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The International School on Research Impact Assessment

Developing Assessment Questions

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Hosted by:



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Learning outcomes

- Describe what makes a good assessment question
- Identify the factors that should be taken into account when developing questions
- Write a question(s) that aligns with the purpose of the assessment
- Write specific assessment questions according to the framework, programme theory, and/or impacts of interest to the stakeholders



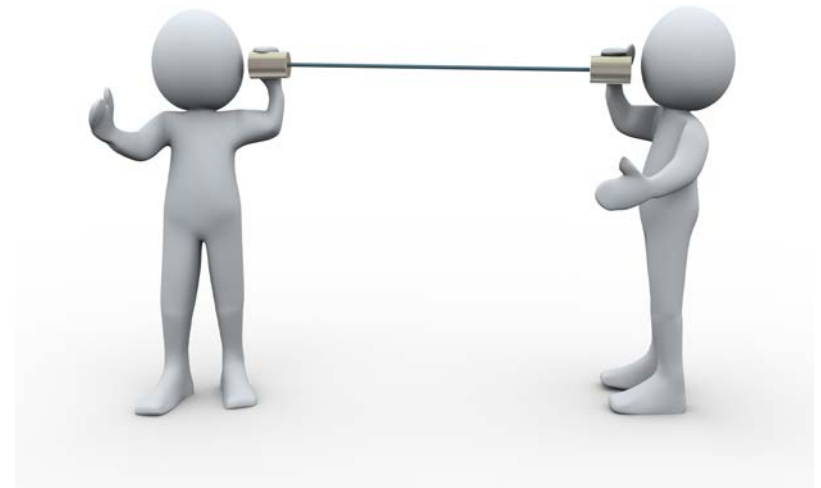
“The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong question”

Peter F. Drucker, *Men, Ideas and Politics*
Harvard Business Review Press, 2010



Assessment questions

- Serve as a basis for essential discussions about who wants the answers and the intended use (purpose)
- Give structure to the assessment
- Facilitate appropriate & thoughtful planning



But....

Developing assessment questions of relevance and quality is not without its challenges



Process for developing questions

- Clarify the programme's objectives and what it intends to achieve
- Identify the assessment stakeholders and their needs
- Identify the purpose of the assessment
- List & prioritise the general questions of interest to the assessment stakeholders
- Determine which specific questions can be realistically addressed



BLOCK 1



BLOCK 2



BLOCK 3

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Programme Description & Context ✓



Stakeholders & Their Needs (Prioritised) ✓



Assessment Purpose ✓



General Assessment Questions



Specific Assessment Questions



Programme Theory



Indicators



General assessment questions

- Broad, overarching questions that the assessment stakeholders need answered in relation to the purpose(s) of the assessment
 - That is, what the assessment is expected to answer



Several factors to take into account

- Purpose(s) of assessment
- Diversity of stakeholder perspectives
- Focus on programme performance areas at issue for the assessment stakeholders
- Availability of resources required to answer the questions
- Need to be responsive to the most important information needs



Prioritise questions that:

- Focus on the purpose
- Are of importance to most assessment stakeholders
- Will be supported (and used) by the assessment stakeholders
 - Provide necessary information on important programme areas
- Can be answered with available resources & on time



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'Good' questions

- Relevant
- Reasonable/appropriate
- Answerable
- Associated with some criteria by which performance can be judged



'Not-so-good' questions

- Irrelevant to stakeholder needs
- Unrelated to actual programme activities
- Ambiguous or vague terms
- Few observable indicators available
- Insufficient criteria on which to judge performance
- Requires more resources, time & expertise than is available



Examples of general impact assessment questions

- How well is the programme producing the expected impacts?
- What unintended impacts occurred?
- What factors helped and hindered the achievement of the impacts?
- Should the programme be continued or discontinued?



Learning activity



- Review the list of general assessment questions for Phase 1 of the *arc* case example
- For each question, identify the primary assessment purpose (i.e. 4As)
- 5 minutes



Specific assessment questions

- A set of specific questions are identified for each (prioritised) general question that, when answered, fulfill the purpose of the assessment



Image courtesy of David Castillo Domínguez/FreeDigitalPhotos.net



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Considerations for developing quality specific questions

- Purpose of assessment
- Available resources
- Alignment to programme activities and what the programme can realistically hope to accomplish
- Specify the target of inquiry
- Will inform indicator selection



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Developing specific questions

- Use the programme theory to identify the aspects of the programme that are most essential to the performance issue raised by each general question
 - Increases likelihood of the specific questions being important and relevant to the programme and assessment stakeholders



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Examples of specific impact assessment questions

General Question	Specific Question	Target of Inquiry
How well is the programme advancing knowledge?	How much quality (peer-reviewed) knowledge has been produced?	Publication productivity
	How has the published knowledge affected the research community?	Community uptake
	In what fields are the researchers producing the most knowledge?	Specialisation or strategic alignment

Learning activity



- Review the general assessment question for *arc*
- Given the impact category of interest and the stakeholder needs, write 2-3 quality specific assessment questions
- 5 minutes



Key messages

- Questions are linked to the purpose of the impact assessment
- Co-develop questions with the stakeholders
- Prioritisation is often required and can help focus the assessment
- The programme theory is an important tool for developing specific questions
- Ensure good and quality questions
- Don't rush the process!



Recommended readings

Rossi PH, Lipsey MW, Freeman HE. (2004). *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Alkin MC. (2011). *Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Preskill H & Jones N. (2009). *A Practical Guide for Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Evaluation Questions*. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Available at:
<http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=49951>)

McDavid JC, Huse I, Hawthorn LRL. (2013). *Program Evaluation and Performance Management: An Introduction to Practice* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.



Thank you!

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