

Environmental Education Grant Programs – Evaluation

Trust Administration Analysis

Evaluation background

The Environmental Trust has in place a framework of rolling independent evaluations for each of its contestable grant programs. These evaluations explore the strengths and weaknesses of each program and assist the Trust in the refinement of objectives, value and scope of future funding rounds, as well as changes to process and administration.

In accordance with this framework, the Trust's Environmental Education Grants Programs (Education and Eco Schools) were the focus of an independent evaluation in 2017/18. The Education program, has been delivered annually since 1990 by both the Trust and its predecessor. The program supports educational projects that develop the community's knowledge of, skills in, and commitment to, protecting the environment and promoting sustainable behaviour. The Eco Schools program, also delivered (under various names) since 1990, aims to provide environmental learning opportunities for students, teachers and school communities by providing hands-on, curriculum-based environmental education focussing on strong student participation. The most recent evaluation of both programs was undertaken in 2010.

Trust Administration engaged the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), through its Institute for Public Policy and Governance and its Institute for Sustainable Futures, to undertake this evaluation, covering the period from 2010 to 2016. UTS were chosen due to their extensive experience in undertaking evaluations and their expertise and knowledge on best practice contemporary environmental education. Additionally, UTS had the ability to analyse every final report submitted between 2010 and 2016.

The final evaluation report was submitted to Trust Administration in April 2018.

Evaluation findings

The evaluation report concluded that overall the Education programs are well run and are in high demand with no other funding programs like them in NSW. The report found:

- that the programs are well regarded within the market
- the programs are efficiently and adaptively managed within the Trust
- both programs have resulted in some unique and positive educational and capacity building outcomes for grant recipients and program participants
- there are no other grant programs like these in NSW
- both Eco Schools and the Education grants are critical for improving environmental education outcomes at this time, given there is limited strategic direction or active policy work for environmental education in NSW
- the application process has considerably improved over time which has resulted in an increase in the sophistication of applications and methods used.

Analysis

The evaluation of any contestable grant program presents opportunities for the Trust to review and potentially reframe it, to ensure that it remains current, that lessons identified through the evaluation are identified and incorporated into future delivery, and to celebrate and promote the successes of the program outcomes.

Program design, operating and policy context

The evaluation found that both programs (Education and Eco Schools) are critical in the environmental education sector in NSW.

However, the previous policy framework 'Learning for Sustainability: NSW Environmental Education Plan 2007-10', concluded in 2010. This has meant that in the absence of clear direction, *'policy guidance is lagging behind contemporary knowledge on effective environmental education'*. The absence of this broader guidance has hindered Trust Administration and the Technical Review Committee determine the most appropriate directions and structures for the program.

This is supported by the evaluation finding that most projects funded under the program (during the evaluation period) had based their projects on the traditional approach of workshops and general awareness raising.

The assumption that awareness raising activities or equipping participants with knowledge, will eventually create behaviour change or invoke a response to alter an attitude or action, is now considered outdated and has been highly critiqued in recent literature.

Additionally, without clear direction in the guidance material about what the program was trying to achieve, (i.e. behavioural change or on-ground outcomes), has meant that applicants and recipients were *'looking for clarity about the scale of environmental benefits expected within the grant context.'* For example, *'what proportion of the grant value should be focussed on achieving on the ground environmental benefits'*.

However, this finding presents an opportunity for the grant programs, especially the Education program, to provide leadership in NSW by incorporating *'new knowledge on transformative learning for sustainability, social practices and values'*.

Specifically, the Education program needs to clearly articulate what it is seeking to achieve, and needs a *'clearer framework, or a clear theory of change, for how environmental education leads to environmental outcomes, incorporating transformative learning and/or social practice theories'*.

This would need to be further supported through the inclusion of practical guidance on how this can be implemented at a project level, and require grant applicants to show how their project addresses or contributes to the program's theory of change. This could be achieved through requiring applicants to develop their own theory of change within the application process or through structuring the application form to elicit that information. That is, how their activities will work to engage their target audiences to change their frames of reference about an environmental issue and how this change is consistent with the intent, and contributes to the intermediate and longer-term outcomes, of the program.

This could be trialled through offering an initial sub-program focussing just on *'transformative learning interventions'*, with the learnings and outcomes of this being shared and incorporated into future rounds of the program.

Staged approach

There are also opportunities to improve the effectiveness of funded projects through *'implementing a staged approach to funding larger Education grants to increase the potential for long-term outcomes, by building on the successes of previous grants and putting more resources to follow up and measuring longer-term project impact'*. This approach would particularly suit a *'sub-program theme focussed on transformative learning interventions'*, where an initially smaller grant could be awarded to trial and ground truth the approach, with a subsequent larger grant to roll it out.

Alternatively, there is opportunity to stage the same grant through a *'gateway'* model, splitting the project into two phases, with the first being a planning phase and the second being the implementation. Projects would only be approved to progress to the implementation stage once they have satisfied the requirements of the initial planning stage. This approach offers the opportunity to provide more intensive support in the initial stage, to create capacity within funded projects. This would allow them to build upon their project and incorporate transformative learning for sustainability and social practice theories into their design, and provide time to fully analyse their target audience - identifying their values, motivators, interests and world views. This approach is currently being used by the Trust's Protecting Our Places Grant Program, with early feedback suggesting that grant recipients are finding great value in it.

Outcome reporting and achievement

The evaluation found that the current structure of the programs and supporting measuring tools meant that *'existing reporting is primarily focussed on outputs instead of project outcomes'*, and that there *'are currently limited opportunities to measure long-term outcomes'*. Therefore *'there is a lack of understanding of monitoring and evaluation amongst many grant recipients, with most projects actually reporting program outcomes as outputs. As a result, the evaluation has found poor recording of outcomes particularly in the areas of environmental outcomes'*.

In addition, many grant recipients *'revealed that they have or are still struggling to provide the required accuracy with respect to the program measures in their reporting to the Trust. Many even questioned the honesty with which measures are reported back to the Trust'*.

Establishing a clearer reporting framework for the programs will assist in addressing this issue. Linked with this, a smaller set of *'meaningful'* measures, that are more *'effective indicators for project outcomes'* should be developed. Both will provide clarity about the programs' intent, and will allow effort and resources to be directed to those measures that will most likely show outcome achievement.

As an example, the existing program measure *'number of participants at a workshop'*, whilst *'a good measure [of] good project planning, it cannot indicate much about actual behavioural change'*. However, by incorporating a measure about how many participants who attended that workshop *'who later join that particular community network or pledge to take environmental action is perhaps a better indicator of the possibility of a behaviour change outcome'*.

Likewise, with the measures for educational resources, whilst the number of products created is good for project planning, it says nothing about the outcome. A better measure would be the number of products downloaded or used, which suggests that someone has actively sought out that resource and would therefore be more likely to use that resource.

Overall, having a much clearer framework and theory of change for the (Education) program, linked with a set of constrained measures that can *'meaningfully'* indicate program outcomes, will assist both the grant recipient and the Trust in recording, measuring and reporting environmental and

behavioural change outcomes, or at least show an indication that participants are on the pathway to achieving that.

Size and length of grant

The current size (dollar value) and length of grant (up to three years) was well received by grant recipients. However, *'while most projects do achieve their intended objectives within their proposed time frame, this timeframe is not enough to observe tangible environmental and behavioural change'*.

Behaviour change is a long-term outcome, that is unlikely to exist or be achieved in the timeframe of a standard Education grant (three years). This provides an opportunity for the Trust to *'set aside some funds for longitudinal evaluation, delivered as a stand-alone grant...or a gateway stage in a staged approach to grant delivery'*. This would either allow past grant recipients to undertake longitudinal follow up with their participants, or provide the extra time and resource needed to measure and report outcomes.

Importantly, longitudinal and/or longer-term grants can also provide key insights into which type of project and which type of engagement method are more likely to succeed. These project learnings could allow the program to adapt incrementally outside of the normal five-year evaluation cycle.

However, there is also a risk in longer term grants with volunteer burnout. The evaluation found that *'most projects have continued even after the grant program concluded', 'despite the issue of volunteer burnout in the long run'*.

Although a risk, this risk is not always linked to the size and length of the grant, but rather the project specifically. Anecdotally, projects that have failed mid-course, have done so due to the original applicant leaving, and not necessarily volunteer burnout. Subsequent project officers have not always been aware of the projects intent, agreed deliverables, or share the same passion and commitment as the original applicant.

Customer experience and governance

The education grant programs are *'efficiently administered within the Trust and reflects good governance principles'*. The overall *'perception of the application and assessment processes amongst applicants is positive'*, however for some, especially smaller projects, the process is thought to be onerous.

Despite this positive feedback, the evaluation did find that there were capacity issues in relation to *'navigating' the grant application process*. That is, the initial expression of interest, full application and if funded, the monitoring, evaluation and reporting planning documents. With applicants expressing a *'keenness for the Trust to deliver workshops/webinars and/or mentor applicants and/or grantees around disseminating and sharing learnings, knowledge transfer, and evaluation capacity building'*.

However, these capacity issues have not reduced the demand for the program. Between 2010 and 2016, the Education program received 1,266 expressions of interest, and funded 113 grants across both the Government and Community streams. Whilst, Eco Schools received 829 applications, funding 458, and Food Gardens in Schools receiving 366 applications and funding 128. At any point in time, there were about 50 active Education grants and 190 Eco Schools and Food Gardens in Schools projects.

While the demand has been strong, the quality of applications has been mixed, with many applicants unable to show appropriate engagement methods or evaluative methods to demonstrate how they will achieve an outcome.

Therefore, there are opportunities for the Trust to improve the level of sophistication within the market, and increase the capacity of environmental educators to amend their practices to match current best practice methods of engagement (transformative learning for sustainability/social practice theories). This could be achieved through changes to the programs mentioned above.

Cost effectiveness

The evaluation found that *'Cost- effectiveness comparisons may be generally appropriate for some but not all Trust objectives. In particular, given that the scope and potentially unique nature of project objectives of some Education Grants, particularly larger scale projects, not necessarily suiting cost-effectiveness comparisons'*.

Nevertheless, the evaluation used the following formula:

$$\text{Cost effectiveness} = \frac{\text{Net Costs (\$\$)}}{\text{Outputs}}$$

Using this formula and using the current output data collected by the Trust, the evaluation found that there is *'little evidence that larger funded and longer running grants consistently offer superior value for money for the Trust. With relatively small education grants and low-mid length projects appearing capable of regularly delivering cost-effectiveness objectives'*.

However, caution must be given to this finding with *'existing project reporting primarily focused on outputs instead of project outcomes'* together with a *'lack of understanding of monitoring and evaluation amongst many grant recipients, with most projects actually reporting program outcomes as outputs'*.

Therefore, from a cost effectiveness calculation, and given the limitations of the data collected by the Trust, the evaluation was not able to do a cost effectiveness calculation to determine which project types are more cost effective in the achievement of outcomes. Moreover, *'that while most projects do achieve their intended objectives within their proposed time frame (usually between one to three years), this timeframe is not enough to observe tangible environmental and behavioural change'*.

Therefore, there is a clear argument that this will require both larger and longer-term grants that incorporate a staged gateway approach to grant delivery. This is consistent with the recommendation to shift the program to incorporate contemporary learning practices, which move beyond just awareness to actual behaviour change, and the desire to *'set aside some funds for longitudinal evaluation, delivered as a stand-alone grant...or a gateway stage in a staged approach to grant delivery'*.

Conclusion

While the evaluation found that the programs were well run, delivered good outcomes, and are highly valued within the market, it also identified some significant reforms that could help the programs support the latest and best practice methodology in environmental education. Trust Administration has considered the recommendations and developed a plan for implementing the suggested reforms within our current resource constraints.

Proposed program changes

To address the evaluation recommendations, Trust Administration is proposing to implement a revised funding model for the Education Program. It is also proposing smaller scheduling adjustments to the Eco Schools program.

Eco Schools

The timing of the annual program will be brought forward to improve the ability of successful applicants to incorporate the projects into the planning for the following school year. The call for applications will now be held in Term 2 (instead of Term 3). The assessment and approval process will occur in Term 3, which will allow successful applicants to be notified in Term 4. This will allow schools to 'hit the ground running' at the start of Term 1 the following year.

Education

It is proposed to create two tiers within the Education program to provide opportunities for different types of projects and allow for further innovation in the latest methods of education.

Tier 1 would reflect 'first order thinking' of behaviour change methodology. It would support projects that focus on getting participants to improve the way they do things they already do – in other words 'do things better'.

These projects, like the ones the program is currently funding, would support transactional type learning, or the direct transfer of knowledge, without examining or changing the assumptions or values that inform what people are doing or thinking. This approach still requires some planning to understand and identify relevant target audiences, but only needs to show who has been involved, what the outcomes were and what things those participants are now doing better as a result of being involved in the project.

It is still an appropriate and worthwhile investment, especially for specific, localised projects that address a particular issue in a particular area. Grants could be over a shorter time frame that currently (2 years instead of 3 years), and would be capped at \$60,000.

Tier 2 would be a new approach for the program and address the evaluation recommendation to establish an 'Innovation sub-program'. This tier would reflect 'second order thinking' of behaviour change methodology that attempts to deliver significant change in thinking, or in what people are doing as a result of examining their assumptions and values. In other words, it is about helping people 'do better things'.

Second-order learning is more challenging and involves the learner critically reflecting on, examining, and if necessary changing, their beliefs, values and assumptions. It generates an awareness and understanding that goes beyond initial first-order level learning, and because of this, such learning and behaviour change is likely to be more permanent.

Due to the innovative nature of this Tier, it is proposed that it be run as a pilot for 2 rounds to determine effectiveness. The program would offer longer-term grants (5 years) valued at \$250,000. One or two grants would be offered for a two-stage funding model, similar to the current POP program. Grantees would work with Trust Administration and leading behaviour change experts for up to 12 months investigating and planning their project in line with this next-generation methodology, before implementing the project over the final four years.

Proposed new structure

Level	Grants Available	Allocation	Orders of change	Seeks to	Can be labelled as	Comments
Tier 1	Up to- \$60,000 2-3 years	Minimum \$500,000 each round	First order change	Effectiveness / Efficiency	‘Doing things better’ Conformative	First-order change refers to doing ‘more of the same’, but doing it better. That is, change within particular boundaries and without examining or changing the assumptions or values that inform what you are doing or thinking.
Tier 2	\$250,000 5 years	Maximum \$500,000 each round	Second order change	Examining and changing assumptions	‘Doing better things’ Reformative	Second-order change refers to a significant change in thinking or in what you are doing as a result of examining assumptions and values, and is about understanding the inner or subjective world.
Ultimate outcome			Third order change	Paradigm change	‘Seeing things differently’ Transformative	Third order change provides people with the capacity to identify and change their behaviors on their own as required.



Environmental Education Grants Programs Evaluation – Administration Response

No	Recommendation		Response
General recommendations			
1.	Advocate for a revised and updated NSW Government plan for environmental education in NSW, taking account of contemporary knowledge on effective environmental education.	Partially accepted	Whilst Trust Administration supports an updated plan for environmental education in NSW, it also acknowledges that this is out of scope of the objects of the <i>Environmental Trust Act 1998</i> . However, it will provide any support required for future efforts to revise and update NSW Government plans for environmental education.
2.	Engage a consultant to develop a publicly available program logic for each of the grant programs that incorporates contemporary knowledge on Transformative Learning for Sustainability, social practice theory and values theory. This could be included in the Program Guidelines.	Accepted	The Trust supports this recommendation, however initial work will be done internally to ensure all its programs that seek a behaviour change outcome are aligned to ensure both consistency in the logic, but also consistently in the measurement and evaluation.
3.	Engage a consultant to develop new principles, criteria and supporting guidance material to assist applicants to incorporate contemporary knowledge on learning, social practices and values into their projects. The guidance material would include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primer for applicants about Transformational Learning for Sustainability, social practice theory and values theory • Practical ideas for learning activities that draw on these frameworks • Resource list • Examples / case studies of relevant or successful TLfS projects. The guidance material would be incorporated into Program Guidelines.	Accepted	The Trust supports this recommendation, with this being gradually phased in and fully implemented by the 2020 round of the program.

No	Recommendation		Response
4.	<p>Actively seek members for the Education and Eco Schools Technical Review Committees with knowledge and experience of transformational learning and related theories, and understanding of the opportunities for links between environmental education and tangible outcomes. New members could come from academic, education or sustainability / environment sectors.</p> <p>If difficult to find new members, consider contracting in this expertise.</p>	Accepted	The Trust supports this recommendation, with this being gradually phased in and fully implemented for the 2019 round of the program.
Program design			
5.	<p>Allocate 25% of Environmental Education grant funding to an Innovation sub-program with additional funding criteria aimed at piloting, building experience with and learning from contemporary learning and social theory. Aim to fund 1 project each year in the government and community streams under this sub-program. This will require:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of an additional assessment criterion for the sub-program to encourage innovative application of these theories • Development of additional research and reporting requirements to ensure that the innovation is thoroughly evaluated and outcomes are shared • Increasing the funding limit for these grants to \$125,000 to encourage applications and allow for the extra work. <p>After three years, review outcomes and update the guidance materials for all participants based on what has been learned. Decide at this point whether to continue the Innovation sub-program or revise the assessment criteria for all applicants.</p>	Partially accepted	<p>While Trust Administration supports the intent of this recommendation, to properly address Recommendations 5, 7 and 8 (b) in an integrated fashion, it proposes splitting the program into two streams:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Smaller grants, up to \$60,000 over 3 years, for applicants to deliver similar projects to what they are now. However, these projects will incorporate engagement methods based on values, interests and world views. 2. Larger grants, up to \$250,000 for up to five years. These larger grants will be targeted at program applicants using transformative approaches that seek to alter participants values and actions. The larger time period, will allow the project to be staged as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage 1: Project Planning - developing all communication and engagement frameworks, developing the target audience demographics, including what they value, what their world views are, their attitudes and interest levels etc. • Stage 2: Priming the target audience • Stage 3: Engagement with the target audience • Stage 4: Evaluation of the engagement • Stage 5: Project close

No	Recommendation		Response
6.	Include a list of resources for values assessment in the guidance material for applicants (Recommendation 3) and particularly encourage their use in the Innovation sub-program (Recommendation 5).	Accepted	The Trust supports this, with this gradually phased in as resources are developed.
7.	Implement a staged approach for the new Innovation sub-program (Recommendation 5) that would involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial stage of up to one year with stronger focus on piloting innovative ideas, learning about effective approaches, establishing a theory of change, building a community of practice between grant recipients, and planning for the full project (Grant value for this stage capped e.g. \$20k - \$30k) • Second stage if the first stage goes well of actual project delivery, using the remaining funds. 	Partially accepted	As outlined in Recommendation 5, this recommendation will be addressed through an integrated approach by introducing a new 'larger-scale' stream that will run over 5 years. It will incorporate similar structures to the current Protecting our Places program (that are also recommended here) of implementing a one-year planning phase to improve the likelihood of successful implementation.
Outcomes and cost-effectiveness			
8.	The Trust should:		
	a. Reduce the number of measures of environmental outcomes on which grant recipients are asked to report, so that they can focus their efforts on those areas where outcomes are most measurable and likely. These measures should go beyond awareness and literacy to values and behaviour, incorporating transformative learning and/or social practice theories.	Accepted	Trust Administration will continue to regularly review and revise the number of project measures to ensure a balance between a few meaningful measures and measures that allow the Trust to make an objective assessment on the progress of a project.
	b. Allow and encourage grant applications that would undertake longitudinal evaluation of previous Trust-funded projects. This will require amendment of Program Guidelines to support and draw attention to this opportunity.	Accepted	Trust Administration is currently looking for ways to incorporate a broader longitudinal program for all its grant programs, but as outlined in Recommendations 5 and 7, this recommendation will be addressed initially through a new 'larger-scale' stream.
	c. Look to ensure that the accuracy in expenditure data collected is accurately recorded and reported.	Accepted	The Trust has a number of established procedures and protocols to ensure accurate expenditure data is collected. This includes the requirement for all final financial reports for grants above \$20,000 to community organisations being independently audited. This audit provides

No	Recommendation		Response
			<p>the assurance to the Trust that project expenditure has been in line with the approved budget and relevant requirements of the grant agreement.</p> <p>Meanwhile, all Eco Schools final financial reports must be accompanied by a statutory declaration attesting to its accuracy.</p> <p>These thresholds have been determined in line with the likelihood and estimated impact verses the cost to both the grant recipient and the Trust in requiring even greater detail, and assessment of greater detail.</p>
9.	<p>Conduct a review of existing listed project measures and categories. Aim of the review is to create measures that improve the project outcomes through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowing room for innovative responses to meeting project measures • Incorporating principles from transformative leaning and/or social practice theories • Reducing the number of measures to ensure they are 'meaningful' to stakeholders and participants. 	Accepted	The Trust supports this recommendation. It will be done in parallel with recommendation 8(a).
Customer experience and governance			
10.	Revise the timing of Eco Schools grant application process to fit in with planning for school year. The time lag between preparing an application, announcement of success and preparation of a funding agreement impacts on program design and the delivery of planned activities	Accepted	The Trust supports this with the 2018 Eco Schools Grants Program opening and closing earlier to ensure successful applicants are notified in Term 4 to allow for planning for the following school year.

No	Recommendation		Response
11.	<p>Run capacity building activities for grant applicants that have successfully made it past the EOI stage. This could take the form of workshops run by an internal or external expert with advice on grant priorities, describing theory of change, how to pitch etc in a similar fashion to FACS Liveable Communities grants or OEH Sustainable Communities grants, or through a more flexible, multi-modal form of delivery and learning. These activities should incorporate and make explicit the link between transformative learning theories and related theories in environmental education and environmental outcomes.</p>	Accepted	The Trust supports this and will run workshops with invited applicants.
12.	<p>Fund a buddy system linking previously successful project coordinators with commencing projects where relevant linkages exist.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring members of previously successful projects to capacity building activities (e.g. post-EOI workshops, Recommendation 11). • Hold regular (annual / biennial) conferences / showcases for recently completed Trust funded projects – the OEH AdaptNSW annual forum could provide an example. • Facilitate an online knowledge-sharing portal for grant recipients, e.g. a LinkedIn group. 	Partially accepted	The Trust supports the idea of linking previously successful project coordinators together, however this at times can be constrained due to geographic locations. However, the Trust will work towards encouraging linkages where possible and will look to establish alternate methods of engagement to facilitate the buddy system. There are also opportunities for the Trust to showcase exemplar projects through other peak non-government organisational events and conferences, for example, the Australian Association of Environmental Educators.

No	Recommendation		Response
13.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use external consultancy to provide temporary increases in available resources • Piggyback the capacity building (Recommendation 12) on existing environmental education events to reduce resource requirements. • Seek a temporary increase in funding from the NSW Government to fund the transition to a program with a stronger basis in contemporary learning and social theory. • Seek a permanent increase in funding from the NSW Government to support capacity building and knowledge sharing activities. 	Partially Accepted	<p>Trust Administration will look to engage suitably qualified contractors to assist with development of revised program resources, webinars / workshops.</p> <p>In addition, Trust Administration will seek the opinion of the Trust on potential future funding levels to address these recommendations.</p>