

## Program Evaluation vs. Performance Audit

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Quite often researchers and managers confuse or conflate program evaluation and performance audit as a single concept. Surprisingly, this happens too often. Notwithstanding the theme of 'assessment' across these two methodologies there are vital differences. This article outlines the differences between the two approaches at a high level.

First, let us define the two methodologies. While there are numerous ways of defining performance audits, a simple definition is 'determination of the compliance of programs, activities and functions with predetermined standards'. Program evaluation, on the other hand, is 'the systematic assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of a program'. The definition's itself set out the differences in the methodologies.

Further differences arise in the implementation of the two approaches. Whereas, performance audits does not so much concern itself with research theories and is focused on answering the question '*does the service reach a predetermined standard?*'; program evaluation, which has evolved from social science utilises a theoretical base to judge the quality of the program. In other words, program evaluation answers the question '*what standard does this program achieve?*'

Audits are designed to be observational and not interventional. They are set-up to provide assurance that the service quality and delivery meets acceptable standards. However, audits are not designed to provide you with the answer '*how and why*'. This is addressed by program evaluations, which in addition to addressing the 'how and why', also if designed well answer '*what and what next?*' Ideally, evaluations are to be experimental and utilise a counter-factual too. Thus, evaluation designs adopt a more comprehensive approach. This is not to undermine the value of performance audits. In most instances, when only an assurance exercise is required in a time sensitive context, performance audits are very suitable. Also, audits are more amenable to be implemented by non-experts. However, as with any scientific approaches, they have to be designed by experts.

So the choice between a 'performance audit' and a 'program evaluation' is what does the commissioner require to know about the program? If it is just to measure compliance, the choice will be an audit. If it is to know how a program has performed and why so, the choice will be a program evaluation.

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