Delivering Qualitative Impact Evaluations in the Youth Employment Sector

Contents

Introduction

About this resource

It provides an overview of different types of impact evaluation methods to help you understand what is available and when best to use them.

It focuses on qualitative or theory-based impact evaluation, taking you through some of the most common types.

It details specific considerations for implementing these in the youth employment sector.

It builds on the vast body of existing evidence which demonstrates that it is possible to deliver robust impact evaluation without randomised controlled trial or quasi-experimental design, and draws on the expertise of Ipsos and NPC, as well as guidance developed by TASO on impact evaluation with small cohorts.

Who is it for?

Anyone involved in delivering, evaluating, or funding employment support programmes.

Overview of impact evaluation methods

What is impact evaluation and why do it?

Impact evaluation assesses what changes have occurred and the extent to which these can be attributed to a programme or service. Impact evaluations are helpful for understanding and evidencing the difference that programmes are making.

When should I do an impact evaluation?

Start thinking about impact evaluation at the very start of a programme to make sure you are collecting the right data to support it. The impact evaluation itself can then be delivered occasionally (every few years), and specifically:

- Once the intervention has been fully designed and deployed, and intended outcomes agreed.

- Starting 1-2 years before a strategic review or decision point (impact evaluations take time!)

How do I choose the right method?

Choosing the most appropriate method depends on:

- What you want to learn (different methods will provide stronger evidence on different types of 'evaluation questions').

- How much time and budget you have.

- Access to people and their willingness to take part.

- The views of the funder (if being commissioned externally).

Who would take part?

Anyone you hope will do something differently because of your intervention (or the people you hope to change as part of your 'intended outcomes').

Depending on your programme theory or theory of change, this may include:

- Young people

- Educators / trainers

- Employers

- Local services or civil society organisations

What types of impact evaluation are there?

There are **three** main approaches to impact evaluation:

1) experimental impact evaluation, or randomised controlled trials (RCTs)

2) quasi-experimental impact evaluation designs (QEDs)

3) theory-based or qualitative impact evaluation

The first two are **quantitative** methods that involve comparing those who have received a service or intervention (known as the treatment group) with those who have not, but who are as similar as possible in all other respects (known as the comparison or control group).

More about quantitative methods

1. An experimental design or RCT design involves randomly assigning participants to receive an intervention or not to enable this comparison.

2. A quasi-experimental design or QED uses existing situations (such as the staggered roll-out of a service) and statistical techniques to compare groups that have and have not received a service without randomisation.

Quantitative approaches allow us to:

• Measure what the outcome would have been for the same person if they had not received an intervention (the counterfactual).

• Avoid selection bias (due to those receiving an intervention often being unlike those who don't in important and unobservable ways).

• Disentangle impact from 'natural change' (the change that would have happened anyway).

• Avoid confounding causation and correlation (the fact that while some changes may happen alongside one another, it is not necessarily true that one change caused the other).

More about qualitative methods

3. Qualitative or 'theory-based' impact evaluations **collect a variety of evidence against a programme's theory to test whether it holds true**.

A programme theory is a collection of assumptions and hypotheses about how the programme being evaluated works. Theory-based evaluation tests if the theory holds true by compiling evidence on each aspect of it. This involves evidence about the changes that have occurred as well as whether, how and why a programme contributed to these changes, or whether it made a difference (or not) for different groups of people.

Theory-based approaches focus on assessing the linkages or causal statements in the theory and investigating the extent to which 'alternative theories' may be more accurate to explain why or why not change has occurred. Often, this involves qualitative research (speaking to people) to test alternative theories which cannot be examined through quantitative research alone (numbers). It also often involves more triangulation of multiple sources of evidence and assessing the overall 'strength of evidence' or level of certainty this provides.

**Theory-based impact evaluation approaches allow us to:**

1. Draw on a broader set of evidence than the first two approaches – importantly, qualitative evidence.

2. Examine how and why an intervention or service makes change, and the role of other contributing factors and context.

3. Measure more complex outcomes and/or use more nuanced measures for assessing whether outcomes have been achieved.

Developing a theory of change

It is not always possible or preferable to conduct experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations. However, that doesn't mean that a robust approach cannot be undertaken to measure impact.

The lack of robust impact evaluation in the youth employment sector is testament to the challenges faced and a gap Youth Futures is seeking to address. **So, when should theory-based or qualitative evaluation be considered?** It is important to note that, with enough budget and time, it doesn't have to be an either / or question: qualitative evaluation methods can precede or sit alongside experimental / quasi-experimental designs.

- When the connection between a programme and how it generates impact is not well understood

- When the right measures to evaluate impact are not fully known or agreed

- When evaluation evidence is needed to inform funding decisions in a timely way

- When impact is specific to individuals and cannot be measured universally
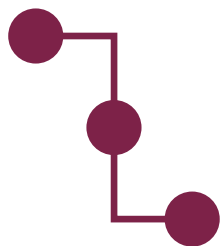
Overview of qualitative impact evaluation methods

Contribution analysis

What is it?

• Contribution analysis is an approach used to understand the likelihood an intervention or programme has contributed to an outcome observed, or not (known as a contribution claim).

• It involves setting out the expected 'contribution claims' (based on the theory of change), and alternative theories which may explain the same change.

• It then involves gathering and triangulating evidence (qualitative or quantitative) against the contribution claim(s) and alternative theories and refining them based on the strength of the evidence.

Why is it useful?

• It is particularly useful to evidence the additionality of an intervention to 'business as usual'.

• It enables you to use qualitative approaches and identifying and weighing internal and external factors.

• It is particularly useful when the explanation for how an intervention creates impact is relatively straightforward and the outcomes are likely to be consistent across contexts.

• It can (and often is) combined with other qualitative impact evaluation approaches, as well as process evaluation.

What issues may you encounter applying contribution analysis in the youth employment sector?

• It can be challenging to isolate the specific difference a programme has made to employment outcomes relative to other factors, particularly for young people who are in receipt of a range of services and support.

• It can be difficult for young people to conceptualise what would have happened in the absence of the support or to consider alternative theories to explain changes.

Realist evaluation

What is it?

- Realist evaluation assesses the results of a single intervention implemented in different contexts.

- Evaluators gather evidence against the 'context' in which an intervention is implemented, the 'mechanisms' linking an intervention to change, and the change itself (or the 'outcome'). This is known as a CMO configuration. Several CMOs can be developed for one evaluation or one programme.

Why is it useful?

- Realist evaluation is particularly useful for assessing differences across contexts.

- It focuses in particular on the mechanism of change or the what about the intervention 'triggers' impact. This is (arguably) the most useful information from an evaluation.

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What issues may you encounter applying realist evaluation in the youth employment sector?

- Employment services are often holistic in nature and incorporate a range of different types of support to address individuals' needs and circumstances. This can make it difficult to identify the specific mechanisms or combinations or support that result in intended outcomes.

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Process tracing

What is it?

- Process tracing is an approach which categorises the evidence gathered based on the extent to which it demonstrates impact.

- Evaluators assemble evidence which supports and refutes the claims in the theory of change against four 'tests' (straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking gun, and doubly decisive)

Why is it useful?

- Process tracing provides a transparent and replicable approach to evaluating an intervention or programme's contribution to impact.

- The process of defining evidence 'tests' helps clarify how evaluation evidence will be analysed and conclusions drawn.

What issues may you encounter applying process tracing in the youth employment sector?

- Process tracing can be resource intensive requiring extensive data collection, which could be burdensome for employment support organisations and service users.

- It is not always possible to establish a clear causal link between inputs to a programme or service and outcomes, especially in complex systems with multiple interactive variables.

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Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)

What is it?

- QCA compares the relative success of similar interventions implemented in similar contexts.

- Evaluators gather evidence on different cases, and compare that evidence across cases to distil how an intervention led to outcomes into the key necessary and sufficient conditions.

- Evaluators specify the key factors that are expected to influence change across cases, gather or assemble consistent evidence against each of these factors for each case, and systematically rule out factors which do not have a bearing on an intervention's success.

Why is it useful?

- QCA is useful for identifying the key necessary and sufficient conditions for an intervention to be successful.

- It provides a transparent and replicable framework for systematically comparing different situations or contexts.

- It allows you to process large volumes of information, handling anywhere from 20 – 200 cases.

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What issues may you encounter applying QCA in the youth employment sector?

- QCA requires consistent data collection and evidence from cases that both worked and did not work. It may be challenging to collect data from 'unsuccessful' cases in the context of unemployed young people, who are likely facing a range of difficulties.

- The definition of a 'case' against which to compare outcomes may be difficult to establish when there are many contexts and types of individuals benefitting.

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Choosing between different qualitative impact evaluation approaches and methods

- **The right approach depends on several factors**, including the evaluation questions you want to answer, the existing data available, access to participants, ethics, cost, time and how the findings will be used and when.

- Qualitative impact evaluation approaches and methods are **often used in combination with one another** to suit the needs of the evaluation.

- There is typically a **3-6 month scoping or familiarisation stage** for an evaluator to help develop a detailed understanding of the intervention, the evaluation objectives, and what approaches and methodology works best.

- It is often helpful to undertake a **'co-design'** process between evaluators and delivery partners to develop the theory of change and evaluation method.

Key considerations

- What questions are most important for the evaluation to answer? What should the evaluation focus on?

- What data is needed to develop strong evidence of outcomes?

- How do we ensure sufficient variety of 'cases' in our sample of individuals or sites taking part?

- How can we ensure we gather consistent data from each case, individual, or site?

- Who are the key stakeholder for the intervention and how can they best be engaged in the evaluation?

- What alternative explanations are there for how change has occurred, and how can we test these?

- How can we maximise the voice of people with lived experience or with diverse perspectives?

- How will we incorporate new information or insight into the ToC and evaluation approach as we learn more?

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Summary table (adapted from The Magenta Book)

Method	Description	Key considerations
Realist evaluation	Designed to work with complex social programmes. It is based on the principle that programmes work (or don't) in certain conditions and for certain people. Therefore, it doesn't just ask whether a program works, but 'how', 'why', 'for whom', 'to what extent', and 'in what circumstances'.	Can be helpful in refining programme theory, identifying causal mechanisms and understanding impact if counterfactual impact evaluation is not feasible. However, it can be time consuming, resource intensive and requires subject-matter expertise. It can also be difficult to communicate / interpret due to complexity.
Contribution analysis	Used to examine the extent to which an intervention has contributed to outcomes relative to 'alternative explanations'. The approach does not definitively prove causation, rather it provides evidence of the contribution of an intervention to outcomes. It is particularly useful in complex delivery settings where multiple factors could be influencing outcomes.	The contribution claim depends on the quality of thinking about the attribution problem and theory of change. It works on average effects and is therefore not suitable for interventions where there is large variability in implementation or outcomes.
Process tracing	Structured method to identify the sequence of events or processes leading to outcomes. Involves detailed examination and analysis of evidence from within a case to understand the mechanisms linking causes with outcomes. Aims to uncover what steps, decisions, or events take place, and in what order, to produce the outcome.	Can test causal hypotheses post-hoc. Must be used with rigour to prevent inferential errors and alternative explanations must be carefully considered. It is a powerful tool for understanding the causal mechanisms in complex systems, but it requires careful planning, detailed data collection and rigorous analysis.
Qualitative comparative analysis	Uses qualitative data to identify patterns and make systematic comparisons across multiple cases. QCA allows for the identification of complex relationships, including conditions where multiple factors interact to produce an outcome.	Can identify groups of causal factors in post-hoc evaluation based on systematic analysis of case study evidence. Works best with 10-50 cases. Requires consistent data about how those factors affect outcomes and assessment of which are the more successful across cases.

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Preparing for an impact evaluation

As your project or service develops, you may engage with external evaluators, who will draw on the data you are collecting internally to conduct more rigorous, in-depth evaluations of your work. As part of the YFF capacity building programme, NatCen produced guidance to support organisations to:

- begin to think about evaluation, build an organisational culture of evaluation, and prepare for external evaluation of work/programmes;

- effectively participate in and support the process of an external evaluation; and

- make the most of the learning an external evaluation can provide

Read more about how to prepare for evaluation.

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Preparing for evaluation

Guidance for organisations

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National Centre for Social Research
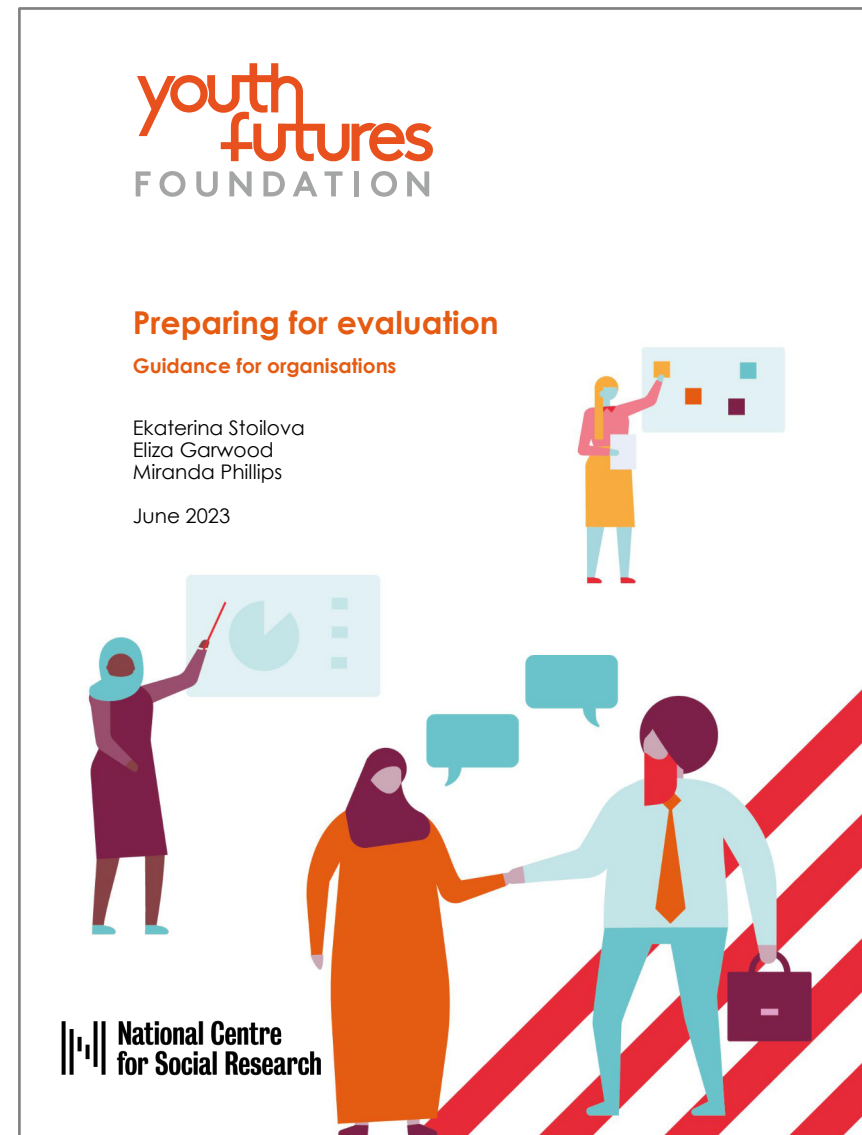
Other resources and about the authors

Other relevant resources

- NPC's guide to 'Theory of change in ten steps' takes you though the key stages in developing a theory of change.
- NPC's Journey to Employment(JET) Framework and NatCen's guide to Measuring Employability Skills provide additional examples of outcomes that may apply to your work.
- HM Treasury guidance on what to consider when designing an evaluation in The Magenta Book
- INTRAC's Guide to Case-Based Evaluation Approaches
- TASO's Guidance on Impact Evaluation with small cohorts

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This resource was funded by Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) as part of a project delivered in partnership by Ipsos and NPC. The project involved the provision of evaluation capacity building support to organisations that help young people to access training and employment. The resource is one of several learning outputs that aim to capture and share knowledge and insights from the initiative.

About Youth Futures Foundation

We the National What Works centre for youth employment, with a focus on marganilised young people. We find and generate high-quality evidence and put it into practice with policy makers, employers and funders who have the means to make direct and impactful change.