

## **Building Research and Evaluation Capacity in Non-Government Organisations in the Alcohol and Other Drugs sector in New South Wales.**

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### **Introduction / Issues:**

Research Capacity Building (RCB) refers to early-stage interventions and systems that embed research and evaluation within service delivery. Although vital for evidence-informed practice, the Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) sector in Australia has received limited attention in this area. To address this, the Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA) supported six 'research emergent' Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to enhance their internal research capacity. NADA's evaluation of these initiatives, alongside a sector-wide research audit, has contributed valuable insights into effective RCB strategies and the sector's evolving research culture.

### **Method / Approach:**

This presentation outlines the implementation and early outcomes of the RCB program, guided by utilisation-focused evaluation. Methods included a baseline survey using the Research Capacity and Culture (RCC) tool, interviews, observations, and document analysis, supported by a comprehensive research audit to assess needs, activities, and barriers to research.

### **Results:**

The audit identified common barriers—particularly in smaller NGOs—such as limited staff time, research skills, backfill, funding, and inadequate data systems. Despite this, motivating factors included a strong interest in program evaluation, involving staff in research activity, and improving outcome measurement. Evaluation was often preferred over traditional academic research, raising the need for a sector-specific definition that reflects practice-based evidence.

### **Discussions and Conclusions:**

NADA's leadership has been central to program success. It has provided mentoring, research showcases, training, tailored outcome tools, and inclusive strategies—such as First Nations-led research approaches. The program has built staff confidence and interest in research, showing that context-sensitive RCB initiatives can significantly strengthen capacity.

### **Implications for Practice or Policy:**

Implications for practice and policy include the value of embedding RCB into service delivery, recognising the unique needs of smaller NGOs, and continuing to invest in long-term, flexible strategies. The program underscores the importance of building a robust research culture through innovation, sustainability, practice-aligned research, culturally-safe approaches, and using data to tell meaningful stories.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

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