Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7, 1360-1381
2025
Publisher: Learning Gate
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

Bridging the gap: The transition of young emerging evaluators from theory to practice in South Africa's M&E landscape

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Abstract: This study explores how South African universities can better prepare Young Emerging Evaluators (YEEs) for the transition from academic learning to professional Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) practice. Despite the growing demand for skilled evaluators in government, NGOs, and the private sector, a persistent gap exists between theoretical training and real-world application. Using a qualitative, multi-method approach—comprising focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis—the study examines the adequacy of current academic curricula in equipping YEEs with the practical skills needed for evaluation work. Grounded in Experiential Learning Theory and Situated Learning Theory, the findings reveal that while universities provide strong theoretical foundations, they fall short in offering structured, field-based learning opportunities. YEEs often enter the workforce underprepared to manage stakeholder dynamics, resource constraints, and the political complexities of evaluation environments. Employers and practitioners similarly report that graduates lack applied competencies and critical soft skills. The study concludes that universities should embed work-integrated learning, mentorship, and professional exposure into M&E programs to strengthen workplace readiness. These reforms are essential for building sustainable internal evaluation capacity in South Africa and reducing dependence on post-graduation interventions, contributing to the professionalization and long-term growth of the M&E field.

Keywords: *Monitoring and evaluation, South Africa, Universities, Curricula, Young emerging evaluators.*

1. Introduction and Background

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) has become a crucial aspect of governance, policy implementation, and development in South Africa. Since the transition to democracy in 1994, evidence-based policymaking has been recognized as a key tool in addressing historical social and economic inequalities. To institutionalize M&E, the government established the Government-Wide Monitoring and Evaluation (GWME) system, later formalized by the National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF), to enhance accountability, efficiency, and service delivery across government levels [1-3]. The establishment of the Department of Planning [4] further reinforced the country's commitment to using evaluation to improve governance and development outcomes [5]. Beyond government, M&E expertise is increasingly important in NGOs, donor-funded programs, and private-sector initiatives, all requiring robust evaluation frameworks to assess social program and CSR impact [6, 7]. To meet this demand, South African universities have introduced various M&E degree programs, diplomas, and certification courses [8].

Despite these developments, universities continue to struggle to prepare students for the profession's practical demands. While M&E programs offer strong theoretical foundations, they often lack sufficient field-based exposure. As a result, graduates enter the workforce without practical competencies needed to conduct evaluations in complex environments—especially around stakeholder engagement, resources, and political dynamics—exacerbated by limited internships and mentorship

History: Received: 8 May 2025; Revised: 9 June 2025; Accepted: 13 June 2025; Published: 17 July 2025
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opportunities [9-11]. Consequently, many rely heavily on post-graduation training, internships, and mentorship to develop competencies that should have been integrated into their academic experience, perpetuating dependence on external consultants and delaying in-house capacity building [9, 12].

This gap is reflective of broader higher education trends in South Africa, where disciplines such as engineering, business, and health sciences have similar deficits in practical expertise despite academic excellence [13, 14]. While other fields have embraced work-integrated learning (WIL) and strengthened industry partnerships, M&E education lags behind [9, 12]. Further, emerging evaluators lack structured career pathways, reinforcing reliance on short-term external support rather than building sustainable institutional M&E capacity [12, 15].

Although universities provide training in methodologies, data analysis, and statistical tools, graduates often struggle to manage evaluations in multi-stakeholder and resource-constrained contexts, a concern voiced by practitioners at SAMEA and EvalYouth forums [5, 7, 12, 16]. To address this divide, this study investigates how South African universities can better prepare Young Emerging Evaluators (YEEs) by embedding practical training and academia-industry collaboration into curricula. It offers actionable insights around experiential learning, mentorship, and professional exposure aimed at bolstering a skilled and self-reliant evaluation workforce.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Young Emerging Evaluators (YEEs)

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) by Kolb and Situated Learning Theory (SLT) by Lave and Wenger both offer valuable insights into the challenges of bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application in educational settings. Kolb's ELT emphasizes the importance of learning through direct experience and reflection, proposing that knowledge is best constructed through active engagement with the world. According to Kolb, learners cycle through four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This model highlights the necessity for learners to engage with real-world tasks, reflect on them, and apply insights to future scenarios. In the context of M&E education, ELT provides strong justification for integrating field-based learning and practical evaluation into academic curricula, helping students move beyond abstract theory to grapple with real-world complexity [17, 18]. Recent studies confirm that experiential learning fosters deeper cognitive engagement, stronger critical thinking, and improved professional identity development in fields that require adaptable, applied skills [19-21].

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
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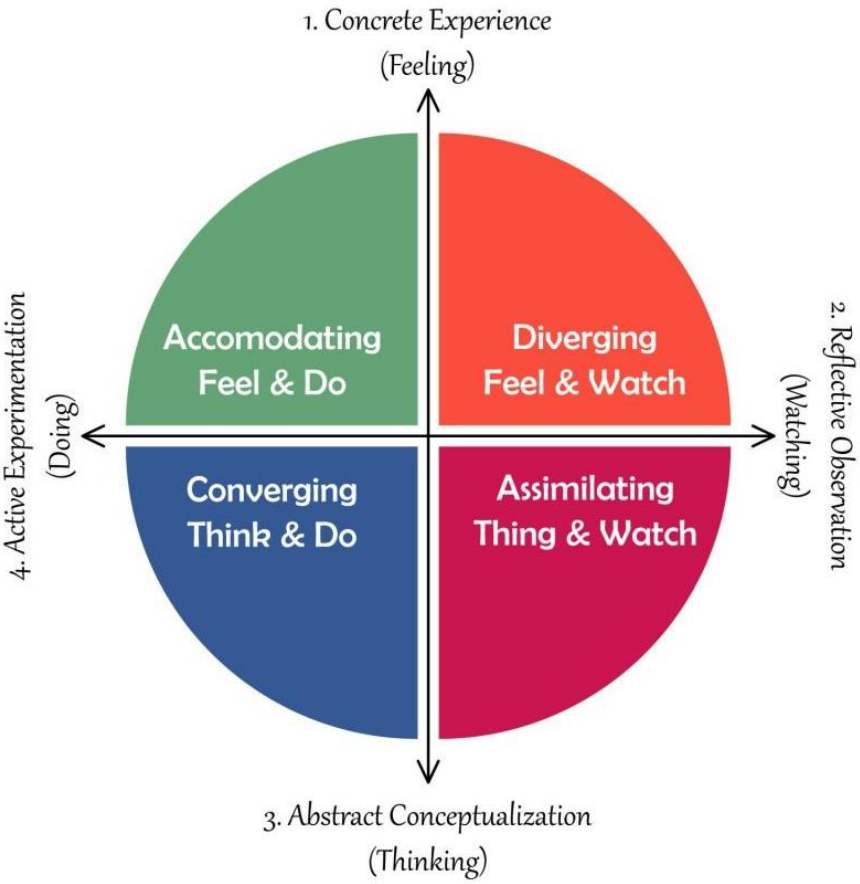

Figure 1.
Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.
Source: Adapted from Kolb [22].

Situated Learning Theory (SLT), developed by Lave and Wenger, further enriches our understanding by emphasizing that meaningful learning occurs within authentic, social, and contextualized environments. SLT introduces the concept of *communities of practice*—informal professional learning networks where students gain expertise by participating in shared professional activities. In this model, tacit knowledge—those nuanced, experiential insights—are best learned through immersion in real-world practice rather than abstract instruction [23]. In the M&E context, this implies that students should learn alongside professionals during real evaluations, navigating client expectations, constraints, and interpersonal dynamics. SLT therefore supports the integration of work-integrated learning (WIL), structured mentorship, and reflective dialogue into M&E programs [24, 25].

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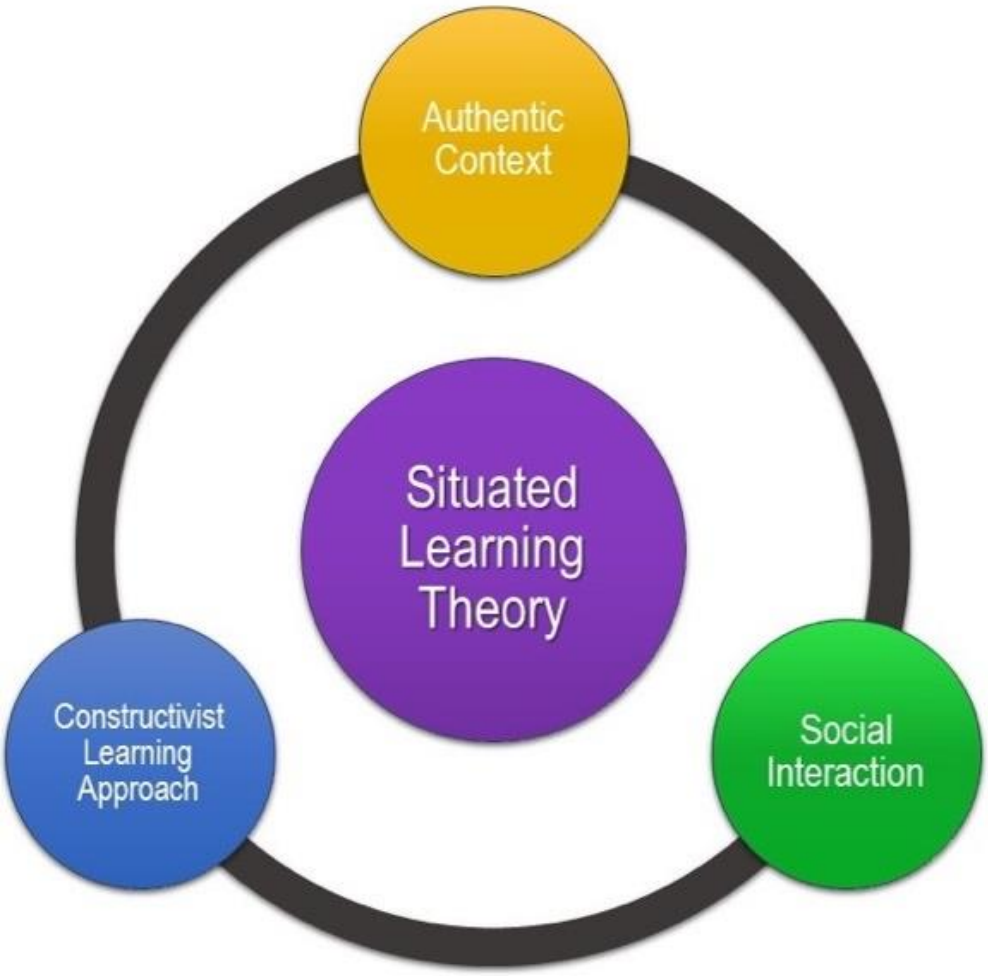

Figure 2.
Key Principles of Situated Learning Theory.
Source: Adapted from Lave and Wenger [17].

These two theories—ELT and SLT—are not mutually exclusive but instead form a complementary framework for reimagining professional readiness in evaluation education. ELT focuses on the cognitive and reflective dimensions of learning, while SLT emphasizes the social and participatory aspects. Together, they highlight the importance of real-world exposure, critical reflection, and guided participation in the professional community. Applied to M&E, this means that students should not only complete internships or capstone projects but also be embedded in reflective and mentoring structures that align learning with practice. Research on workplace-based learning shows that students who learn under the guidance of skilled mentors in live professional settings demonstrate faster transitions into professional roles, greater methodological confidence, and stronger ethical reasoning [9, 26]. For M&E educators, these insights offer a roadmap for designing curricula that produce evaluators who are not only theoretically sound but professionally grounded and ready to navigate complex real-world challenges.

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2.2. Higher Education and M&E Training in South Africa

South African HEIs have responded to the increasing demand for qualified M&E professionals by offering specialised postgraduate M&E programs. These programs, typically offered at master's and postgraduate diploma levels, are designed to equip students with the necessary theoretical knowledge, methodological skills, and practical experience required for effective evaluation in diverse sectors such as public policy, social development, corporate governance, and public health [27]. These academic offerings address the growing need for M&E professionals, particularly in a country where evidence-based decision-making has become central to policy and development initiatives. According to the Zenex Foundation, the total number of academic offerings in M&E across South African universities has risen to 55 confirmed programs, with postgraduate programs (PG) accounting for most of these offerings (*see Table 1*) [27].

Table 1.
Number of academic offerings in M&E in SA.

Offering	Initially Identified	Offerings Confirmed	Completed forms	Level
Programmes	9	9	7	(6 PG + 1 UG)
Modules	22	24	13	(12 PG + 1 UG)
Short Courses	14	22	17	(14 PG + 3 below NQF 7)
Total	24	55	37	32 (PG) and 5 (UG)

Source: Tengeh [27].

Despite these developments, there remains a persistent challenge in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical M&E skills in South Africa's postgraduate education. While the programs offer essential insights into evaluation methodologies, data analysis, and theoretical frameworks, they often fail to provide the immersive, field-based experiences necessary for students to develop the practical competencies required for managing real-world evaluations. The limited integration of practical M&E training—such as internships, work-integrated learning (WIL), and industry collaborations—remains a key challenge. While some institutions incorporate assignments and research projects, these practical components typically focus on theoretical case studies rather than engaging with actual evaluation contexts [28].

Moreover, the reliance on academic assignments and research projects, while central to postgraduate education, often neglects critical real-world exposure. The disconnect between classroom learning and real-world application is an issue that is not unique to M&E but is a broader challenge in higher education globally [29]. Other fields, such as engineering and business management, have documented similar concerns, where students excel academically but struggle to address the complex challenges they face in professional environments [30]. M&E's challenges are magnified by the complexities of stakeholder engagement, managing data under resource constraints, and adapting evaluation methodologies to diverse cultural and organizational contexts [31].

In order to bridge this gap, it is essential that postgraduate M&E curricula incorporate work-integrated learning models that enable students to engage with real-world evaluations under the guidance of experienced mentors. Studies in various sectors have emphasized the importance of incorporating field-based assignments, data collection exercises, and internships to prepare students for the complexities of managing evaluations in multi-stakeholder and resource-constrained environments [32]. Unfortunately, these opportunities are often limited, and short-term field placements and internships fail to provide students with the deep, sustained exposure needed to build comprehensive evaluation competencies (*see Table 2*). The short duration of many field placements means students cannot immerse themselves in the challenges of large-scale evaluations, which often include extensive stakeholder engagement and navigating the ethical and political complexities involved [33].

This situation highlights the need for closer partnerships between academic institutions and external organizations, such as government departments, NGOs, and private sector organizations,

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which can offer longer-term, immersive learning experiences. These partnerships could provide students with the practical exposure necessary to tackle the challenges professional evaluators face in the real world [34]. However, this integration of practical training requires significant collaboration and effort from universities, professional bodies, and employers to ensure that M&E students receive more than just theoretical knowledge and are prepared for the complex realities of M&E practice.

Table 2.
Summary of M&E Courses at South African HEIs.

Institution	Course Type	Course Title	Hands-on Experience
University of Johannesburg (UJ)	Postgraduate Diploma, Masters	Postgraduate Diploma & Masters in M&E	Research projects, practical assignments
Durban University of Technology (DUT)	National Diploma	National Diploma in Public Administration	Practical assignments
University of Fort Hare (UFH)	Bachelor's, Honours	Bachelor of Social Sciences in Human Settlement, B Admin	Research projects, practical assignments
University of Zululand (UNIZULU)	Honours	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Development Studies	Research projects, practical assignments
University of the Western Cape (UWC)	Postgraduate Diploma, Masters	Postgraduate Diploma & Masters in Public Health & Administration	Research projects, practical assignments
North-West University (NWU)	Short Learning Programme	Short Learning Programme in Monitoring and Evaluation	None specified
Central University of Technology (CUT)	Advanced Diploma	Advanced Diploma in Monitoring and Evaluation	Research projects, practical assignments
University of Pretoria (UP)	SLP, Postgraduate Diploma, Masters	Postgraduate Diploma & Masters in Public Health, Public Administration, Epidemiology, Agriculture	Research projects, practical assignments
University of Cape Town (UCT)	Postgraduate Diploma, Masters, PhD	Postgraduate Diploma & Masters in Health Economics, Public Health, Programme Evaluation, PhD in Programme Evaluation	Research projects, practical assignments
University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)	Masters	Masters in Health Promotion with M&E module	Research projects, practical assignments
Nelson Mandela University (NMU)	Masters	Masters in Development Finance with M&E module	Research projects, practical assignments
Stellenbosch University (SU)	Postgraduate Diploma, Masters, PhD	Postgraduate Diploma In M&E, Public Administration, PhD in Evaluation Studies	Research projects, practical assignments

2.3. Professionalization of M&E: The Role of VOPEs and Employers

The professionalisation of M&E is essential for strengthening capacity and ensuring effective evaluation practices in South Africa. VOPEs have played a crucial role in advancing the M&E field by offering platforms for professional networking, learning, and promoting best practices. In South Africa, the SAMEA is at the forefront of this movement, working to build evaluation capacity through initiatives such as the Emerging Evaluators Programme. This program provides mentorship, professional certification, and targeted training to enhance the competencies of both YEEs and experienced professionals [35]. SAMEA's role in bridging the gap between academic training and workplace expectations is significant, as it offers exposure to real-world evaluation practices and fosters continuous professional development. Beyond training, VOPEs contribute to the formalization of the M&E profession by establishing competency frameworks, professional standards, and ethical guidelines that help evaluators meet industry and stakeholder expectations. By collaborating with academic institutions, VOPEs ensure that M&E curricula align with contemporary industry needs and global best practices, thereby promoting knowledge sharing and professional development in the sector [27].

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Additionally, VOPEs advocate for policy reforms that institutionalize M&E in government and private organizations, reinforcing its role in evidence-based policymaking and service delivery.

Despite these efforts, a significant gap remains between the competencies of M&E graduates and the expectations of employers. Many public and private sector employers report that while graduates possess strong theoretical knowledge of evaluation methodologies and data analysis techniques, they often struggle with the practical aspects of evaluation, such as stakeholder engagement, the contextual adaptation of evaluation tools, and the application of findings to inform decision-making [36]. A study by the Zenex Foundation highlighted that employers are particularly concerned about the ability of graduates to design and implement evaluations in challenging, resource-constrained environments independently [27]. This gap forces many organizations to invest in additional training or mentorship programs to prepare young evaluators for professional practice [35]. Employers also emphasize the need for M&E professionals to manage multi-stakeholder evaluations, navigate complex political and institutional dynamics, and handle real-time data interpretation under pressure [33]. However, academic programs, despite offering strong theoretical foundations, often lack sufficient hands-on learning opportunities, leaving graduates underprepared for the demands of the profession. As a result, employers increasingly rely on external consultants or specialized post-graduate training programs to equip young evaluators with the practical skills they require [37]. This continued reliance on external expertise highlights the need for better alignment between academic preparation and workplace readiness, reinforcing the importance of VOPEs in addressing these professionalization challenges.

Employers play a vital role in shaping the future of M&E professionalization by providing work-based learning opportunities, field experience, and supervised practice for emerging evaluators. Some South African employers have begun collaborating with universities and VOPEs to design competency-based training programs aimed at equipping graduates with the necessary skills for the profession. These partnerships are crucial for ensuring that M&E curricula evolve in line with industry needs and that young evaluators are adequately prepared for real-world challenges [31]. However, these collaborations need to be more structured and institutionalized to effectively bridge the gap between academic knowledge and professional practice. Moving forward, employers must actively participate in curriculum development, provide regular feedback on graduate competencies, and support structured mentorship and professional development initiatives. Strengthening employer involvement in the training and professionalization of M&E practitioners will help create a more sustainable pipeline of skilled evaluators, reducing dependence on external consultants and enhancing South Africa's internal capacity for conducting high-quality evaluations. By fostering closer ties between universities, VOPEs, and employers, the M&E sector can ensure that future evaluators are well-equipped to contribute meaningfully to evidence-based governance and program evaluation.

3. Methodological Framework

This study employs a qualitative research design anchored in the constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and contextual experiences [38, 39]. Within the field of M&E, the transition from academic training to professional practice is shaped by institutional structures, industry expectations, and the lived experiences of YEEs. Given the complexity of this transition, qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of how various actors—YEEs, M&E scholars, practitioners, and employers—interpret and navigate the existing gaps between university education and workplace competencies.

3.1. Data Collection

The study employs a multi-method qualitative approach to capture a holistic understanding of the issue, incorporating FGDs with YEEs, semi-structured interviews with M&E scholars, practitioners, and employers, and document analysis of M&E curricula across South African universities. FGDs facilitated peer discussions among YEEs, helping to identify common themes regarding their

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preparedness for professional M&E practice. Semi-structured interviews allowed M&E scholars to reflect on their curriculum design choices. At the same time, M&E practitioners and employers provided insights into the competencies they expect from recent graduates and the extent to which university training meets these demands. Document analysis involved a systematic review of postgraduate M&E programs, assessing the balance between theoretical instruction and practical training. This triangulation of data sources enhances the study's validity and reliability, ensuring that findings reflect multiple perspectives.

3.2. Sampling Techniques and Participants' Profiles

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants had direct experience with M&E education or professional evaluation practice. This approach aligns with qualitative research best practices that emphasize selecting information-rich cases to maximize analytical depth [40]. Participants were drawn from four key groups: YEEs, M&E scholars, M&E practitioners, and employers from government, NGOs, and the private sector. Including employers was critical in understanding how workforce expectations align or misalign with university curricula. A total of 75 participants were engaged in the study, ensuring a diverse sectoral representation (*see Table 3*). The largest group (40 participants) comprised 30 YEEs, 15 M&E scholars, 15 M&E practitioners and 15 employers. This distribution was designed to balance perspectives across those receiving M&E education (YEEs), those providing it (scholars), those practising it (practitioners), and those hiring M&E graduates (employers).

Table 3.
Participants by Group and Sectoral Representation.

Group	Number of Participants	Sector/Field	Justification for Inclusion
Young Emerging Evaluators (YEEs)	30	Government, NGOs, Private Sector, International Development Agencies	Provide firsthand experiences of transitioning from academic training to professional evaluation practice.
M&E Scholars	15	Higher Education Institutions (Universities)	Offer insights into the design and delivery of postgraduate M&E education and its alignment with industry needs.
M&E Practitioners	15	Government, Private Consultancies, International Organizations, NGOs	Represent industry expectations regarding the competencies required from M&E graduates.
Employers	15	Government, Private Sector, NGOs	Provide perspectives on hiring trends, skill gaps, and on-the-job training requirements for M&E graduates.
Total	75	Diverse representation across sectors	Comprehensive insights into M&E education and practice.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted thematically, following Braun and Clarke's widely applied six-phase approach to qualitative analysis. These phases include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This method was selected because of its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns in large, qualitative datasets, particularly across diverse respondent groups such as YEEs, academics, and employers. All interviews and focus group transcripts were first transcribed verbatim and then analysed using NVivo software. Coding was both inductive and deductive: inductive codes emerged from participants' narratives, while deductive codes were guided by the research objectives and existing literature on M&E education and professionalisation. Coding consistency was ensured through peer debriefing, where a second coder reviewed a subset of transcripts to confirm thematic coherence and interpretive alignment. This process enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis and ensured that

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findings were firmly rooted in the data while still connected to the conceptual framework and research questions. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and any identifying information was anonymised during transcription.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Demographic Profile of Participants

YEEs constituted 30 participants, primarily recent graduates or early-career professionals who had completed M&E-related qualifications *(see Table 4)*. Most YEEs held postgraduate diplomas or master's degrees in M&E, public policy, or related fields. While some had entered the workforce through government agencies, NGOs, or private consultancies, others were still navigating the job market, highlighting the uneven availability of entry-level opportunities in the field. Most YEEs had 1 to 2 years of experience, with a significant number still relying on internships or mentorship to gain practical skills. Despite their academic training, many reported feeling underprepared for real-world evaluation tasks, particularly in stakeholder engagement, evaluation design, and adapting methodologies to complex field settings.

Table 4.
Demographic Profile of Young Emerging Evaluators (YEEs).

Participant ID	Gender	Age Range	Highest Qualification	Employment Sector	Years of Experience in M&E
YEE001	Female	25-30	PG Diploma in M&E	Government	2 years
YEE002	Male	30-35	MA in M&E	NGO	2 years
YEE003	Female	25-30	MPhil in M&E	Private Sector	1 year
YEE004	Male	25-30	PG Diploma in M&E	International Dev.	2 years
YEE005	Female	28-32	MA in Public Policy	Government	2 years
YEE006	Male	22-27	PG Diploma in M&E	NGO	1 year
YEE007	Female	24-29	PG Diploma in M&E	Private Sector	2 years
YEE008	Male	30-35	MA in M&E	International Dev.	4 years
YEE009	Female	28-32	MPhil in M&E	Government	32years
YEE010	Male	26-31	PG Diploma in M&E	NGO	2 years
YEE011	Female	27-32	MA in M&E	Government	2 years
YEE012	Male	30-35	PG Diploma in M&E	NGO	2 years
YEE013	Female	25-30	PG Diploma in M&E	Private Sector	1 year
YEE014	Male	28-33	MA in Public Policy	Government	4 years
YEE015	Female	24-29	MPhil in M&E	International Dev.	2 years
YEE016	Male	22-27	PG Diploma in M&E	NGO	1 year
YEE017	Female	30-35	MA in M&E	Government	2 years
YEE018	Male	26-31	PG Diploma in M&E	Private Sector	2 years
YEE019	Female	27-32	MPhil in M&E	NGO	2 years
YEE020	Male	30-35	PG Diploma in M&E	Government	3 years
YEE021	Female	24-29	MA in Public Policy	International Dev.	2 years
YEE022	Male	25-30	PG Diploma in M&E	NGO	1 year
YEE023	Female	28-32	MA in M&E	Private Sector	2 years
YEE024	Male	30-35	MPhil in M&E	Government	2 years
YEE025	Female	22-27	PG Diploma in M&E	NGO	2 years
YEE026	Male	28-32	MA in Public Policy	International Dev.	2 years
YEE027	Female	25-30	MPhil in M&E	Private Sector	2 years
YEE028	Male	30-35	PG Diploma in M&E	Government	2 years
YEE029	Female	28-33	MA in M&E	NGO	2 years
YEE030	Male	22-27	PG Diploma in M&E	Private Sector	1 year

M&E Scholars comprised 15 participants from leading South African universities, including institutions offering specialized postgraduate training in M&E *(see Table 5)*. These scholars had

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
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extensive teaching and research experience, with an average of 12 to 20 years in academia. Their contributions focused on how universities design and implement M&E curricula and the extent to which these programs incorporate practical training. While scholars acknowledged the growing need for applied learning, many cited institutional constraints such as limited funding for field placements, reliance on case-study-based learning, and the challenge of balancing theoretical rigour with workplace demands.

Table 5.
Demographic Profile of M&E Scholars.

Participant ID	Gender	Age Range	Institutional Affiliation	Years in M&E Education
MS001	Male	40-50	University of Johannesburg	10 years
MS002	Female	30-40	Foundation for Professional Development	10 years
MS003	Male	35-45	University of the Witwatersrand	8 years
MS004	Female	40-50	University of Pretoria	6 years
MS005	Male	45-55	Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT)	8 years
MS006	Female	50-60	University of KwaZulu-Natal	10 years
MS007	Male	35-45	University of Free State	6 years
MS008	Female	40-50	University of Johannesburg	14 years
MS009	Male	45-50	University of South Africa	13 years
MS0010	Female	30-40	Nelson Mandela University (NMU)	8 years
MS0011	Male	40-50	Rhodes University	14 years
MS0012	Female	45-55	University of Cape Town	15 years
MS0013	Male	35-45	Durban University of Technology (DUT)	12 years
MS0014	Female	50-60	University of Zululand (UNIZULU)	15 years
MS0015	Male	45-55	University of the Western Cape (UWC)	15 years

M&E Practitioners formed 15 professionals drawn from government, NGOs, private consultancies, and international organizations *(see Table 6)*. These individuals had extensive evaluation experience, ranging from 5 to 15 years, and were responsible for implementing M&E frameworks, conducting program evaluations, and training young evaluators. Practitioners noted significant gaps between academic training and the realities of evaluation work, particularly in navigating political and organizational challenges, managing large-scale evaluations, and effectively communicating findings to decision-makers. Many reported that graduates, though well-versed in evaluation theory, often lacked the hands-on experience necessary to lead evaluations or engage meaningfully with stakeholders independently.

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Table 6.
Demographic Profile of M&E Practitioners.

Participant ID	Gender	Age Range	Organization Type	Years of Experience
MP001	Female	35-45	Government	10 years
MP002	Male	45-55	Private Consultancy	20 years
MP003	Female	30-40	NGO	5 years
MP004	Male	50-60	International Organization	25 years
MP005	Female	35-45	Government	12 years
MP006	Male	40-50	Private Consultancy	15 years
MP007	Female	30-40	NGO	7 years
MP008	Male	45-55	Private Sector	18 years
MP009	Female	30-40	Government	9 years
MP0010	Male	50-60	International Organization	22 years
MP0011	Female	35-45	Private Consultancy	13 years
MP0012	Male	40-50	Government	14 years
MP0013	Female	30-40	NGO	8 years
MP0014	Male	45-55	Private Sector	16 years
MP0015	Female	40-50	International Organization	20 years

Table 7.
Demographic Profile of M&E organizations (Employers)

Participant ID	Organization Type	Sector	Organization Size	Primary M&E Focus	Years of M&E Experience	Location
EMP001	Government Agency	Public Sector	Large	Policy, Public Service Delivery	20 years	Pretoria, South Africa
EMP002	Private Consulting Firm	Private Sector	Medium	Corporate Social Responsibility, Program Impact	18 years	Johannesburg, South Africa
EMP003	Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)	Social Development	Small to Medium	Community Development, Social Impact	25 years	Cape Town, South Africa
EMP004	International Development Organization	International Development	Large	Development Programs, Aid Effectiveness	22 years	Nairobi, Kenya
EMP005	Government Agency	Public Sector	Large	Government Monitoring, Policy Implementation	15 years	Cape Town, South Africa
EMP006	International Development Agency	International Development	Large	Humanitarian Aid, Impact Evaluation	22 years	Johannesburg, South Africa
EMP007	NGO	Social Development	Medium	Poverty Alleviation, Gender Equality	10 years	Durban, South Africa
EMP008	Private Consulting Firm	Private Sector	Small to Medium	Program Evaluation, Impact Measurement	5 years	Cape Town, South Africa
EMP009	Government Department	Public Sector	Large	Public Health, Education	12 years	Pretoria, South Africa
EMP010	Corporate Social Responsibility Division	Private Sector	Large	CSR Projects, Social Impact Measurement	10 years	Johannesburg, South Africa
EMP011	International NGO	Social Development	Medium to Large	Social Development, Human Rights	17 years	Kigali, Rwanda
EMP012	National	Public Sector	Large	Public Policy,	20 years	Pretoria,

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	Government			Service Delivery		South Africa
EMP013	Academic Institution	Education	Medium to Large	Evaluation Research, Public Sector Research	15 years	Cape Town, South Africa
EMP014	Private Corporation	Private Sector	Large	Business Development, CSR Programs	8 years	Johannesburg, South Africa
EMP015	Government Agency	Public Sector	Large	Evaluation of Public Health Policies	12 years	Pretoria, South Africa

Employers made up the final group, with 25 participants representing hiring organizations, including government agencies, NGOs, consulting firms, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) divisions (see Table 7). These participants provided insights into hiring trends, skill gaps, and the expectations placed on entry-level evaluators. A key theme that emerged from employer discussions was the need for graduates to demonstrate both technical competencies and soft skills, such as adaptability, critical thinking, and stakeholder management. Many employers noted that new graduates often required additional workplace training or mentorship before taking on substantive evaluation roles. This dependency on post-graduation training underscored concerns about whether universities were sufficiently preparing students for the realities of M&E work.

4.2. Key Themes from the Data

4.2.1. Challenges in the Transition from Theory to Practice

The transition from academic training to professional evaluation practice presents significant challenges for YEEs. Many YEEs experience a stark disjuncture between university coursework and the realities of field-based evaluation, where technical design skills must be applied under political, institutional, and logistical constraints. One participant noted that textbook-based evaluation models do not prepare graduates for navigating politically sensitive evaluations or for managing client expectations, which often override methodological ideals. Others recalled being unprepared for stakeholder-driven negotiations and the highly contextualised nature of evaluation work. Their accounts highlighted that while theory equips graduates with procedural steps and conceptual tools, it often omits the messiness of implementation realities, including handling resistance from gatekeepers and managing ethical dilemmas during fieldwork. These gaps were especially pronounced in settings where clients had predefined agendas, budgets were tight, or organisational politics overshadowed data integrity. The perceived mismatch created anxiety and self-doubt among many YEEs as they tried to meet expectations with limited exposure to real-world dynamics.

Several participants described how evaluation practice was more relational and adaptive than expected. One YEE noted that their first consulting assignment involved presenting findings to high-level stakeholders who demanded practical insights—not conceptual distinctions between evaluation types. Others reported being overwhelmed by the emotional labour involved in community-based evaluation, such as engaging with frustrated beneficiaries or navigating distrust of the evaluation process. Practitioners and employers echoed these concerns, stating that while recent graduates were technically sound, they lacked critical soft skills—probing during interviews, adapting tools in dynamic environments, and triangulating incomplete datasets. Moreover, many YEEs were unprepared for managing time-sensitive evaluations with resource limitations. Some reported being trained to pursue methodological perfection in class, only to face budgetary constraints that required data prioritisation and trade-offs. Across the dataset, it was evident that graduates struggled most with the grey areas of evaluation: improvising during uncertainty, securing institutional buy-in, and making methodological concessions without compromising credibility.

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

These findings resonate with recent scholarly critiques of M&E education in the Global South. While academic institutions in South Africa have expanded postgraduate offerings in evaluation, most programs remain heavily theory-driven with minimal practical immersion [1, 2]. As highlighted by Sello, et al. [41] employers increasingly prioritise candidates with work-integrated learning experience over academic credentials alone. Similarly, Ayob, et al. [42] argue that M&E training should embed adaptive learning frameworks to prepare graduates for complex and unpredictable policy environments. Kolb's experiential learning theory provides a useful foundation here, yet it remains underutilised in curriculum design [6]. Newer models of competency-based education, such as those piloted in East and West Africa, emphasise real-world engagement through mentorship, community-based evaluation, and capstone projects [7]. Integrating such components could address the skills-practice mismatch identified in this study. Without these reforms, YEEs will continue to enter the field underprepared, and the burden of training will remain with employers, hindering the broader goal of professionalising M&E in the region [8].

4.3. Theoretical Knowledge vs. Practical Competency in M&E

M&E scholars emphasized that the current curriculum provides a strong theoretical and methodological foundation, equipping students with the essential analytical skills required for evaluation work. They argued that while practical competency is crucial, evaluation as a discipline is inherently methodologically rigorous and evidence-driven, requiring students to first master theoretical principles before engaging with applied practice. MS007, a professor specializing in evaluation methodologies, defended the structure of M&E training, stating, "We are not training technicians; we are training evaluators who must be able to think critically, design robust methodologies, and ensure the integrity of the evaluation process. If students enter the workforce without a strong grasp of theoretical foundations, they risk conducting poor-quality evaluations that do not stand up to scrutiny." Similarly, MS002 noted that while universities could incorporate more applied learning, there is a deliberate pedagogical approach behind ensuring that students first develop strong conceptual competencies: "Evaluation is a field that requires a balance of both theory and practice. We cannot send students into the field without ensuring they understand the epistemological underpinnings of evaluation, the ethical frameworks that guide our work, and the ability to critically assess methodologies before applying them. The pressure to emphasize practical training should not come at the expense of intellectual rigour" [1, 2].

Scholars also argued that while practical experience is invaluable, it cannot replace the depth of analytical training that university programs provide. MS011 explained, "we must not reduce evaluation training to an apprenticeship model. Universities are academic institutions, and our role is to cultivate evaluators who can engage with complex problems, critically interrogate data, and advance the field. Practice without a strong theoretical foundation leads to weak evaluations that fail to challenge dominant paradigms or improve decision-making processes." This aligns with recent findings which argue that evaluation must be seen as both an applied and an intellectual discipline, requiring evaluators to engage deeply with conceptual frameworks, power dynamics, and reflective critique [3, 5]. Scholars also pointed out that practical experience alone does not necessarily translate to competency. MS005, who has been involved in training both students and professionals, stated, "I've seen many evaluators with years of experience in the field but with no understanding of evaluation theory, which makes them ineffective at designing sound methodologies. They may know how to collect data but don't understand how to make sense of it beyond basic reporting." This suggests that practice without a theoretical foundation can lead to poor evaluation quality, reinforcing the need for universities to emphasise conceptual training [6, 7].

However, scholars did acknowledge that the challenge lies in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and workplace readiness. MS009 noted that while students receive rigorous training in evaluation methodologies, statistical techniques, and research ethics, they often lack exposure to real-

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

world constraints such as political sensitivities, data limitations, and client-driven pressures: "We provide students with the best possible training in terms of methodological rigour, but we recognize that the realities of evaluation work are different from controlled academic settings. The challenge is not that universities fail to teach practical skills, but that professional evaluation environments introduce complexities that can only be fully grasped through direct experience." This aligns with Situated Learning Theory, which posits that true professional competence emerges through social participation and contextualized practice [8]. Scholars emphasized that universities alone cannot bear the full responsibility for preparing students for professional practice. Instead, industry partners, government agencies, and consultancies should be more active in mentoring, training, and integrating new graduates into the field [9].

One of the most pressing concerns raised by practitioners was that graduates often struggle with adapting evaluation designs to real-world constraints. MP008, an experienced evaluator in the private sector, described how rigid adherence to theoretical principles can hinder effective evaluation: "Many new graduates come in with an idea of how evaluations 'should' be done based on what they learned in school, but in practice, things don't always go as planned. Budgets are limited, timeframes are tight, and stakeholders have competing agendas. Evaluation in the field is about flexibility and problem-solving—skills that are difficult to teach in a purely academic setting." Similarly, MP013 explained that universities tend to teach evaluation as if it operates in an ideal environment when, in reality, it is subject to political, financial, and logistical constraints: "It's one thing to design an evaluation in a classroom where you assume access to all the data you need. It's another thing entirely when you're in the field, and a government department refuses to share critical data or when respondents are reluctant to participate because they fear the consequences of the findings. That's when practical wisdom, not just theoretical knowledge, comes into play" [10, 11].

Scholars defended the structure of academic training, noting that practical competency should not come at the expense of intellectual development. However, they acknowledged that the current model of M&E education could benefit from deeper integration of experiential learning opportunities. MS014 proposed that universities should work more closely with industry partners to create structured internship programs to gain exposure to professional evaluation environments while still receiving academic guidance: "Students should not have to wait until they graduate to encounter real evaluation work. If we embed work-integrated learning into the curriculum—where students can work on actual evaluations under the supervision of both academics and practitioners—it will help bridge the gap between theory and practice." This aligns with Kolb's experiential learning model, which suggests that learning is most effective when students actively engage in real-world experiences and reflect on them to derive meaningful understanding [12, 13].

While employers emphasized the need for more applied learning, better communication training, and stronger industry partnerships, scholars cautioned that universities must maintain their role as institutions of higher learning rather than training centres for immediate workplace readiness. MS001 articulated this balance well: "Universities produce thinkers and researchers, not just employees. If we shift entirely toward practical training, we risk losing the critical inquiry that makes evaluation an intellectually robust discipline. The solution is not to replace theory with practice, but to find ways to integrate them more effectively." This suggests that the future of M&E education should not be a binary choice between theory and practice but rather a model that combines rigorous academic training with structured professional exposure [14]. Employers agreed that universities cannot be expected to train students in every aspect of evaluation practice, but they stressed that graduates should not enter the workforce without basic exposure to real-world evaluation work. EMP007 summarized this tension succinctly: "No one expects universities to do everything. But if graduates are entering the workforce without ever having interacted with a client, written a professional report, or handled real evaluation constraints, then there's a gap that needs to be addressed." This reinforces the argument that bridging

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
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the gap between academic training and workplace readiness requires collaboration between universities, industry practitioners, and professional evaluation networks [15, 16].

4.4. The Role of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in M&E Education

WIL has emerged as a crucial mechanism for bridging the gap between academic training and professional evaluation practice, offering YEEs the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings under the supervision of experienced professionals. Internships, mentorship programs, and field placements have proven effective in equipping YEEs with the practical skills required to navigate the complexities of evaluation work, particularly in managing client relationships, adapting methodologies to organizational constraints, and interpreting data in politically sensitive environments. Many YEEs who participated in structured WIL programs reported greater confidence in transitioning into full-time evaluation roles, as these programs exposed them to the operational realities of evaluation in high-pressure settings. YEE009, who completed a six-month internship with a government evaluation unit, reflected: "At university, I learned about theories of evaluation use, but during my internship, I saw the politics behind evaluation findings. Some findings were downplayed, and others emphasized, depending on who was in the room. It was eye-opening. I learned how to present results that addressed stakeholders' concerns while maintaining integrity." This supports Situated Learning Theory, which argues that professional competence is best developed through participation in real-world communities of practice rather than in isolated academic exercises [1].

The effectiveness of internships and mentorship programs was also highlighted by M&E practitioners, who noted that graduates who had participated in structured WIL programs were significantly more prepared than those with only classroom-based training. MP004, a senior evaluator in the private sector, emphasized that internships provide critical exposure to the business and client management side of evaluation—an often-overlooked aspect in university programs: "Many new graduates don't realize that evaluation is a business. You have to win contracts, build client relationships, and tailor your approach based on the client's wants. Internships allow students to see this side of evaluation, which is just as important as the technical work." Employers confirmed that YEEs who had undergone structured mentorship were more adept at handling high-stakes meetings, managing stakeholders, and adapting to field challenges. EMP003, who supervises interns in a nonprofit evaluation firm, described how mentorship accelerates professional growth: "We pair each intern with a senior evaluator, and they shadow them on real projects. By the time they complete the internship, they know how to facilitate stakeholder meetings, handle difficult clients, and write evaluation reports that are actually useful to decision-makers." These insights resonate with Experiential Learning Theory, which underscores that active participation and reflection, rather than passive instruction, lead to deep learning [2, 3].

Despite these benefits, institutional challenges persist in embedding WIL into M&E curricula. Many universities struggle to establish long-term partnerships with government departments, NGOs, and private firms, limiting the availability of structured internships. MS010, a professor who has tried integrating WIL into an evaluation program, described the difficulty of securing lasting industry collaborations: "The demand for internships far exceeds the supply. Many evaluation firms are small and don't have the capacity to take on interns. In contrast, government evaluation units often have bureaucratic hurdles that make it difficult for students to get access. Without strong industry partnerships, WIL remains an ad-hoc opportunity rather than an integral part of M&E education." The lack of funding and administrative support compounds these barriers. MS014 explained: "Unlike disciplines like medicine or engineering, where internships are standard, M&E doesn't have a structured pipeline for practical training. Every student placement has to be individually negotiated, which makes it difficult to institutionalize." These reflections align with broader critiques of the South African M&E landscape, which argue that fragmentation and the lack of standardized pathways hinder the development of a robust professional training system [5, 6].

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

Another barrier is the mismatch between academic and industry expectations. Employers often operate in high-pressure environments that do not permit the structured training universities envision. EMP006, a director at an international evaluation firm, described the dilemma: "We want to support young evaluators, but we're running a business. We have tight deadlines, demanding clients, and limited time to train interns. Universities expect us to provide structured learning experiences, but interns have to learn by doing—sometimes that means jumping into projects without much hand-holding." This highlights the need for clearer collaborative frameworks that balance academic learning goals with practical business constraints [7].

Despite these systemic constraints, successful models demonstrate that professional associations and employers—rather than universities—are leading the way in bridging the gap. A case in point is the SAMEA EE Initiative, which collaborates with employers to provide mentorship, internships, and training for YEEs. EMP008, who has mentored interns through this initiative, emphasized its value: "The SAMEA EE Initiative is one of the few structured efforts that gives young evaluators direct exposure to real evaluation work. It places them in environments where they must interact with clients, respond to project constraints, and contribute to real evaluations—not just theoretical exercises." Unlike traditional university-based WIL models, this initiative represents a partnership among industry stakeholders, sidestepping reliance on academic institutions for facilitation [8].

However, this approach is limited in scale and reach. Participation depends on individual initiative or selective placement, leaving many students excluded. Scholars acknowledged the initiative's importance but stressed its limited integration into formal education. MS010 noted: "The SAMEA EE Initiative is doing important work, but they are not embedded in academic training. They depend on external funding, volunteer mentors, and employer goodwill. We need universities to start integrating these types of programs into the formal curriculum, rather than leaving practical training to be an optional, external add-on." Without institutionalization, readiness for practice will remain uneven, with some graduates gaining critical exposure while others are left behind [9].

A key takeaway is that universities have yet to fully engage in structured WIL in M&E, which sets the field apart from others like engineering, law, or public health—where work-integrated training is routine and required. M&E education in South Africa continues to rely on volunteerism, ad-hoc mentorship, and third-party initiatives to fill the experiential gap. MS014 argued: "Universities should not be bystanders in the development of evaluation professionals. They must formally integrate WIL through mandatory internships, partnerships with evaluation firms, or embedding real evaluation projects into coursework. Currently, the field relies too much on external mentorship programs, which are valuable but cannot substitute for structured professional training." Until academic institutions take a more active role in shaping WIL structures, YEEs will continue to face inconsistent access to the competencies necessary for professional readiness [10, 11].

4.5. Professionalization and Continuous Learning

The professionalisation of M&E has become a major agenda item for evaluation communities globally, especially for VOPEs (Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation). These bodies play a central role in bridging the gap between academic preparation and real-world practice, particularly for YEEs who navigate a field lacking clearly structured career pathways. Unlike law or accounting, M&E has no universal certification system, resulting in inconsistencies in training, professional identity, and skills recognition. In South Africa, SAMEA has led initiatives such as the Emerging Evaluators (EE) Initiative, which provides mentorship, peer learning, and access to networking events. EMP002, a senior government evaluator, confirmed its impact: "SAMEA's EE Initiative is one of the few structured programs where young evaluators can engage with experienced professionals, gain real-world insights, and develop the networks necessary to build a career in this field." This confirms the value of community-based mentoring structures in professions without formal pipelines [1, 2].

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

Mentorship and capacity-building programs by VOPEs such as SAMEA and EvalYouth have helped YEEs build both technical skills and professional awareness. These initiatives foster informal learning that complements academic training. As MS007 explained, "M&E is not a profession you can learn entirely in a classroom." Similarly, EvalYouth's global and regional chapters (e.g., EvalYouth Africa) offer leadership training, peer exchanges, and mentoring schemes. YEE015, a mentee, noted: "Having a mentor meant I could ask the difficult questions… things we weren't taught at university." These experiences illustrate the principles of Situated Learning Theory, which argue that knowledge is acquired through authentic participation in communities of practice [3]. The value of mentorship is echoed in empirical studies showing how social learning improves evaluators' ability to respond to real-world pressures such as shifting scopes, politically sensitive findings, and difficult stakeholder environments [5, 6].

In parallel with mentorship, professionalization is increasingly being supported by competency frameworks and voluntary certification schemes. Organizations such as EvalPartners and the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) have developed global competency frameworks outlining the ethical, technical, and contextual standards evaluators should meet [7]. SAMEA has aligned its national efforts with these standards, aiming to define and promote a South African evaluator profile. MP006, an evaluator at an international NGO, argued that "competency frameworks give the field more structure, ensuring professionals meet a standard level of knowledge and skill." Yet implementation remains inconsistent. EMP009, a private sector evaluator, observed that "anyone can still call themselves an evaluator," and without an accreditation system, quality assurance remains weak [8]. Similar critiques have emerged in African and Latin American contexts, where evaluation continues to operate in a hybrid space between science, consultancy, and public service [9].

Training workshops, conferences, and short courses are additional forms of continuous professional development. SAMEA, AfrEA, and EvalYouth regularly offer training on emerging tools such as developmental evaluation, realist evaluation, and digital monitoring. EMP005 emphasized that "evaluation is a constantly evolving field," making lifelong learning essential. However, access to these opportunities is uneven. MS012 highlighted the prohibitive cost of international certifications and conferences, particularly for emerging or independent evaluators. This mirrors earlier findings on how professional growth in M&E is shaped by socio-economic barriers and limited institutional sponsorship [10, 11]. While online platforms have expanded access post-COVID, many training opportunities remain dominated by urban, well-resourced actors, raising equity concerns [12].

Another underexplored dimension of professionalization is the role of employers. While VOPEs and universities provide external training, internal institutional learning also shapes evaluator development. EMP010 described how their department uses peer-led workshops to discuss practical issues like stakeholder conflict and data manipulation. This kind of learning addresses the "invisible curriculum" of evaluation—soft skills, ethics, and political navigation. Unfortunately, not all organizations offer such support. MP009 admitted that "many organizations still see training as a cost rather than an investment," leaving evaluators to pursue development in their own time. Such organizational neglect contributes to high turnover, burnout, and fragmented career trajectories [13].

Recommendations emerging from this study emphasized stronger coordination between universities, VOPEs, and employers. MS004 proposed integrated pathways that connect postgraduate training with mentorship and accreditation: "Right now, mentorship, training, and certification efforts are scattered. We need a more coordinated approach." EMP013 echoed the need for state investment in capacity building: "If evaluation is critical for governance, evaluator training should be a national priority." The introduction of an accreditation system—voluntary or mandatory—was also widely supported, though some participants warned against rigid gatekeeping. EMP007 concluded: "We don't necessarily need a rigid licensing system, but we do need some kind of accreditation framework that ensures evaluators meet a basic standard before leading major evaluations." Until such frameworks are

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

adopted, professionalization in M&E will remain patchy and reliant on individual initiative rather than systemic support [14, 15].

4.6. Synthesis and Reflections: Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide

The transition from academic training to professional evaluation practice is highly nonlinear for YEEs. This study affirms prior debates in the literature concerning the disjuncture between university-based knowledge and the practical competencies required in professional evaluation settings. Existing research has emphasized the weak alignment between higher education outputs and the demands of real-world M&E practice, particularly in the Global South where institutional ecosystems are fragmented [1-3]. While mechanisms such as work-integrated learning (WIL), mentorship, and professional networks like SAMEA and EvalYouth are increasingly positioned as bridges between academic training and practical immersion, their reach and effectiveness remain constrained by institutional inertia and structural inequalities. The broader debate around the professionalization of M&E remains unresolved—caught between methodological pluralism, competing disciplinary influences, and contested definitions of what constitutes credible evaluation knowledge.

The centrality of practice-based learning in professions that require context-sensitive judgment has long been recognized. In fields like education, social work, and engineering, WIL is foundational in ensuring that graduates are prepared for the ambiguity and complexity of applied settings. Theories of experiential learning and social learning—including Kolb's experiential learning model and Lave and Wenger's situated learning—stress that knowledge is acquired not in isolation but through interaction within communities of practice [5-7]. The South African M&E context, however, lacks institutionalized WIL structures. SAMEA's EE Initiative, EvalYouth Africa, and scattered donor-funded internships attempt to address this gap by providing informal pathways to experience. However, unlike other regulated fields, there is no national standard for apprenticeship in evaluation. This results in a fragmented and uneven professional entry, especially for evaluators from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Mentorship emerges as one of the most consistently cited accelerators of professional growth in this study. Participants emphasized that while academic qualifications provide conceptual foundations, the ability to apply these concepts in politically charged, data-scarce, or ethically ambiguous environments is often learned through guided practice. These findings are supported by relational learning theories, which hold that trust-based mentor-mentee relationships promote deep skill acquisition, especially in fields where tacit knowledge is crucial [8, 9]. The successes of EvalYouth's pan-African mentorship programs further validate this claim. However, the voluntary and donor-dependent nature of these programs raises questions about scalability and sustainability. Without institutional backing—either through universities or employers—mentorship remains an elite privilege rather than a universal feature of evaluator training. These limitations expose gaps not only in program design but in the political economy of evaluation capacity-building itself.

Beyond mentorship and WIL, this study highlights how deeper epistemological tensions shape evaluator development. Professionalization in M&E is not merely about competency but also about legitimacy—who defines valid knowledge, what constitutes evidence, and which methodologies are deemed credible. Evaluation has evolved into a transdisciplinary field, drawing on economics, political science, sociology, and management science. The absence of a unified disciplinary home has led to multiple, sometimes contradictory, conceptions of what an evaluator should be [10, 11]. For some, evaluation is a craft learned through doing. For others, it is a profession requiring formal accreditation and regulatory control. These competing paradigms generate fragmentation in professional development pathways and leave YEEs navigating ambiguous standards of entry and excellence.

This ambiguity is further complicated by structural inequities in how M&E is taught and practiced in Africa. South Africa's evaluation ecosystem continues to reflect the influence of donor logic, Western methodologies, and managerialism—often at odds with African-centered evaluation philosophies. Local

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

evaluators must grapple with global standards while trying to remain responsive to community needs and indigenous knowledge systems [12, 13]. The absence of a national certification or structured entry pathway exacerbates exclusion, as access to professional roles is often mediated by networks, informal mentoring, and access to internships—advantages not evenly distributed. Thus, the divide between theory and practice is not only a pedagogical issue but a reflection of broader inequities in knowledge production and professional access.

As the evaluation field undergoes digital transformation—incorporating AI-based analytics, real-time dashboards, and integrated data systems—the stakes for YEEs are even higher. They are required to master both legacy methods and emerging technologies while navigating a crowded space of actors including donors, consultants, academics, and policy managers. This makes the development of hybrid evaluative skills (technical, political, and ethical) increasingly vital [14, 15]. The future of evaluation depends not only on methodological innovation but on inclusive and systematic capacity development strategies that ensure YEEs are positioned as co-creators of evaluation knowledge, not just peripheral implementers. This requires a paradigmatic shift: from isolated training interventions to holistic professional development ecosystems that integrate academic institutions, VOPEs, employers, and policy frameworks.

4.7. Provocations for the Future of Emerging Evaluators

The trajectory of YEEs in the M&E profession remains fragmented, informal, and heavily reliant on personal initiative rather than structured career frameworks. Unlike regulated professions such as medicine or law—where progression into practice follows defined steps like internships or residencies—evaluation lacks a systemic entry route to ensure that emerging professionals develop core competencies in a structured and equitable manner. Professional associations such as SAMEA and EvalYouth have played an instrumental role in providing mentorship and peer learning opportunities, yet these efforts operate outside a formal regulatory framework. This situation limits the scale and consistency of early-career support and reflects a broader institutional inertia in how the field invests in talent pipelines. The need is not simply to "bridge the gap" between theory and practice but to reimagine the architecture of entry into the profession—defining who supports evaluator development, how quality is assured, and what a fair, inclusive, and sustainable pathway looks like [1, 2].

Internships and mentorships, while acknowledged as essential for skills transfer, remain unevenly accessible. Many YEEs rely on informal channels and professional networks to access these opportunities, which introduces systemic exclusion for those lacking social capital. The absence of formalized graduate entry routes into M&E means that early-career evaluators are often placed in complex projects without adequate induction into evaluation logic, stakeholder engagement, or ethical frameworks. This raises a critical question: could the field benefit from establishing a structured national or regional evaluation traineeship—similar to articling in law or medical internships—that exposes emerging evaluators to a rotation of contexts and methods? Such a model would enable the development of balanced capabilities: methodological fluency, political awareness, communication skills, and ethical sensitivity. Implementing this model would require strategic collaboration between universities, employers, and VOPEs to design sector-specific placements and shared evaluation laboratories, echoing proposals already emerging in recent capacity-strengthening frameworks [3, 5].

Equally urgent is the unresolved question of professional standards and accreditation. The current landscape permits broad entry into the profession based on diverse educational backgrounds and informal project experience. While this fosters inclusivity and draws interdisciplinary talent into the field, it also results in significant variability in the skills and knowledge of practicing evaluators. Competency frameworks such as those proposed by IOCE, EvalPartners, and the African Evaluation Guidelines project have gained traction as means of introducing accountability and legitimacy into the profession [6, 7]. However, a universal certification system may risk reproducing global inequalities if not designed for flexibility and contextual responsiveness. For instance, strict certification regimes

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

could unintentionally exclude community-based evaluators, local researchers, and non-traditional actors who contribute meaningfully to evaluation ecosystems but do not possess formal credentials. A tiered accreditation system—recognizing diverse pathways into evaluation, including experiential learning, formal education, and indigenous knowledge—may offer a more inclusive compromise that allows recognition without closure [8].

A deeper provocation concerns the question of responsibility: who owns the evaluator development process? Currently, accountability for nurturing emerging evaluators is diffused across multiple actors. Universities focus on conceptual foundations but often neglect the applied and contextual components of evaluation. Employers expect workplace-readiness without providing structured training, while VOPEs offer mentorship without having the mandate to enforce development norms. This institutional diffusion leaves YEEs in a precarious position—underprepared, under-supported, and often undervalued. Addressing this disconnect requires a shift in how professional preparation is imagined. Universities could be required to embed WIL and evaluation labs into curricula, VOPEs could formalize training pathways linked to membership tiers, and employers could co-invest in graduate trainee programs. These interventions would not only enhance capacity but would also foster collective responsibility for building the profession's future [9, 10].

This fragmentation is symptomatic of a broader tension: the field of evaluation is growing more complex, multi-scalar, and digitally mediated, yet its professional development infrastructure remains outdated. Evaluation is now entangled with digital governance, climate resilience, AI systems, and equity-focused policymaking. These realities demand a new evaluator profile—one equipped not only with technical methods but also with systems thinking, data ethics, and policy literacy. If evaluator development continues to rely on informal mentorships and project-based induction, the profession risks being ill-prepared for emerging demands. Now is the time to institutionalize a coherent professional development model that does not just equip YEEs with technical tools but empowers them to be leaders, change agents, and critical thinkers in development contexts [11, 12].

Ultimately, the future of M&E will be shaped not by its theoretical advances but by the inclusiveness and intentionality of its professional pathways. The question of "who gets to become an evaluator" will determine the field's epistemic diversity, ethical standing, and transformative potential. The evaluation community must move from fragmented and reactive models of YEE support to proactive, systemic, and values-driven approaches that ensure the next generation is equipped, connected, and empowered to lead.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Johannesburg's School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy (SPMGPP). Ethical approval was granted by the SPMGPP Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 7: 1360-1381, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/25768484.v9i7.8921

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