



## **Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation**

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# **Report on the Assessment of Government Evaluations**

## **Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme**

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**Date Evaluation was completed:** January 2010

**Name of assessor:** Ray Basson

**Evaluation Number:** 3

**Date Assessment Completed:** 13 February 2013

## Evaluation Assessment Details

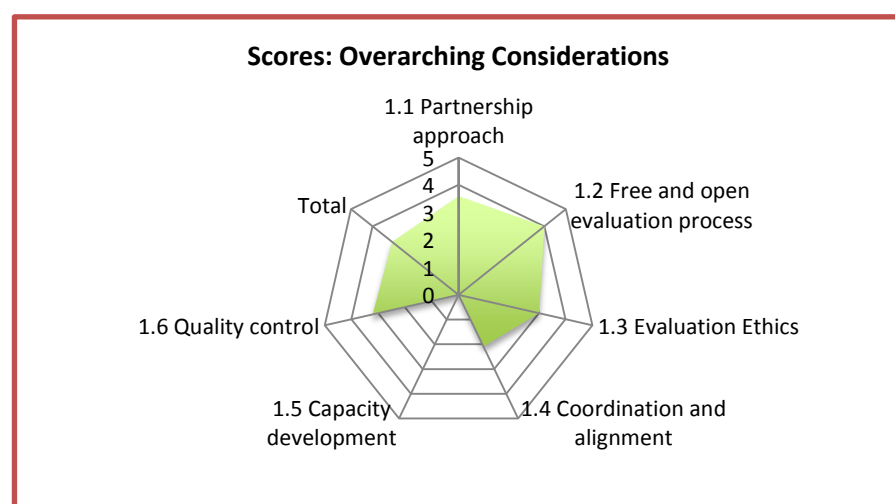
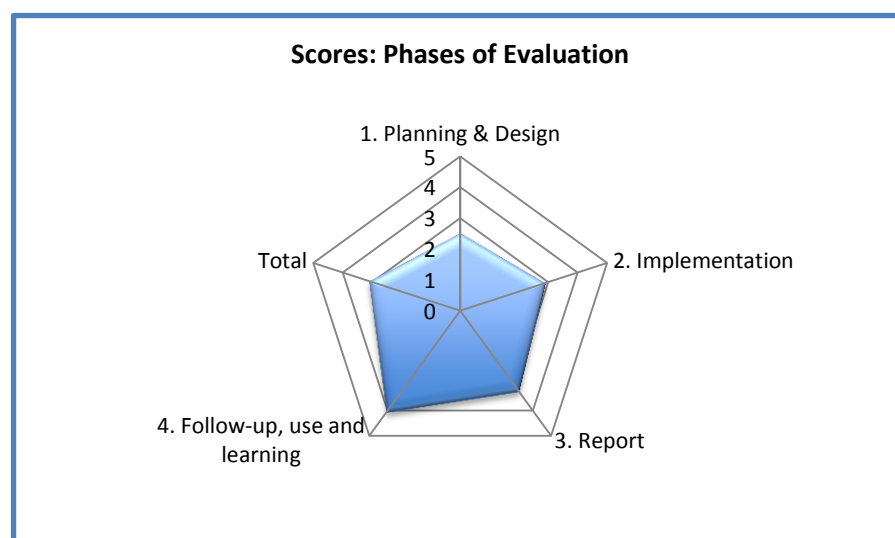
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Title of evaluation report	Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme
Completion Date of Evaluation	January 2010
Name of Assessor	Ray Basson
Evaluation Number	3
Completion Date of Assessment	13 February 2013
Initiated by	Department of Higher Education and Training
Evaluation undertaken by	Balintulo
Evaluation area / sector	Education
	Additional
National Outcome	Outcome 5
	Additional
Type of Evaluation	Implementation
	Additional
What is being evaluated	Institution
	Additional
Geographic Scope	National
Period of Evaluation	12 months
Known Cost of Evaluation	Approximately R2 million

## Quality Assessment Scores

Phase of Evaluation	Score
Planning & Design	2.52
Implementation	2.90
Report	3.23
Follow-up, use and learning	4.06
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.14</b>

Overarching Consideration	Score
Partnership approach	3.59
Free and open evaluation process	4.00
Evaluation Ethics	3.00
Coordination and alignment	2.08
Capacity Development	Not Applicable
Quality control	3.22



## 1. Planning & Design

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### 1.1. Clarity of Purpose and Scope in TOR

**STANDARD:** *The evaluation was guided by a TOR with at least the following sections explicit: purpose, scope and objectives; expectations regarding design and methodology; resources and time allocated; reporting requirements; expectations regarding evaluation process and products..*

#### Comment and Analysis

There is a clear TOR. It specifies 9 "specific terms of reference" as the mandate of the Committee. These commence with: Assess the strengths and shortcomings of the current scheme; followed by, Conduct a needs analysis of students who will require financial aid in the short-, medium- and long- terms. No separate document called Terms of Reference appears to have been drawn up. It should be noted that the specific terms of reference read like evaluation questions. In addition, the wording of these changes between the Executive Summary (9, on page xi), Introduction (9, on pages 3-4) and Recommendations (6, on page 124).

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD:** *The purpose of the evaluation was clear and explicit in the TOR*

#### Comment and Analysis

The purpose of the report is stated clearly: to review the NSFAS and assess the strengths and shortcomings of the current scheme and to advise the Minister on the short-, medium-, and long term needs of student financial aid to promote the twin goals of equity and access and providing free undergraduate education to students from working class and poor communities who cannot afford further or higher education.

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD:** *The evaluation questions were clearly stated in the TOR and appropriate to addressing the evaluation purpose*

#### Comment and Analysis

No evaluation questions are stated in the report. However, the Report treats the 9 specific terms of reference listed in the TOR as evaluation questions, which was confirmed by interviewees.

**Rating** 3

***STANDARD: The approach and type of evaluation was suited to the purpose and scope of the evaluation TOR*****Comment and Analysis**

Whilst the writers use the term "review" in naming the study, it appears an implementation evaluation of NSFAS 10 years on after its establishment in 1999 [Act 56 of 1999]. Broadly speaking, it aims to find out what happened? [strengths and weaknesses, et al], why?, and to make recommendations.

**Rating** 4***STANDARD: Intended users and their information needs were identified in the TOR*****Comment and Analysis**

Users don't appear to be identified specifically in the report. However, it is clear the DHET will want to use its findings to strengthen equity and access to higher education and training.

**Rating** 3***STANDARD: Key stakeholders were involved in the scoping of the TOR and determining the purpose of the evaluation*****Comment and Analysis**

Yes, stakeholders were involved, in drawing up the TOR and design of the evaluation, the DoE and universities particularly, and were approved by the Minister.

**Rating** 4

**1.2. Evaluation was adequately resourced**

***STANDARD: The evaluation was adequately resourced in terms of time allocated***

***Comment and Analysis***

The evaluation was completed in 12 months, which included an extension of 3 months for write-up.

**Rating** 4

***STANDARD: The evaluation was adequately resourced in terms of original budget***

***Comment and Analysis***

It was considered adequately funded, the total cost being approximately R2 million.

**Rating** 5

***STANDARD: The evaluation was adequately resourced in terms of staffing and skills sets***

***Comment and Analysis***

The evaluation appears to be adequately resourced in terms of staff and skills. The review was chaired by an academic/ professor, had a committee of 8, two having PhD degrees, a Report Writer, and a Research and Management Support group consisting of another 2 individuals. In addition, the Committee had the services of academics from NMMU for data analysis particularly.

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD:** *Where appropriate, the evaluation planned to incorporate an element of capacity building of partners/staff responsible for the evaluand*

**Comment and Analysis**

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

### 1.3. Alignment to Policy Context and Background Literature

**STANDARD:** *There was evidence that a review of the relevant policy and programme environments had been conducted and used in the planning of the evaluation by the evaluators*

**Comment and Analysis**

There was evidence of a review of the policy environment as it affected student aid, of the NSAFAS Act and HET training policy particularly. However, there was no clear evidence that this was used in planning the evaluation.

**Rating** 2

**STANDARD:** *There was evidence of a review of appropriate literature having been conducted and used in the planning of the evaluation by the evaluators*

**Comment and Analysis**

Literature on financial allocation, drop-outs, development and tertiary education, international trends in HE financing, and the like were reviewed. But there was no clear evidence that this was used in planning the evaluation.

**Rating** 2

**1.4. The evaluation methods planned were appropriate to the project**

***STANDARD: There was explicit reference to the intervention logic or the theory of change of the evaluand in the planning of the evaluation***

***Comment and Analysis***

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

***STANDARD: Key stakeholders were consulted on the design and methodology of the evaluation***

***Comment and Analysis***

NSFAS stakeholders were involved in the design and methodology of the evaluation.

**Rating** 3

***STANDARD: The planned methodology was appropriate to the questions being asked***

***Comment and Analysis***

The planned methods were appropriate to questions asked in this study. A desk top review was undertaken on studies in SA and internationally; research was commissioned in consultation with the DHET; it studied 87 written submissions and held panel hearings for the presentation of submissions; analysed data on the NSFAS and DHET database; used questionnaires; conducted focussed interviews with interested parties.

**Rating** 4



***STANDARD: Planned sampling was appropriate and adequate given the focus and purpose of evaluation******Comment and Analysis***

Sampling procedures were not stated. However, there appears to be a mix of purposive sampling [key stakeholder organizations] and convenience sampling [contributions by organizations willing to do so] in the sample selected.

**Rating** 1***STANDARD: There was a planned process for using the findings of the evaluation prior to undertaking the evaluation******Comment and Analysis***

No planned process for using the report was made explicit prior to the evaluation. However, it is clear from the report that use is important and will follow on its completion.

**Rating** 1**1.5. Inception phase*****STANDARD: The inception phase was used to develop a common agreement on how the evaluation would be implemented******Comment and Analysis***

The inception phase didn't result in any major changes to the plan.

**Rating** 4

## 2. Implementation

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### 2.1. Ethical Review and Considerations

**STANDARD:** *Where data was gathered in contexts where ethical sensitivity is high, appropriate clearance was obtained through an ethics review board; e.g. in evaluation involving minors, institutions where access usually requires ethical or bureaucratic clearance, and situations where assurances of confidentiality was offered to participants*

**Comment and Analysis**

No reference is made to following ethical procedures in the evaluation. This was not a requirement of the evaluation. Confidentiality was upheld, no names of individual participants were used, but names of institutions, like universities, were.

**Rating** 2

### 2.2. Evaluator independence

**STANDARD:** *Where external, evaluation team was able to work freely without significant interference*

**Comment and Analysis**

Interviewees indicated they worked without interference during the evaluation.

**Rating** 3

***STANDARD: The evaluation team was impartial and there was no evidence of conflict of interest******Comment and Analysis***

Where Committee members were members of the DHET, a conflict of interest could have arisen. Interviewees said this did not arise.

**Rating** 3

**2.3. Key stakeholder involvement*****STANDARD: Key stakeholders were consulted through a formalised mechanism or institutional arrangement during the evaluation******Comment and Analysis***

Key stakeholders were consulted, and a formal mechanism was in place which made it possible.

**Rating** 4

***STANDARD: Where appropriate, an element of capacity building of partners responsible for the evaluand was incorporated into the evaluation******Comment and Analysis***

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

## 2.4. Methodology

***STANDARD: The methods employed in the process of the evaluation were consistent with those planned***

***Comment and Analysis***

Methods employed to gather data in the evaluation appear consistent with those planned.

**Rating** 5

***STANDARD: Data collection was not compromised by fieldwork-level problems or unplanned diversions from original intentions***

***Comment and Analysis***

On the whole, data collection was not compromised by fieldwork-level problems. Having said this, not all HEIs participated, nor did NSFAS provide all the data required of them [data base problems, absence of policies, late reporting]. A diversion appears to be researching the cost of another funding model when the brief was to evaluate the present one.

**Rating** 3

***STANDARD: Forms of data gathering were appropriate given the scope of evaluation***

***Comment and Analysis***

Forms of data gathering appear to be appropriate in the main. But it is difficult to gauge appropriateness as many times the report did not indicate what data was to be collected or instruments used.

**Rating** 2

**STANDARD: The data analysis approach and methods were appropriate and sufficient given the purposes of the evaluation**

**Comment and Analysis**

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

**STANDARD: Key stakeholders were significantly engaged as part of the methodology**

**Comment and Analysis**

Universities and students particularly were engaged as part of the methodology.

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD: The methodology included engaging beneficiaries appropriately as a key source of data and information**

**Comment and Analysis**

Key beneficiaries were included as sources of data and information.

**Rating** 4

## 2.5. Project management

**STANDARD: The evaluation was conducted without shifts to scheduled project milestones and timeframes**

### Comment and Analysis

The evaluation team negotiated an extension of time [3 month] to submit its report. Some NSFAS documents weren't received.

**Rating** 4

## 3. Report

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**3.1. Report was well-structured and presentation was clear and complete in each of these areas**

**STANDARD: Executive summary captured key components of the report appropriately**

### Comment and Analysis

A very extensive Executive Summary appears [approximately 25 pages] in the report. It captures key components of the evaluation report.

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD: The context of the development intervention was explicit and presented as relevant to the evaluation**

### Comment and Analysis

The legislative framework, environment, historical background, and mandate of the NSFAS provides insights into the context of the NSFAS.

**Rating** 5

**STANDARD: There was a clear rationale for the evaluation questions****Comment and Analysis**

There was no explicit rationale for the evaluation questions.

**Rating** 1

**STANDARD: The scope or focus of the evaluation was apparent in the report****Comment and Analysis**

The national scope of the evaluation was apparent in the report.

**Rating** 5

**STANDARD: A detailed methodology was outlined in the relevant section of a report (full report or 1/3/25) to the point that a reader could understand the data collection, analysis and interpretation****Comment and Analysis**

The Methodology section of the report states clearly the field methods which were used . Sampling is omitted [which may be appropriate in this type of evaluation]. Little if anything is said of data analysis and how this was accomplished.

**Rating** 3

**STANDARD: Key findings were presented in a clear way; they were made distinct from uncertain or speculative findings; and unused data was not presented in the body of the report****Comment and Analysis**

Key findings are not presented clearly. Findings are presented as "Strengths", such as "Creating access" "life changing hope", and "Shortcomings", such as compliance of the Act with the Constitution, regulations, governance. And, the former seem in balance with the latter, which are more numerous, as may be expected of an evaluation aimed at improving a system, such as NSFAS. But, there is an absence of conclusions from this discussion.

**Rating** 4

***STANDARD: Conclusions and recommendations were clear and succinctly articulated***

**Comment and Analysis**

Conclusions seem absent from critical parts of the study [eg: to Assessing the NSFAS]. Conclusions appear to be absent from the Executive Summary, where findings [no heading] and Recommendations were presented. And, in the Report and Executive Summary, the first Recommendation appears to fall outside the TOR [a new funding model]. Recommendations on specific terms of reference, in addition, were embedded in this section, rather than being main categories structuring it.

**Rating** 4

***STANDARD: Acknowledgement of limitations of all aspects of the methodology and findings were clearly and succinctly articulated***

**Comment and Analysis**

Limitations are referred to at different junctures in the evaluation report, one being difficulty getting data from NSFAS, its database especially.

**Rating** 3



### 3.2. Writing and presentation

**STANDARD:** *Quality of writing and presentation was adequate for publication including: adequate layout and consistent formatting; complete sentences and no widespread grammatical or typographical errors; consistency of style and writing conventions (e.g. tense, perspective (first person, third person); levels of formality; references complete and consistent with cited references in reference list and vice versa; etc)*

#### Comment and Analysis

The quality of writing is very good, as is the layout of the report. Formatting is consistent too. There doesn't appear to be widespread grammatical, spelling and other errors in the report. Graphs present data clearly and, in the main, follow the normal conventions. Referencing in the report also appears consistent.

Rating **5**

**STANDARD:** *Appropriate conventions were used in presentation of data (e.g. use of appropriate statistical language; reporting of p-values where appropriate; not reporting statistically insignificant findings as significant; clarifying disaggregation categories in constructing percentages; not using quantitative language in reporting qualitative data, etc.)*

#### Comment and Analysis

The usual conventions were used in the presentation of data. Statistical language is used where appropriate, so the discussion is easily followed. Quantitative and qualitative language are used appropriately in the report.

Rating **4**

### 3.3. Presentation of findings

**STANDARD:** *The use of figures and tables was such that it supported communication and comprehension of results; and data reported in figures and tables was readily discernible and useful to a reader familiar with data presentation conventions*

**Comment and Analysis**

Tables were clear, well introduced and discussed. Data reported in Figures and Tables were easily discernable, and useful in the main, even to a reader not readily familiar to data presentation conventions.

**Rating** 5

**STANDARD: Data analysis appeared to have been well executed**

**Comment and Analysis**

Not known.

**Rating** 1

**STANDARD: Findings were supported by available evidence**

**Comment and Analysis**

Findings were supported by available evidence from multiple sources, including HESA the most informed and expert stakeholder on HEIs and funding students in universities and colleges.

**Rating** 4

***STANDARD: The evidence gathered was sufficiently and appropriately analysed to support the argument*****Comment and Analysis**

Whilst data analysis procedures were not disclosed, interviewees noted that academics from NMMU assisted with data analysis. It appears sufficiently and appropriately analysed to support the argument.

**Rating** 3***STANDARD: There was appropriate recognition of the possibility of alternative interpretations*****Comment and Analysis**

There was no clear evidence of the recognition of the possibility of alternative interpretations.

**Rating** 1***STANDARD: The report appeared free of significant methodological and analytic flaws*****Comment and Analysis**

As far as can be seen, the report seems free of significant methodological and analytic errors.

**Rating** 4

### 3.4. Conclusions

***STANDARD: Conclusions were derived from evidence***

**Comment and Analysis**

Conclusions seem conflated with Findings on the 9 "...specific terms of reference mandated..." mandated in the ToR for study in the evaluation. They could be more clearly structured as responses to these specific issues.

**Rating** **3**

***STANDARD: Conclusions took into account relevant empirical and/or analytic work from related research studies and evaluations***

**Comment and Analysis**

Conclusions took into account relevant data gathered, from other studies relevant to it as well as studies commissioned for the evaluation.

**Rating** **4**

***STANDARD: Conclusions addressed the original evaluation purpose and questions***

**Comment and Analysis**

Conclusions on NSFAS were embedded in the report, rather than being given a section called, Conclusions. They seem also to be conflated with Findings.

**Rating** **3**

***STANDARD: Conclusions were drawn with explicit reference to the intervention logic or theory of change*****Comment and Analysis**

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

**3.5. Recommendations*****STANDARD: Recommendations were made in consultation with appropriate sectoral partners or experts*****Comment and Analysis**

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

***STANDARD: Recommendations were shaped following input or review by relevant government officials and other relevant stakeholders*****Comment and Analysis**

Regular meetings were held during the evaluation between the team and government officials including the Minister of HET, which may also have extended to shaping recommendations.

**Rating** 3

**STANDARD: Recommendations were relevant to the policy context****Comment and Analysis**

Recommendations were made on 6 of the 9 listed specific "terms of reference" mandated for the committee to review. The first Recommendation, to adopt new models for financing HEI and FET students, is not stated explicitly in the TOR, and reasons were not easy to find which link it to one of the 9 specific issues for investigation. Nevertheless, recommendations will be relevant to policies governing student funding in HEIs and FET colleges.

**Rating** **3**

**STANDARD: Recommendations were targetted to a specific audience sufficiently - were specific, feasible, affordable and acceptable****Comment and Analysis**

Recommendations appear to be made for policy makers in government. Each recommendation is specific, in the main. However, no theory of change was given to indicate if the main recommendation was feasible. And, with the calculated increased cost of funding free study in HEIs and FET colleges rising from R2.2 billion and R500,000 in 2010 to a maximum of R22 billion and R18 billion respectively in 2020, this recommendation may not be affordable. This comes as a surprise as the report earlier notes that free higher education has been abandoned internationally, most recently by Germany, as being unaffordable.

**Rating** **1**

**3.6. Relevant limitations of the evaluation have been noted****STANDARD: Relevant limitations of the evaluation were noted****Comment and Analysis**

Limitations in the data were noted in the report.

**Rating** **3**

### 3.7 Protection of participants and risk considerations

**STANDARD:** *The full report documented procedures intended to ensure confidentiality and to secure informed consent where this was needed (in some cases this is not needed - e.g. evaluation synthesis - in which case N/A should be recorded)*

#### Comment and Analysis

Confidentiality was upheld, no names of individual participants were used, but names of institutions, like universities, were. However, these were not explicitly stated in the report.

**Rating** 2

**STANDARD:** *There were no risks to participants in disseminating the original report on a public website*

#### Comment and Analysis

Besides the usual risks to participants when going public, there appear to be no, or limited, risks to them, in disseminating this report.

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD:** *There were no unfair risks to institutions in disseminating the original report on a public website*

#### Comment and Analysis

Besides the usual risks to institutions which participated in the evaluation, no unfair risks to institutions appear to be had in disseminating the report widely through a public website.

**Rating** 4

## 4. Follow-up, use and learning

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### 4.1. Presentation to stakeholders

**STANDARD:** *Results were presented to all relevant stakeholders*

#### Comment and Analysis

Interviewees indicated that the report was placed on the DHET website and emailed to all stakeholders.

**Rating** 4

### 4.2. Resource utilisation

**STANDARD:** *The evaluation was completed within the planned timeframes*

#### Comment and Analysis

The Committee had to negotiate an extension of one month to complete the report.

**Rating** 4

**STANDARD:** *The evaluation was completed within the agreed budget*

#### Comment and Analysis

The evaluation was completed within budget.

**Rating** 5



#### 4.3. Transparency

**STANDARD:** *The report was publicly available (website or otherwise published document), except where there were legitimate security concerns*

##### Comment and Analysis

This report was made available on the DHET website, sent to all stakeholders by email, but not printed, as this was not included in the budget.

**Rating** 4

#### 4.4. Lessons learnt

**STANDARD:** *After completion of the evaluation, a reflective process was undertaken by staff responsible for the evaluation to reflect on what could be done to strengthen future evaluations*

##### Comment and Analysis

Not known.

**Rating** 2

#### 4.5. Symbolic and conceptual value

**STANDARD:** *The evaluation study was seen by interviewed stakeholders as having added significant symbolic value to the policy or programme (eg raised its profile)*

##### Comment and Analysis

Whilst not explicitly stated, one interviewee said it was long over due as a second evaluation of the student financial aid scheme, suggesting the study added symbolic value to stakeholders such as HESA, DHET, HEIs, FET colleges and students.

**Rating** 3

***STANDARD: The evaluation study was of conceptual value in understanding what has happened and possibly in shaping policy and practice***

**Comment and Analysis**

Not known.

**Rating** N/A

#### **4.6. Utilisation of findings and recommendations**

***STANDARD: There was clear evidence of instrumental use - that the recommendations of the evaluation were implemented to a significant extent***

**Comment and Analysis**

One interviewee said that there was clear evidence of, what may be called, instrumental use. The report has been used: to align the NSFSA with the Constitution, clarify the NSFAS Act, show the extent of change needed in NSFSA to fulfill its mandate, change the NSFAS Board, and the like. It has also led to a follow-up study still to be released, to see if NSFAS students perform better than their unfunded counterparts. Another interviewee said the Final year programme was introduced [if graduate in final year, NSFAS loans commute to a bursary]. A new distributive mechanism directly to students is being discussed too.

**Rating** 5

***STANDARD: There was clear evidence that the evaluation has had a positive influence on the evaluand, its stakeholders and beneficiaries over the medium to long term***

**Comment and Analysis**

Changes already made in NSFAS--to align it better with the Constitution, and the Act governing its operations, as well as appointing a new Board, and streamline procedures in NSFAS, and in HEIs and FET colleges, suggest the evaluation to be having a positive influence.

**Rating** 4

## **References**

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Ministerial Committee (2010). Report of the Ministerial Committee on the Review of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme. .

## **List of Interviewees**

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P Whittle, Ministerial Committee, DHET; Telephonic Interview 8/2/2013.

K Menon, Ministerial Committee, DHET; Telephonic Interview, 8/2/2013.

Makgoba, S., Universities, DHET; Telephonic Interview, 12/2/2013.