

# BULLETIN

## Evaluating programmes to combat disadvantage: alternative methodologies

### Introduction

The persistence of long-term unemployment and concerns regarding social exclusion point to the need for policy-makers to understand the issues keeping particular groups of the population out of employment and to evaluate and improve policy responses. While there has been a proliferation of initiatives designed to address unemployment, only relatively recently has the importance of evaluation, especially at local level, come to be recognised more widely and resources committed to the process (Turok, 1989; Storey, 1990; Crighton, 1998).

This Bulletin examines different evaluation methodologies, drawing on a recent research project undertaken by the IER and the Local Government Centre at the University of Warwick for Hertfordshire County Council and others (Pitcher, Green and Geddes, 1998), which was designed to evaluate a local programme aimed at disaffected and disadvantaged young people. The programme, which was led by a partnership involving a local authority, a TEC and a Careers Service company, aimed to enable disadvantaged young people to "maximise their contribution to, and share in, economic prosperity and social well-being" and involved a number of schemes dealing with specific groups of young people, such as ex-offenders, disabled young people and those from minority ethnic communities.

### Evaluation in context: the Youth Life Chances programme

The aim of the study was to undertake in-depth evaluation of three pilot schemes within the overall programme for

young people and to design a framework for evaluation which could be applied more widely and by different agents.

The three pilot schemes considered all have as their main focus young people who have experienced labour market disadvantage. Many of these young people have to negotiate their way through considerable barriers to entry into training or employment and may have been profoundly discouraged from attempts to enter 'mainstream' activities. Part of the evaluation involved attempting to understand the processes leading to such disadvantage and to arrive at an acceptable set of indicators through which policy evaluators may judge the relative success of the projects.

### Evaluation methodologies

There are several reasons why evaluation of local labour market initiatives is important. Traditionally, evaluation has been used to measure whether and how a project meets its objectives. This alone is a limited and narrow goal and is not in itself sufficient for an effective evaluation. Other reasons for evaluating wider social programmes or projects at local level include:

- ◆ the encouragement to scrutinise objectives and specify exactly what they are (Storey, *op. cit.*);
- ◆ assessment of their appropriateness and to identify ways of improving project delivery (Freeman *et al.*, 1979);
- ◆ exploration of the relationship between the programmes and other initiatives taking place at local level.

The degree of apparent success of a project in terms of its outputs should have no bearing on the need for evaluation. 'Success' may come about by accident rather than intent and may mask a need for improvements in procedures and processes; an apparently 'unsuccessful' project may be operating on misplaced or unrealistic criteria, with important outputs and outcomes currently being ignored.

### Traditional Approaches to Evaluation

Traditional models of evaluation focus on efficiency, economy, effectiveness and accountability of organisations (Everitt & Hardiker, 1996). Such models, which are based in performance measurement, adopt a 'scientific' approach to evaluation, which presupposes the existence of certain 'facts' which can be assessed objectively. This form of evaluation tends to centre on defined inputs and measurable outputs/outcomes, with causal relationships being sought between inputs and outputs. Means of assessing these indicators are generally quantitative, for instance through the use of large-scale surveys, often linked to administrative data. A common feature of traditional methods, particularly in the evaluation of large programmes, is the use of different interventions applied to control and experimental groups who are considered to have common characteristics, in order that differences in outputs can be measured.

Traditional models of evaluation, sometimes called 'rational-positivist' models, employ certain key concepts in defining criteria of measurement, including notions of deadweight, additionality, substitution and displacement (as defined below).

- ◆ deadweight denotes the economic activity or jobs which might have occurred even if the policy in question were not in place (Storey, 1990: 675);
- ◆ displacement has been defined as the degree to which the entry into the market of subsidised firms reduces the output and employment of non-subsidised firms, through giving the former a competitive advantage (Elias and Whitfield, 1987);
- ◆ substitution effects relate to the proportion of sponsored or subsidised 'units' (generally individuals) who substitute for non-subsidised units in the same company (Lindley, 1993);
- ◆ additionality may be described as the net benefit or recruitment effect.

Rational approaches to evaluation may also sometimes incorporate qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, although these would normally be considered as secondary to the main quantitative evaluation.

### Limitations and Pitfalls of Traditional Approaches

Certain pitfalls and problems have been identified by some writers in traditional evaluation methodologies. Meyers (1981: 114-115) discusses the 'goal trap' which exists in some models. An example of this trap could be searching for goals which do not exist, or imposing goals on projects. The result could be that measures imposed on the project or programme become ends in themselves and distort the programme. The dangers of imposing inappropriate goals on labour market programmes are highlighted by Nicaise *et al* (1995). For example, poor outcomes may in part be attributed to inappropriate activities, as in the case of mismatches between schemes and the actual needs and capabilities of disadvantaged participants such as long-term unemployed job seekers.

'Success' in traditional approaches to evaluation tends to be defined in terms of positive outcomes, usually quantified as the proportion of the target group going into employment or full-time education and training. Such an approach tends to assume a degree of homogeneity in the target group (Fletcher, 1997) and these outcomes, while being appropriate in certain circumstances, may only give part of the picture, or a distorted picture, in the case of programmes dealing with disadvantage. For some groups in the population, for example disabled people, disaffected young people, ex-offenders and others with particular disadvantages, such outcomes may be a much longer-term goal and each individual may be at a different starting point. Alternative, more qualitative evaluation techniques, which will help in understanding the processes leading to and maintaining disadvantage, need to be considered in such instances.

### Alternative Approaches to Evaluation

A very different approach to the traditional method described earlier is the *interpretivist*, or naturalistic approach to evaluation. This method bases itself on the assumption that the social world is fundamentally different from the physical and natural worlds, in that it consists of individuals with subjective understandings. Interpretivist approaches reject the notion of objectivity and freedom from values in evaluation, focusing instead on processes, meaning and understanding, rather than causal explanations. Such approaches tend to use qualitative methods and generate qualitative data. The interpretivist approach has been criticised for failing to take account of 'the structures and processes through which subjectivities are shaped and maintained' (Everitt and Hardiker, *op. cit.*: 98): that is, that power relations, interests and values often need to be recognised explicitly.

Everitt and Hardiker argue that evaluation of social projects should be located within a critical social science paradigm and should recognise different understandings of what the project does, theorise differences between people's understandings, (locating them in relation to such



differences as social class, gender and race), generate both quantitative and qualitative data, and analyse them as such, and make values explicit. They argue that data are not external facts and truths which can be checked and understood in isolation from their context.

The importance of setting programmes and policies in context is recognised by other writers in the field. For example, Nicaise *et al* (*op cit*: 213) point to the need for labour market measures to be “embedded in a holistic approach, including elements of social assistance, guidance and counselling, training, childcare and so on”.

While many organisations will adhere to ‘tried and tested’ evaluation methods, some projects, especially at local level, are moving towards a more integrative or holistic approach, particularly with the more recent emphasis on partnerships and the need to explore the interaction between a multiplicity of programmes at local level.

### Designing an integrative evaluation framework

The purpose of the evaluation of the Youth Life Chances programme was in part to test the efficacy of the projects against the declared aims, but to also explore the perceptions of all parties and the activities and difficulties faced by the clients in greater depth, in order to arrive at a set of indicators which take into account the unwritten aims and processes of the project, thus giving a more holistic interpretation. The operation of the individual projects was also set in the context of the wider local labour market and the networks of partnerships in which the projects operated.

A case study approach to the evaluation was adopted, in order to view outcomes in the context of internal processes and also external influences both on the operation of projects and also the experience and actions of the young people participating.

Initial discussions with stakeholders, partners and project managers set the parameters for evaluation and enabled relevant statistical and other information to be collected, prior to exploration of issues in greater depth with managers, staff and clients of the projects.

A series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken with project managers, project staff, clients, key agencies and stakeholders.

The questions for managers covered:

- ◆ recruitment and marketing processes of the projects;
- ◆ the project activities;
- ◆ funding, monitoring and feedback procedures;
- ◆ links with other agencies; and
- ◆ referrals and follow-up.

For staff within the project, the main areas for discussion were:

- ◆ assessment of the project operation and the client group; and
- ◆ the role of staff and support they received.

The questions for the young people themselves were designed to explore:

- ◆ their personal characteristics, such as experience and skills;
- ◆ factors and barriers affecting their participation in education, training, employment and society generally; and
- ◆ their experience of the project, including involvement in employment, training and relevant life experiences.

The interview schedules for key agencies and stakeholders aimed to establish:

- ◆ their role in the local economy;
- ◆ their perceptions of the role and desired outcomes of the projects;
- ◆ the availability of local labour market indicators;
- ◆ their perceptions of the current situation for young people within the county; and
- ◆ the impact of the programme on the wider economy.

The framework was designed to assess not only whether current objectives were met, but the rationale for those objectives, whether they were realistic, how the activities of the projects reflected the actual needs not only of stakeholders but also clients, how they fit in with the activities of other agencies in the county and whether it was appropriate to set alternative or additional indicators. It was important to ensure as far as possible that no one perspective was privileged over another, although the views of participants in the projects had to be balanced against the requirements of sponsors or potential sponsors of the projects.

### Development of ‘alternative’ indicators

The activities of projects in the Youth Life Chances programme are dictated to an extent by their declared aims, but involve far more, not only in terms of preparing young people for employment, but helping to provide them with life skills which they may never have possessed to any great extent, or which they are having to ‘relearn’. Many young people arriving at a project, for example, do not have concepts such as how to make an appointment and keep it, or how to behave towards others and may have immense difficulties trusting those in ‘official’ positions because of early experiences of being let down.

Project workers may have to provide advice on benefits, literacy training, housing, contraception and health care, in addition to advice and guidance on training and job search activities. They may also need to chase up or find funding for courses, examination fees, books, etc. It was estimated by one project manager that around 80 per cent of staff time is spent in preparing young people for guidance and only the final 20 per cent on actually helping clients with training and job search.

Certain issues which impacted upon the evaluation were raised by project managers and staff. Where targets are not met, the reason may be because of the way in which they have been set, which may not take into account all the important 'milestones' during the progress of a young person before they become 'job-ready'. Such key stages, which form a vital part of the projects' training activities, need to be built into monitoring and evaluation processes. They include basic life skills such as accepting the need to modify behaviour, trusting the project workers, building up confidence and being able to cope with problems alone. For some of the clients, employment may not be a desirable goal and evaluation needs to take into account other important forms of development in their own right, such as participation in social and leisure activities, as well as the life skills discussed earlier. Many of the client group, because of the nature of their disadvantages (including, for example, drug or alcohol problems) may 'drop out' of the project temporarily with no means of being contacted, only to return at a later date when the immediate problems have been dealt with. Such early exits may have no relation to the activities of the project and thus might not be regarded as 'failure', but rather 'deferred outcomes'.

With the client group in question, establishing the success of the project in terms of traditional 'positive' outcomes is also more problematic because of the difficulties in tracking the destinations of young people once they have left.

The evaluation thus aimed to identify indicators in addition to the more obvious outputs of employment and training, which would capture the different stages of development of each individual participant.

Examples of indicators which were arrived at through the interviews and discussions are:

- ◆ returning to the project after the first visit;
- ◆ asking for advice;
- ◆ accepting and acting on advice;
- ◆ making a decision for oneself;
- ◆ increase in self-confidence;
- ◆ undertaking day-to-day activities alone;
- ◆ accessing leisure or social activities;

in addition to more 'traditional' employment or training-related outcomes.

Such outcomes, which should be viewed as equal in importance to those which might generally be adopted in a more traditional evaluation, are much more difficult to measure than easily visible outputs. An important question is also 'who determines the level of progress?'. Is it the evaluator, the manager of a programme, or the client him/herself?

While evaluators may provide evidence which will facilitate the process of forming judgements, the evaluator may not be the most appropriate person to make the judgement and certainly not in isolation. The client should be enabled to have a role in assessing their own progress. Thus, for example, some form of entry and exit questionnaire, based on self-assessment, may help to indicate individual development over time and the contribution of the project to that development. Attention must be paid to the language in which such a questionnaire is formulated and also who is most appropriate to administer the questions. It is easy to arrive at differences in interpretation or 'semantic breakdown' (Deutscher, 1977). In addition, the relationship of power which the interviewer has to the respondent may influence the response.

It is not suggested that a questionnaire of this kind be used as the sole means of gauging the effectiveness of a programme from a client perspective, as responses may be limited by using pre-set questions and young people should be able also to provide feedback in their own words, through other means. As part of the process of learning developed by one of the participating projects, young people were encouraged to describe their experience of and feelings about the project in their own terms. Work such as this, produced by clients themselves, is important as evidence in an evaluation, and not simply as illustration.

In the evaluation project undertaken, evidence was gathered from the various partners and stakeholders in the programme, in order to capture understandings of the objectives and activities of the programme and the wider socio-economic context. This was then analysed under the framework which had been agreed following the initial discussions. Issues raised during the interviews were presented to partners and stakeholders through a series of seminars, which formed an additional forum for group dialogue on policies and practice and which then fed back into the process of evaluation. While the perspectives of clients/users of the services were gathered earlier through individual and group interviews, they were not themselves present at the seminars and thus their interests were represented by practitioners. Part of the evaluation focused on whether both formal and informal mechanisms were in place within the projects for feedback from clients and such feedback forms an important ongoing means of gaining the views of users on the service they receive.



## Conclusions

The evaluation exercise demonstrated that projects aimed at addressing disadvantage may not be framed in a way which reflects the nature or extent of that disadvantage. For example, outputs may relate to final stages without taking into account the time it may take to reach these stages, or the important steps in between. Such projects are likely to be more intensive and demanding of resources than more mainstream programmes, especially where there is a need for one to one counselling or mentoring. Inclusion of the indicators discussed earlier may present the project in a very different light, especially when demonstrating its successes, than if the project is judged simply in terms of final outcomes.

The framework of partnership and inter-agency collaboration within which projects such as the ones described operate and possible overlapping jurisdictions are important considerations, as are effective links between agencies, both to enable progression and also to 'track' the progress of young people leaving projects.

As the need for a progressive pathway of programmes involving young people becomes increasingly recognised, the capacity of organisations to assist in the process and the degree of interaction between agencies also becomes a focus for evaluation.

The degree to which young people leaving the project are able to gain employment or enter further training may not necessarily reflect on the extent to which the project has prepared those young people for the labour market, but also on the actions of external bodies. The potential for preconceptions and prejudice on the part of employers and training organisations and other external factors impinging on outcomes also need to be given consideration.

Finally, evaluation should be seen not as a 'one-off' exercise, but as a continuing process, which enables programmes to evolve and respond to experience, in the context of a changing labour market with changing need for policy intervention.

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