FEASIBILITY OF DATA COLLECTION IN EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS EVALUATION

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Abstract

During the educational project evaluation process, the feasibility of data collection as well as drafting the evaluation report is directly influenced by the project's needs and beneficiaries' or donors' expectations. If the evaluation team considers these aspects, the preconditions of relevance, importance, purpose, and time are met. In a project evaluation process, it is important to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for different categories of beneficiaries based on a balance of a project's descriptions, observations, judgments, and recommendations.

Keywords: project, evaluation process, project management, qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis.

Like any project, in the European Commission's understanding, an educational project is a logical sequence of coordinated and controlled activities, carried out in a methodically and progressively organised manner with constraints of time, resources, and cost, aimed at achieving new results necessary to meet clearly defined objectives.

Project management theory identifies six stages of the project cycle: programming, identification, preparation, funding, implementation, and evaluation [1, p. 42–81]. In this paper, focus will be placed on the educational project evaluation stage. Evaluation is the stage in which an objective appraisal of an ongoing or completed project takes place. The purpose of the evaluation stage is to compare the coherence of the project results with the proposed objectives, determining the effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of the project [1, p. 76–79].

In Europe, the evaluation of educational projects began in the early 1980s, in the context of European integration. In the Republic of Moldova, the field of evaluation of educational projects is in its early stages, as educational projects only emerged about two decades ago. In the Republic of Moldova, the first educational project evaluations have been carried out with international assistance, such as the EC TACIS CBC Programme 1996–2003. Nevertheless, this new field for the Republic of Moldova—the evaluation of education projects—enjoys great interest from national experts, researchers, donors, and policymakers. The interests and the need for evaluation of funds allocated through educational programmes and evaluation research have stimulated the rapid development of the field. Evaluation is a learning process that develops the skills of all those involved in the project to self-evaluate and make qualitative decisions at the project preparation and implementation stage [6, p. 2–3].

Data collection as well as its analysis in an evaluation process is an important step because it determines how the information will be used and reported [3, p. 143–186]. Additionally, it is an ongoing process that takes place during the entire project cycle and allows collected data to be properly interpreted in order to guide project implementation in the short and long term. Data analysis includes identifying trends and relationships between different data sources, assessing results in relation to the initially set objectives, formulating conclusions, anticipating problems, identifying solutions, and finding best practices to guide decisions and organisational learning. The collection and analysis of data in a timely and reliable manner is essential for data credibility and use.

In order to evaluate educational projects, analytical modalities such as qualitative and quantitative analysis can be used. Both types of analysis differentiate between them. However,

many people confuse these terms, causing confusion. Quantitative analysis is used when data is analysed by statistical means. It focuses on numerical data. Qualitative analysis is used when the project evaluator wants to analyse data that is subjective and not numerical. It focuses on descriptive data [2, p. 38–44]. Basically, qualitative data are words, and quantitative data are numbers. For example, participant ratings of the usefulness of a workshop on a scale of 1 (not at all useful) to 5 (extremely useful) are quantitative data, while participant descriptions of how useful the workshop was are qualitative data.

There are a variety of sources of qualitative data, including data that already exists and data that will be collected during the evaluation period. Existing data can include project reports, meeting minutes, websites, or basically anything that is available. Qualitative data that is collected as part of the project may include interviews, focus groups, observations, and project documentation. The evaluator should be fluent in the languages of the participants. If that is not possible, a translator will need to be used.

- Interviews are structured or semi structured conversations between two people, one of whom is the interviewer and the other the interviewee. The evaluator has a series of questions to ask, often with follow-up prompts to encourage the interviewee to speak more about the evaluated project.

- Focus groups are composed of five people brought together by a facilitator (evaluator) for a period of 30–60 minutes to collectively provide a variety of ideas about and responses to a project.

- Observation. Evaluator observes participants interacting in a real-life setting. The evaluator tries to be a much a part of the background as possible. The evaluator has been found to rate the same behaviors differently based on the perceived characteristics of those being observed.

- Surveys are one of the most widely used forms of data collection. Closed-ended questions are questions that are answered by ratings or other forced-choice responses, while open-ended questions are questions that are answered in words or sentences

The evaluation of an educational project should address questions about its outcomes but should not be limited to these. It should also look at the objectives of the project, the implementation strategy, and the activities themselves. The evaluation team constructs a set of evaluation questions, which then guide the evaluators: Did the project achieve what it set out to do? Did the project progress in accordance with the original work plan? What outcomes were achieved? What was the impact of the project? Did the project meet the effectiveness criteria? Were the available project resources used at the optimal level? To what extent have the initial requirements set up by the donor been met? To whom and how will the results be communicated?

While qualitative data can provide vivid, richly detailed accounts of participant's experiences, there are some challenges related to qualitative data. The collection of qualitative data can take considerable time and effort in relation to the training of evaluators, the actual data collection process, coding data, and the analysis of quantitative data. The collection of qualitative data may be particularly challenging when the evaluator is examining an educational project with a large number of participants and there is a need to hear from as many individuals as possible. Because of the focus on the individual and the complexity of the data that are collected, the number of individuals from whom qualitative data are collected tends to be relatively small. There can be a legitimate concern that the relatively small sample size when collecting qualitative data

can yield a biased or skewed depiction of the educational project and its participants. The smaller sample and individual focus may limit the generalisation of the findings.

With quantitative data, the evaluator can collect information from a number of individuals in a relatively short period of time. Synthesis and analysis of such data can be done more quickly than with qualitative data. Furthermore, quantitative data provide the possibility of further generalisation. Statistical analysis can be done. The size of differences and relationships can be determined, and the data can be used to make systematic, standardized comparisons. Evaluation tools used to generate quantitative data can be tested for defined types of reliability and validity. Definitions of validity and reliability are quite different for quantitative and qualitative evaluations and the resultant data. Validity in quantitative assessments refers to accuracy, while in qualitative assessments it refers to appropriateness. In quantitative assessments, reliability refers to replicability, but in qualitative areas, reliability is tied more to consistency.

In 2005, Karen Kirkhart points out that validity addresses the fundamental correctness of evaluation, references the accuracy and limits of understandings, and guides what can and cannot be appropriately concluded from evaluative inquiry. For the data to be appropriate and accurate, the assessment tools used to collect it need to be both valid and reliable. While, as indicated earlier, validity refers in quantitative areas to accuracy and in qualitative areas to appropriateness. In any assessment, validity is the most important construct (Linn, 1997). The reliability of quantitative data is the degree to which responses to items or questions on measures are consistent.

There are five basic modes of data collection that can be used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. One of the most frequently used modes is online data collection. The ease of putting surveys online using tools like SurveyMonkey has made online data collection relatively inexpensive and easy to do. It is useful when data is being collected from many individuals or institutions and the surveys being used are relatively short. Since participants enter their own data electronically, there is no need for the evaluator to do so. The evaluator will still have to check the data for obvious mistakes and inaccuracies. Online data collection is not at all useful for those who do not have web access or have a fear of technology. Accessibility is also an issue with the second mode of data collection. Paper forms are a traditional way to collect data, and they are particularly useful when data is being collected from participants without access to or knowledge of technology. The fourth mode, telephone data collection, is useful when more complex, open-ended questions are being asked and where there is a need for probing or follow-up questions. Collecting data in person is the most expensive mode of data collection and, as such, is used when there is no other reasonable way to get the needed data. It is most often used for observations and focus groups and for in-person interviews when there is reason to believe that telephone interviews won't be as effective.

A major component of data management is the timing of data collection. The deadline for needing the results of the data collection is one of the most important factors to consider when scheduling data collections. Knowing a donor's needs and timelines allows the evaluator to work backwards and schedule data collection so that there is time to collect and analyse the data, write up the results, and meet the deadlines.

Regardless of the evaluation methods used, for an evaluation to be of high quality, the evaluator or the evaluation team must be culturally competent. There are several categories of

evaluation beneficiaries with different information needs [7, p. 58–59]. For example, the evaluation of an educational project is of interest to teachers, pupils, parents, policymakers, school managers, and development partners. The evaluation of a project should therefore reflect different audiences, needs, interests, and expectations. If this is not taken into account and data collection is not done properly, the evaluation is likely to fail to meet the needs of different categories of beneficiaries. An evaluation report designed to meet the needs of some beneficiaries will not be as useful to other target audiences. In this context, the presentation of the data reflected in the evaluation report is an essential part of the process. Because even if data have been collected and analysed very well, they cannot be used effectively by the beneficiaries of the evaluation report if they are not well presented. Unfortunately, there are many examples where important data has lost its value because it was incorrectly communicated to different categories of beneficiaries.

There are three principles to equitable evaluation, as outlined by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (2020):

1. Evaluation and evaluative work should be in service of equity.
2. Evaluative work should answer critical questions about:
   - Ways in which structural decisions have contributed to the condition to be addressed
   - Effect of strategy on different populations
   - Effect of a strategy on the underlying systemic drivers of inequity
   - Ways in which cultural context is tangled up in both the structural conditions and the change initiative itself
3. Evaluative work should be designed and implemented commensurate with the values underlying equity work.
   - Multi-culturally valid
   - Oriented toward participant ownership.

Evaluators, like other researchers, must discern the best analysis given a number of statistical and methodological considerations. Equally important are considerations of ways to analyze data that uncover inequities that may be hidden from view and reveal findings that can facilitate discussions related to fairness and equity. In order to get a complete overview, an evaluation of an educational project should not only look at the results or impact but also at the specific objectives of the programme through which the educational project is funded, the implementation strategy, the project activities and how the results will be communicated to the different target groups.

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