OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SERIES

KOGAN PAGE

Programme Evaluation and Quality

A Comprehensive Guide to Setting up an Evaluation System

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KOGAN PAGE
Published in association with the
Institute of Educational Technology, Open University

Open and Distance Learning Series

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To my colleagues past and present, from whose pleasure in new ideas I have learned and continue to learn so much.

First published in 1994

Kogan Page Limited
120 Pentonville Road
London N1 9JN

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 7494 0847 2

Typeset by BookEns Ltd, Baldock, Herts.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

Contents

examining how evaluation can help you get a view of the student's experience as a whole, in order to identify ways in which the organization of the programme may be made more 'student friendly'.

Chapter 6

Student recruitment and support services

In this chapter we look at the structures and support systems insofar as they relate to the teaching process and the provision of open and distance learning courses. The aim is to examine how evaluation can help you view programme provision as a whole from the perspective of the student in order to get a better understanding of how evaluation can contribute to the more effective functioning of the student service areas.

Pre-registration issues

The focus of all the concern and activity, the people who are to benefit from the carefully designed and constructed courses, are the students. They are on the receiving end of a whole range of different aspects of the course presentation system. Figure 6.1 represents the interaction of the different service systems with the teaching system.

The point is that even if the pedagogic aspects of a course are all tested and well structured, the experience of entry into and participation in the programme may be spoiled for the student if any aspects of the service systems are not operating as they should be; for example, if enquirers get their materials late, or if information about courses or workshops is inaccurate. If you are trying to design a system of evaluation which will take into account the overall experience of the student within the institution, you will need to consider including some form of evaluation of the student interface with these associated service systems.

The flow diagram in Figure 6.2 shows each successive stage in the recruitment process from awareness that the learning or training

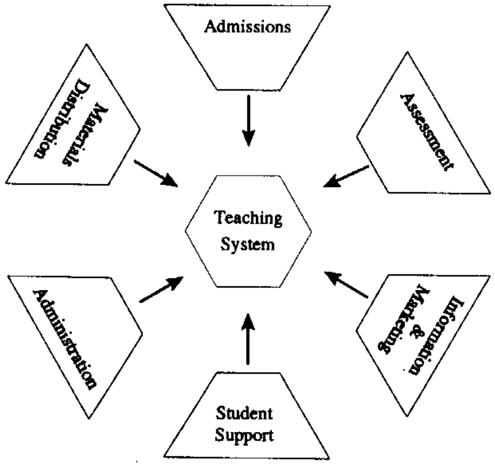

Figure 6.1 *Interaction of service systems with the teaching system*

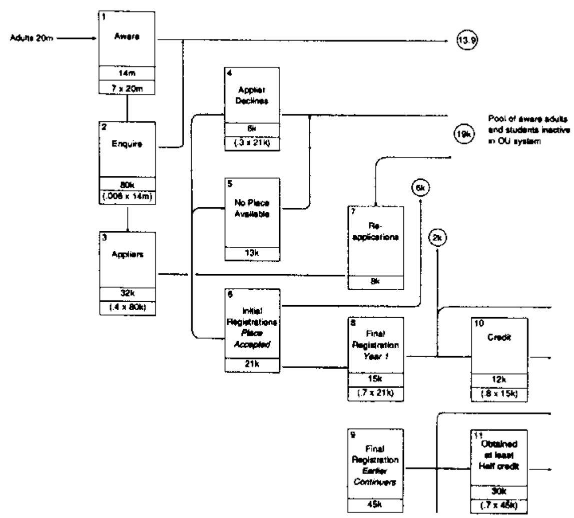

Figure 6.2 *Flow diagram showing stages in the recruitment process*
Source: Field 1982, p 129

opportunity exists to actually applying for a place. In the figure, six different groups of students or clients who are potential students are identified. In the following sections, we will be considering the extent to which the interests of these groups need to be represented through the programme evaluation process.

Information and marketing

If you have designed or developed a course or a programme of courses with particular target groups in mind, perhaps after having carried out careful needs assessment and market research, you will want to ensure that the right people are aware that your courses are available. Think about your own organization, and the information and marketing strategies it uses for open and distance learning courses. What aspects do you feel should be included in evaluating its effectiveness? Some ideas about the sorts of issues you might be interested in are listed below.

- Do the people you are trying to attract on to your programmes of study know of your existence?
- Is people's knowledge about the organization and its programmes of courses accurate?
- Is the right information getting to the right people?
- Are enquiries being handled satisfactorily from the users' point of view?
- How easy is it to get hold of an application form for your programme of study?

In the following sections we will be looking in more detail at these issues with the aim of identifying just what aspects may be useful for you to build in as part of your programme evaluation.

Awareness of programme provision

Clearly the size of the pool of applicants on which a course or a programme draws will depend to a large extent on the proportion of the target group who are aware that the courses are available. The distribution of public awareness in terms of geography, location within a company and socio-economic status, can tell you much about the success of the marketing and information effort. For example, for many years now the Open University has regularly monitored the UK general population about its awareness of the OU as an institution, and about its courses and the special features of the University. Figure 6.3 shows how public awareness has increased from 31 per cent in 1971 to 87 per cent in 1993. In this way, senior management have been able to monitor changes over time in awareness among certain

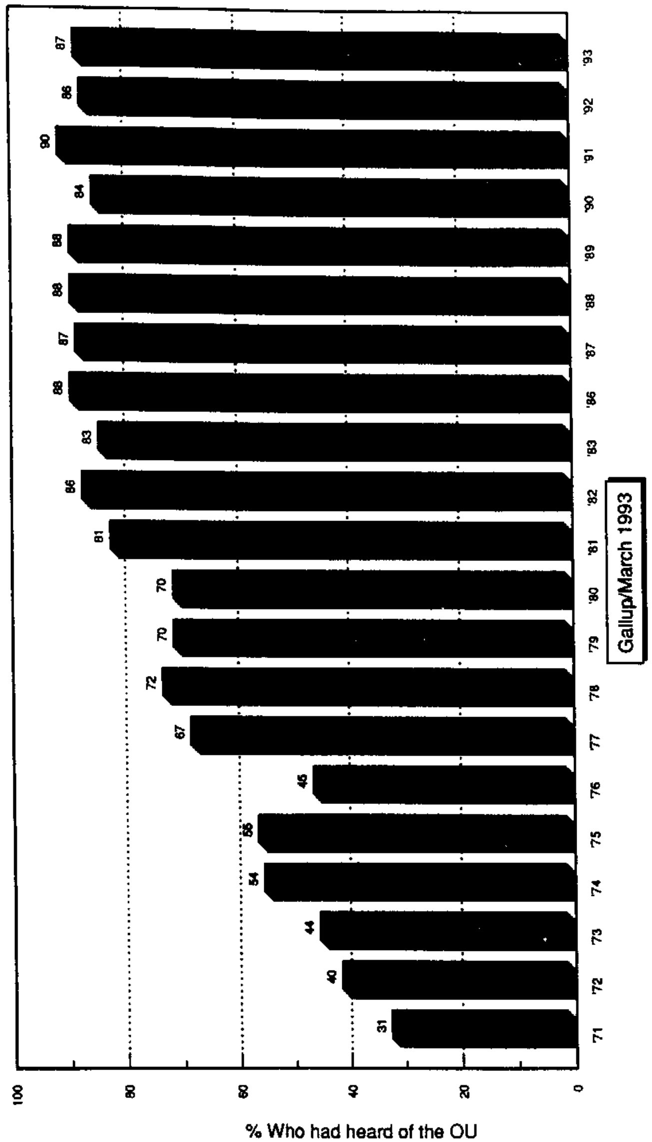

Figure 6.3 *Public awareness of OU provision*
Source: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd 1993

key groups. They are also able to monitor the accuracy of the information which was getting through.

Thinking about your own organization, who would be the most appropriate groups to monitor in terms of their awareness of your provision? Your answers will depend very much on whether you are providing for a closed population, such as certain categories of staff in a particular company, or people who live in a certain geographical area, or, perhaps, people in a particular profession. Whatever your answers, you need to know whether your target groups, and indeed your potential clients, are aware of the programmes you offer and of the benefits to them of those particular programmes.

How do you make contact with members of your target group for the purpose of establishing the level of penetration of your message? For this type of information, it is essential that the data is statistically valid, that it comes from a representative sample or a full census if you are only dealing with a small population. It does not matter what method you use to contact people for this type of study – face-to-face, phone, postal survey – but a sound sample design and a good response rate are essential if you are going to make estimates from the data.

Enquirers

The enquiry phase plays a key role in linking potential students to the institution. Frequently some details are kept about enquiries. Think about your own institution. Are you familiar with the procedures for dealing with enquiries? Is any record of each enquiry kept?

- Address of inquirer – an analysis will give an indication of the geographical spread of enquirers.
- Details of query – an analysis will give details about the sorts of topics people have an interest in studying; the sorts of questions they would like information on.
- Where did you hear about us? – a commonly used but extremely useful way of getting feedback on contact sources for different groups in different areas.

It must be said, however, that there can be a great danger of too much data being collected at this stage with no procedures being set up to gather together this information and analyze it. This data can be very useful as feedback on what messages are getting through to whom, and on what is not getting through that people want to know about, but only if the data is actually analyzed and fed through to the person or people who can make use of it.

Non-applicants

Non-applicants are people who have enquired about a course or a programme but who have not followed through their initial interest with an application for a place. Can you think of why it may be important for you to find out why this is?

- The person's personal circumstances may make it inconvenient at the moment.
- The way the enquiry was handled may have deterred the person from pursuing the idea of an application.
- The course/programme the person wanted is not available at all/at the time it was wanted/in the form it was wanted/at the price that was wanted.

The three groups of reasons listed above each suggest possible areas for further research and evaluation. The reason it may be worth considering looking further at this group is that you know that they are already interested in study or training, and that they were interested enough to take the trouble to make an enquiry. If there are problems with the way enquiries are being handled, then you need to know about the problem quickly so that it can be rectified. If the problem falls into one of the other two categories, then you still need to know about it in case changes in provision or in the regulations are possible. The use of information and the adoption of ideas from this group may well help to minimize the loss of people at this stage.

Recruitment and selection

Guidance

Part of the application process may well include some guidance for applicants. Advice can vary from the provision of a detailed personal session with someone, either face-to-face or on the phone, the provision of detailed and often complex information booklets, or simply including very brief instructions with the application form. Whatever form the guidance available to your students takes, you will need to know:

- whether the applicants are aware that it is available;
- whether those who might benefit from the advice actually use it;
- if they do use it, whether it is useful;
- how accurate the information is which is given to them.

Applications

It can be crucial to monitor carefully the people who make an application to join your course or programme. Unless you are always able to accept everyone who wishes to join a course whenever they apply, then the data about your applicants may also have to serve as a basis of selection, and as a means of ensuring that there is no bias or discrimination in your selection procedures.

Selection

The question of selection of students is an important one. If the selection is being carried out by intermediaries, for example if departmental heads select those of their staff whom they wish to take a specific course, then the criteria they are applying will need to be clear, explicit and open to monitoring. Selection may just mean imposing some sort of queuing procedure, or it may mean choosing a sub-group of those who have applied on the basis of the possession of some attribute. Consider the following example: a course for middle-managers is only open to those who have completed three years in a management position. If you were to carry out an evaluation of the selection system, what aspects would you want to see included? The sorts of issues I would consider including are:

- Establish the aims of the selection criteria – what outcome are they trying to achieve?
- Are the selection criteria actually being applied as set out in the regulations?
- What are the outcomes – are they the ones being aimed for?
- What are the other effects of having these selection criteria – on different groups of stakeholders, on the courses and programmes?

Non-acceptors

Even after applicants have received the offer of a place, they may choose not to accept the offer. Whatever the size of your organization, the existence of this group can make planning difficult. It can also mean lost revenue, and it may be an indicator that there is a problem in the system which needs attention. Typical of the sorts of reasons a person might have for not taking up the offer of a place are:

- their personal circumstances have now changed;
- they forgot to respond to the offer and missed the deadline;
- they decided to go somewhere else.

The reasons which people who do not take up the offer of a place give when asked about their decision can tell you a lot about the effects of competition and who the competition is, whether people are having problems in fitting in with your regulations, whether they are too complex or the application period too extended, and whether additional guidance or counselling may be needed for applicants so that problems can be anticipated, or possible options identified for the individual. For example, if there is some sort of financial problem, there may be a financial assistance fund or special scheme about which they could be given information.

The major problems in carrying out any evaluation of this group are in fact likely to be ones of making contact and of getting the people involved to participate in your evaluation research. The less involved a person feels with an organization, the less likely they are to want to participate in any research activities which are primarily for its benefit. This does not mean that research is impossible with this group; but it does mean that considerable care will have to be taken in following them up. Personal interviews either by telephone or face-to-face, although expensive, are likely to yield much better response rates than postal questionnaires or invitations to participate in group discussions.

Teaching and support systems

Student support issues

As Mary Thorpe pointed out when discussing the problems of evaluating counselling provision, a wide variety of approaches for supporting students are used by different organizations (Thorpe 1993). Some provide continuing support from the first point of contact before the student has even applied for the course. This may be the case particularly where certain groups have been targeted for recruitment. Others may have a brief induction for new students, and then leave them to get on with their studies, responding to any requests for help or information as and when they occur. This help and information may be provided by a variety of people in different departments of the organization.

Organizational policy may be to encourage such variation within a particular programme, with different approaches being used in different locations. Where this is the case, then local evaluation studies may need to be considered. There are several ways in which this can be organized:

- organized and carried out locally;
- organized centrally and carried out locally;
- organized and carried out centrally.

Clearly there are advantages and disadvantages to each of these strategies. The major advantage of evaluation which is carried out locally is that it can be tailored to meet particular local circumstances and needs. However, there will be a danger of lack of comparability of the information if it is collected in different ways in different areas. This problem will be compounded where the studies are also designed locally. One way to minimize this problem is to provide centrally designed guidelines for the collection of data, or templates for questionnaires to students.

However, there is a range of issues where information is needed by the programme decision-makers centrally. These include:

- Identifying what is actually happening in terms of induction, preparation and support of students.
- Establishing whether students have
  - sufficient knowledge of availability of preparation and support services;
  - ease of access to services; and
  - realistic expectations of what might be provided.
- Other issues which need to be established are which students actually use the service, what do they get, and does the service offered meet students' needs with respect to content, structure, timing, accessibility?

Although course-based studies can and should cover such issues, the information gathered only indicates how well or badly such services are operating for that particular course. For feedback on how a service is operating overall, some form of student-based study will be needed. If information about both the services overall and in specific courses is required, then the sample design will need to reflect the dual purpose of the study, with due weighting being given for students who may be registered for more than one course.

Functioning of the teaching related systems

The major systems will vary between different open and distance learning organizations, but the principle is common; namely, that the students' experience of study will be determined both by the pedagogic quality of the courses for which they are enroled and by the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching related systems. Not all courses will necessarily use all the teaching related systems. For example courses which consist only of study packages may have no tuition and no assessment, or personal development courses may not use the assessment system.

The major questions relating to the information and non-academic support systems have already been discussed, but issues relating to the other systems could include such aspects as:

- whether course components are delivered in time for scheduled study;
- whether the turn-round time for marking is adhered to; whether the quality of feedback on assignments is adequate; whether the marking is seen to be fair, and whether the appeal system is understood and seen as satisfactory;
- whether the availability and responsiveness of tuition staff is satisfactory.

The range of options which are available for evaluating such a range of issues are as wide as for other areas of activity (see Figure 6.4). Essentially there are four types of option:

- passive/student initiated feedback received on an ad hoc basis;
- passive/student initiated feedback organized on a systematic basis;
- active feedback on an ad hoc basis;
- active feedback sought on a systematic basis.

Passive feedback received on an ad hoc basis is simply what might be described as the shriek method, whereby things are assumed to be operating as intended unless someone shrieks. The institution may claim to be alert to any concerns expressed by students, but does nothing to seek out information about concerns in any active or systematic way.

Passive feedback which is organized on a systematic basis is quite a common feedback method. Here, the student is provided with the means to comment or raise matters of concern, but no further action is taken by the institution to encourage student response or seek out student opinion. Feedback cards inserted into materials are a common means of data collection using this method.

	Passive	Active
Ad Hoc	✓	✓
Systematic	✓	✓

Figure 6.4 *Feedback options for monitoring teaching related systems*

Active feedback organized on an ad hoc basis usually consists of some form of special study which addresses specific concerns. These may have been identified as requiring further investigation either through passive feedback or from systematic feedback.

Active feedback organized on a systematic basis usually provides a monitoring function. Regular feedback will provide measures of any changes over time as well as data on current levels of satisfaction and areas of concern.

These options are not mutually exclusive and may indeed all be used in varying degrees within the same evaluation programme. The examples which follow are approaches which all operate in the same organization.

Monitoring the quality of teaching related services

Different types of evaluation approaches can be appropriate for this aspect of provision for students. I would like to describe three rather different approaches recently tried out at the Open University as part of its work in trying to improve its monitoring of the quality of services to students:

- A student initiated response system.
- A special student postal survey.
- Staff and student workshops.

Example of system using student initiated response

The first example is the 'Quality Issue Card System' (QIC). An example of the feedback card provided by the programme organizers for students is shown in Figure 6.5. This particular system was set up by the Open Business School with three aims (Cameron and Holloway 1992):

- to provide students with a simple route for feeding in reports of problems and other comments, reducing the risk that they will write to 'The Open University, Milton Keynes' and get lost in the system and increasing the chance that they will receive a prompt and helpful reply;
- to help us to build up a clearer picture of common types of problems, so we can concentrate resources on preventing them happening in the future;
- to assist MECs [Management Education Coordinators] and course teams in compiling their own logs of problem areas or comments for attention.

All MBA students received a sheet of cards with their first mailing. This was accompanied by a letter of welcome from the MBA Director in which she comments all being typed up for reference. The advantages of the survey approach are that

- managers are given an accurate picture of students' opinions about a range of services at a particular moment in time;
- aspects which are working well can be monitored as well as those where there are problems;
- it is possible to identify the relative success of different areas in providing a satisfactory service for students.

It should be noted that the issues were those chosen by the provider as being important and therefore they reflect the provider's perspective.

Staff and student workshops

In the third example, a series of three workshops were held in different parts of the country. The aim of these workshops was to identify those issues relating to the quality of the service which was offered to students and part-time staff which students and staff themselves felt should be monitored on a regular basis. In each of three Regional Centres, approximately a dozen students and four or five part-time staff were brought together for a workshop scheduled to last for three hours. Structured group discussion methods were used to promote full and frank exchanges of views, and to move participants towards agreed statements on areas of concern and on possible 'criteria' for monitoring.

The facilitator commented that:

> In these three workshops, several sets of issues have been defined, each within a slightly different conceptual framework and investigative procedure. Each is of interest in its own right, and the similarities, overlaps and differences between them are also of interest. It might moreover be of interest to look at them cumulatively as an instance of 'progressive focusing of issues' of the sort favoured by some exponents of illuminative evaluation. (Beattie 1993)

The issues were the ones which students and part-time staff were concerned about. Insights from this type of qualitative approach do give a good idea of the range of issues which are of concern to students and to part-time staff. Some aspects which were the cause of concern included:

- the size and frequency of tutorial groups;
- access to buildings for the disabled;
- extended waiting period before exam resit could be taken;
- late arrival of materials;
- quantity of written material received(!)

This information will be used to develop a regular systematic feedback questionnaire. Transforming the qualitative feedback into a structured instrument provides an accurate idea of the extent and degree to which the issues identified from the qualitative study are shared concerns among students and staff; and to establish their relative importance.

The three approaches each produced a rather different type of information. It is necessary to be clear about the type of information required before deciding how to go about gathering it. In a sense, the strategies used in the examples were attempting to do two different tasks. One was the identification of individual problems in order to take action and rectify any organizational errors. The other was to identify broader problems, both one-off, due to some specific cause, or endemic, where the system itself was revealed as inadequate. It would depend very much on what your major concerns were as to which one, or which combination of strategies you should choose as the most appropriate for your situation.