct evidence-based and methodologically rigorous program evaluation. This affects the services available to Australians who rely on the support of these organisations. In response, UTS Director of the Masters of Not-for-Profit and Community Management Program, Prof Bronwen Dalton, has launched the 'Measuring Social Impact Toolbox' project.

It aims to empower the sector to know 'what to measure' and 'how to measure' by providing free digital tools and validated instruments which can be used by all NFPs, regardless of their size, location and resources.

2. The Problem

Measuring social impact has become increasingly important for NFPs to secure ongoing income. Funders are looking to social impact data to determine where and how to allocate resources. As such, all NFP organisations are required to routinely plan, measure, and assess their impact in order to continue their work.

However, many NFPs are struggling to demonstrate the effects of their good work according to Prof Dalton.

One of the key barriers to successful impact reporting is that there is no standardised approach to evaluation, and many organisations have limited understanding of what high quality impact measurement looks like. The validated tools are often locked behind the paywalls of expensive journals and the know-how required can only be accessed through paying expensive consultants, meaning that especially smaller NFPs with limited resources are at a disadvantage.

As a result of this, funders are less likely to provide support for these organisations, ultimately leading to cuts in service provision for communities in need.

3. Beneficiaries

Direct beneficiaries of the project are all organisations that seek to make a social impact, especially those who lack the funding and capacity to conduct program evaluation. Due to the digital nature of the project, and the fact that it is freely available to all, the toolbox may also be useful for organisations beyond Australia's borders.

By supporting the NFP sector, the initiative ultimately benefits the end-users as well. Being able to report effectively to secure funding is instrumental in continuing and improving social interventions and programs.

4. Approach to impact

As a first response to the reporting and evaluation issues, Prof Dalton dedicated her own time to help individual organisations. However, she quickly saw the opportunity to scale up her endeavour to serve the sector as a whole for bigger impact.

She launched a project to democratise the knowledge of impact measurement in collaboration with UTS and Community Sector Banking (CSB). The aim of the initiative is to build an open digital platform containing tools which will enhance the capacity of the NFP sector and help improve their impact reporting.

Specifically, the tools include online courses and community forums, templates and a repository of reliable, verifiable and validated measures, all available free of charge. Led by Prof Dalton, this ongoing project consists of three key components, of which one has been completed.

The first step was to curate a free online repository of validated impact measures, indicators and tools, such as survey instruments and questionnaires. These are sorted by discipline-specific menus to assist in effective reporting. These resources are now available on UTS's open learning portal and can be accessed around the clock by anyone who seeks to realise a positive social change and report on it.

The project is now in its second stage, in which the team is helping to standardise the parameters and approaches used to measure social impact. This will be done by offering additional online resources, such as templates, exemplars and case studies and a repository of validated measures.

The third stage will centre on developing more formalised online learning modules to enhance the capacity of organisations to implement validated methodologies, such as Cost Benefit Analysis.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

The most significant outcome of the project thus far is the free online repository, currently hosted on the UTS Open platform.

By opening access to evidence-based and rigorous program evaluation tools, all NFPs, regardless of their size or resources, will be in a position to present methodologically robust evaluations of their various programs.

As of January 2018, over 100 students have enrolled to the learning portal to access the repository.

5.2. Impact

The ultimate goal of the project is to maintain and increase the support available to Australians who rely on NFPs.

By assisting in the reporting and making the tools free for all online, the team hopes to help organisations across the country attract more funding and grow their service provision. By doing so, the project would make a small but important contribution to the overall objective.

As the project is still in its first phase, there is currently not enough data to report on its impact. However, early evidence suggests that organisations have accessed the resources, and the project will be publicised more widely in the coming months to reach a wider user base.

In addition, existing research continuously demonstrates the links between supporting the NFP sector and increased social and economic benefits.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Prof Dalton's passion for working on social-oriented issues was sparked during a high school exchange program in South Korea where she first became politically active and aware of social justice matters. As a person who has accessed social services herself, she understands the importance and value of the NFP sector to ensure social justice and cohesion.

Since then, she has been supporting the volunteer and NFP sectors in various capacities. She grew particularly aware of the impact evaluation issues whilst working as National Research Manager with Mission Australia. Her experience as a researcher and academic has been critical in developing an educational platform that addresses the specific needs of this industry.

6.2. External enabling factors

The program received its initial support from the UTS Centre for Social Justice, starting out with a grant of \$5,000.

After its first phase, Prof Dalton brought on board CSB who are supporting the completion and ongoing development of the project with additional funding. Further support is provided by the UTS Business School and Open Learning.

7. Challenges

One of the key challenges Prof Dalton faces in her social justice work is the fact that her performance as an academic is measured not by external engagement, but by teaching and research outputs. While she is in a position to fulfil these in addition to her social initiatives, she acknowledges that many academic professionals are not.

However, she is optimistic that as social impact is becoming more valued, external engagement will become more supported and recognised within the university sector.

In the meantime, she makes a concerted effort to leverage her skills and resources to continue working on projects which promote social cohesion and wellbeing.

8. References

<https://open.uts.edu.au/measuringsocialimpact.html>

