Evaluating Impact – A quick reference guide

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Understanding and evaluating the impact of activities and projects to better support our students is crucial if we are to ensure that our work benefits students and vital if we are to make informed decisions about where best to target resources. This guide has been written as an aide-memoire to support all University of Essex staff in developing methods to effectively evaluate the impact of interventions, initiatives, activities and/or projects.

What is 'impact'?

Impact refers to an effect of an initiative or intervention, whether it is positive or negative, direct or indirect, intended or unintended, on an outcome.[1]

Why evaluate?

- To build a better understanding of your audience (their interests, behaviours, etc.);
- To inform your plans and predict which engagement/learning methods will be most effective;
- To target resources more effectively using an evidence based approach;
- To know whether you've achieved your objectives (or not) and understand why (and why not);
- To re-design an approach to be more effective in the future (i.e. continuous improvement).

How can you effectively evaluate?

- Effective evaluation starts with SMART objectives and clear intended outcomes. Evaluation is not open exploration; it should focus on the objectives of the initiative, intervention or project.
- Good impact evaluation tells you how and why particular aspects of an activity are effective, in order to make things better.
- Effective evaluation goes beyond advocacy (i.e. telling a nice story using testimonials). It is primarily about making things better; continuously learning and improving to identify opportunities for further improvement.

Self-evaluation questions

The following questions are designed to help you evaluate the impact of a new or an existing initiative or intervention:

1. **Objectives/Intended outcomes**
   - What is it you want to achieve through the initiative/intervention? i.e. What is the problem that you are trying to solve?
   - If this initiative is successful, will you be able to repeat it again? What will it replace?

2. **Intervention design**
   - Where does the idea for this initiative/intervention come from? Has anything similar been tried elsewhere before? Have you involved other stakeholders (including students) in the design?
   - What makes you think it will work? Is there evidence of this having a positive impact at another institution, or in another department?
   - If the initiative/intervention has been evaluated before, are you able to use the same evaluation methods?

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[1] Gabarino, S. and Holland, J. (2009) *Quantitative and qualitative methods in impact evaluation and measuring results.* Governance and social resource development centre, UK. www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/eirs4.pdf

3. **Audience**
   - Who is your key audience? Who will be affected and how? eg Individual, class, department, University.

4. **Resources**
   - What resources will you need to deliver the initiative/intervention? eg. time, staffing, costs.

5. **Information/data**
   - What does success look like?
   - What indicators could be used to measure progress/success (e.g. reach, value for money)?
   - What data/information do we need for this? What data/information already exists for this? What methods will we need to use to collect new data, when and how?
   - What else is going on that might have an impact on your outcomes? How will you control for other variables and determine causality (i.e. how will you be sure that your intervention has been the cause of the observed changes?)

   NB Evaluating the impact of an intervention relies on some form of comparison, either before or after an intervention (comparing outcomes to a baseline), or with another group of individuals who were not exposed to an intervention (i.e. a control group).

6. **Sustainability**
   - Does the activity demonstrate impact against your stated aim(s)?
   - If you were to run the activity again, what would you aim to change?
   - If your intervention/initiative was successful, what will it replace? How will it be rolled out and embedded/mainstreamed into business as usual? Who are the stakeholders you'll need to engage in this?
   - If your intervention/initiative was not successful, do you understand why you haven't achieved your objectives? How will you share your learning with others?

The evaluation process is ongoing, based on learning and enhancement and continuous improvement. You should always consider disseminating your results, even if they show no impact or a negative impact, because this is often where the greatest learning takes place.

References

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If you require this document in an alternative format, such as braille, please contact Hannah Lamb (hlamb@essex.ac.uk).