



## Evaluation

Evaluation is the process of judging the quality of an experience.

Evaluation is different from but related to reviewing, which is the process of reflecting upon an experience in order to learn from it – see National Guidance (NG) document [4.2c "Reviewing"](#).

This document uses the term "an experience" to mean any chosen episode of outdoor learning, off-site visits or learning outside the classroom: for example, it could mean a lesson, session, outing, visit, residential, expedition or programme, or a specific activity or moment that forms part of one of these.

Evaluation is normally focused on experiences themselves, and the attainment and progress of groups of participants in the experiences, whereas assessment (such as pupil assessment in a school) is normally focused on the attainment and progress of individuals.

## Why Evaluate?

Evaluation is used for many different reasons, for example:

- To measure progress and to help plan next steps;
- For continual improvement;
- To provide general feedback to participants about their progress (rather than the specific feedback provided by individual assessments);
- To provide feedback to leaders about their effectiveness, to support professional development;
- To help make decisions about the effectiveness and relative value of different types of experience – i.e. to understand what works;
- To provide evidence to stakeholders, such as funders and regulators (e.g. Ofsted).

## Types of Evaluation

These various reasons for evaluation can be divided into two types: summative and formative.

## Summative Evaluation

Summative evaluation sums up what has been achieved by an experience or set of experiences. This is commonly most useful when compared to the aims and objectives of the experience(s), or to a relevant external standard.

## Formative Evaluation

Formative evaluation is used to provide information to help form plans for the next steps, and to improve practice. It can be used during or after an experience, is part of the learning process, and often contributes to reviewing.

## What to Consider

In order to judge the quality of an experience, you must first decide what aspects of the experience you wish to consider. An evaluation is usually concerned with one or more of the following aspects of an educational experience:

- Inputs;
- Outputs;
- Outcomes;
- Impact.

### Inputs

The inputs are the resources devoted to the experience, such as money, staffing, time and equipment. For some of these, a simple measurement may suffice (such as the cost of accommodation for a residential, or the number of staff hours involved), but for others a more complex assessment may be necessary.

### Outputs

The outputs are the actions that are undertaken or the services that are provided. For example, the outputs of an experience might include the number of participants, the activities that the participants completed, or the occupancy rate of a facility. They are often easily measured

Because outputs are easily measured, there is a temptation for evaluations to focus on these rather than to attempt to evaluate outcomes and impact.

### Outcomes

The outcomes are the changes that the participants gain as a direct result of the experience, such as changes in their knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour. Outcomes are expected to be beneficial, but occasional negative outcomes should not be ignored.

Evaluation will normally focus on the desired outcomes: the anticipated changes which are expressed as the aims of the experience. However, evaluations should also be open to acknowledge unplanned outcomes. One of the benefits of experiences such as adventure activities in wild places is that they often lead to unplanned moments that can have significant outcomes: for example, the sight of a wild animal or a beautiful sunrise can lead to immediate and profound changes in a

child's attitude towards the natural world, even if this outcome was not included in the aims of the experience.

Some outcomes, especially those related to attitudes and behaviours, are difficult to measure. It is therefore useful to choose some indicators which show whether the desired change has happened. Such outcome indicators should be specific, observable and measurable actions, characteristics, etc. For example, if the aim of an experience is to develop participants' social skills, indicators could include instances when they are observed to listen to others, or when they report feeling more confident. These outcome indicators could be incorporated into the objectives of the experience.

### Impact

The impact of an experience is its long-term effect. As with outcomes, impacts can be both positive and negative.

Impact is difficult to measure, because it is sometimes indirect, and because it is difficult to distinguish what changes are due to a particular experience and what are due to other experiences and other factors. For example, although an immediate outcome of a Year 9 field study visit might be an improved knowledge of certain aspects of geography, it may be difficult to determine what impact the visit has on participants' success in GCSE exams.

It can also be difficult to measure the impact of an experience because it can take a long time for it to have an effect. For example, it is common for successful people in later life to realise that certain aspects of their education had a profound impact, but that they had not previously identified these aspects as important.

It is thus difficult to show a cause-and-effect relationship between an experience and its educational or developmental impacts. Impact evaluation therefore often seeks to find associations or indications that show that, on balance, an experience has certain impacts, rather than to attempt to find direct effects.

### Theories of Change

Because it can be difficult to understand the impact of an experience through direct cause-and-effect (that is, to answer the question "what?") an alternative approach is sometimes used. This uses accepted theories to explain how a certain experience should have a particular impact: in other words, to address the questions "why?" and "how?".

It is good practice to use a theory of change, sometimes known as a logic model, to underpin the design of experiences, as well as their evaluation. See:

- Box 4 in NG document 2.4r "[Giving Evidence / Blagrave Trust \(2015\): The Existing Evidence Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning](#)";
- [www.outdoor-learning.org/Good-Practice/Good-Practice/Theory-of-Change](http://www.outdoor-learning.org/Good-Practice/Good-Practice/Theory-of-Change).

A theory of change does not have to be complex. Some elements of it are likely to already form part of an establishment's or leader's ethos or underpinning philosophy. For example, it might include elements such as:

- "People develop when they experience trust and support";
- "Learning is most effective when people reflect upon their experiences";

- “People learn best when they are challenged so that they move beyond their ‘comfort zone’ into their ‘stretch zone’, but not into their ‘panic zone’”;
- “Real world experiences provide powerful learning opportunities”.

## Evaluation Questions

A good starting point for designing an evaluation is to decide what questions the evaluation should seek to answer. Some typical questions are as follows.

### Questions about inputs

- What was the financial cost of the experience?
- What staff time was involved in the experience?

### Questions about outputs

- How many participants benefited from the experience?
- How many participants successfully completed the experience?
- Did the participants enjoy the experience?

### Questions about outcomes

- What did the participants learn from the experience?
- How did the participants develop because of the experience?
- Did the experience achieve its aims and objectives?
- What were the outcomes from the experience?
- Were there any negative outcomes?

### Questions about impact

- Is the learning/development long-lasting?
- What was the impact of the experience?
- Did the experience make a difference?
- To what extent can a specific impact be attributed to the experience?
- How or why did the experience make a difference?

### Questions about theory of change

The following questions relate to the example elements of a theory of change given above:

- Did the leaders facilitate an atmosphere of trust and support?
- Did the leaders integrate active reviewing into the experience?
- Did the leaders manage the activities so that the level of challenge was differentiated and matched to each individual?
- Were opportunities for real-world learning used?

## Gathering Evidence

In order to make judgements about the quality of an experience, you should gather evidence to help you to answer the evaluation questions that you have posed.

The evidence can be quantitative (using measurement or counting) or qualitative (using descriptions), or a mixture of both. Sometimes qualitative evidence can be quantified: for example, the number of participants who are observed to have made significant progress in a particular area.

Evidence of outcomes and impact can come from a variety of sources, for example:

- Participants' self-perceptions;
- Judgements of participants' progress by leaders, teachers, parents, peers, employers etc.;
- Performance in formal and informal assessments;
- Anecdotes.

It can be gathered in many different ways, for example:

- Reviews;
- Questionnaires;
- Interviews;
- Surveys;
- Assessment tools;
- Relevant data from establishment systems, e.g. attendance, engagement, progress;
- Formal and informal observations;
- Photos / videos / audio recordings.

Evaluation can involve gathering of evidence before, during and after the experience. You should therefore design how you will carry out the evaluation prior to the experience.

## Value Judgements

Sometimes an evaluation requires a relative value judgement. For example, it might seek to answer the question "Was the experience worth doing?". This will mean weighing the benefits of an experience (the outputs, outcomes and impacts) against its costs (the inputs).

In an educational context, it is not normally possible to measure the outcomes and impacts numerically, and thus directly compare them with the inputs. One way to make this judgement is to compare the experience with other experiences which have similar aims and objectives, but which have different inputs or use a different approach.

Sometimes it is not possible to directly compare one experience with another, so the evaluation is made using professional judgement. Bringing in external expertise can add objectivity in making such a professional judgement.

## Risk Evaluation

A risk assessment is a form of evaluation, in which the benefits (positive outcomes) of an activity are weighed against the risks (potential negative outcomes) involved, and professional judgement is used to decide if the risks (after they have been reduced as low as reasonably practicable) are acceptable.

An evaluation following an experience can be used to check whether the judgements used during risk assessment were valid, and to contribute to reviewing the process of risk management. Some relevant questions could be:

- Input: Did the leaders demonstrate good practice in risk management?
- Output: Were there any accidents or near misses?

## Interpreting Evaluation Findings

The findings of an evaluation depend on the questions that it asks. Sometimes this means that the true outcomes or impact of an experience are missed.

For example, the aim of a residential week with a group of young people was to improve their school attainment and employability by developing their personal and social skills. At the beginning and end of the residential, the young people completed an evaluation questionnaire in which they were asked to rate themselves against certain criteria. The leaders were surprised to find that many of the young people rated themselves lower at the end of the week than at the beginning in several areas. After reviewing the findings with the young people, the leaders realised that the young people had developed greater self-awareness and so were more accurate with their self-perceptions, whereas at the beginning of the week they had over-estimated their skills.

## Useful Resources for Evaluation

[English Outdoor Council \(2015\): "High Quality Outdoor Learning"](#)

NG documents:

- [5.1a "Establishment Self-Evaluation Form"](#)
- [5.1c "Self-Evaluation and the Ofsted Framework"](#)

