Introduction to outcome harvesting

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# Introduction

Many theses and research projects include a program evaluation—an approach in which researchers assess a program, intervention, or initiative. For example, a researcher might want to ascertain whether some online game enhances the experience and progress of research candidates

A person holding a cell phone

Description automatically generated with low confidence

As the introduction of this document indicated, to evaluate a program, researchers—often called evaluators in this setting—will tend to

* review and familiarize themselves with the program or intervention they want to evaluate
* clarify the aims of this evaluation—such as to explore whether this online game improves retention
* decide which data to collect, such as which methods to use and which people to assess
* collect, analyse, and interpret the data
* communicate the results in various interim and final reports or presentations

**Outcome harvesting**

Researchers and evaluators have developed many variants of program evaluation, such as [utilisation-focussed evaluation](https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2021-08/Introduction%20to%20program%20evaluation%20-%20The%20utilisation-focussed%20method.docx) and outcome mapping. Both of these variants informed another valuable approach, called outcome harvesting (for more information, explore [this link](https://outcomeharvesting.net/welcome/)). In essence, to conduct outcome harvesting, you would

* distil an array of outcomes—that is, changes in people, teams, organizations, or communities— from past documents and other sources
* describe how various programs, initiatives, or practices contributed to these outcomes
* analyse this information to uncover patterns and insights around how various practices can promote valuable outcomes
* utilise these insights to help the relevant stakeholders generate recommendations.

**When to apply outcome harvesting**

Outcome harvesting can be applied in a range of circumstances. The following table outlines the circumstances in which outcome harvesting may be especially useful.

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| When to apply outcome harvesting |
| When the evaluator is more interested in exploring how to generate positive outcomes—rather than merely evaluating a specific initiative or practice |
| When the causes of some outcome are ambiguous—perhaps because   * multiple programs have been implemented at overlapping times * the programs encompass many facets—such as advocacy or policy changes |
| When the objectives of some program are ambiguous or variable over time |
| When the stakeholders are interested in unintended effects of some program |

# Illustration of outcome harvesting

Outcome harvesting tends to comprise six phases, although these phases tend to be iterative and ongoing. The section illustrates these phases.

**Phase 1: Design the evaluation**

The first phase is to design the evaluation. Proponents of this approach tend to label the evaluation as a harvest and evaluators as harvesters—and hence strive to design the harvest at this time. To design this evaluation or harvest, you might

* consider the questions in the first column of the following table
* answer these questions in collaboration with the people who will utilise the findings and other key stakeholders

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| Questions to consider | Examples |
| Who will utilise the findings of this evaluation—called the primary users? | * To evaluate an online game that is designed to assist research candidates, the users may include developers of this game as well as the staff who implement and promote this game—such as the research administrators. |
| What are the objectives of this evaluation? | Common objectives are to   * reveal and promote recent achievements—perhaps to inspire staff and other stakeholders * monitor existing programs to demonstrate accountability * help users continually improve the programs * demonstrate the benefits of this program—to attract funding in the future |
| What are the questions these users want to answer | * The key question might be what practices or initiatives transform research candidates who are not progressing effectively—and how does this online game contribute to this transformation * The question might also revolve around the implications or consequences of these outcomes—such as how this transformation improved the reputation of CDU |
| **When developing these questions, consider…** |  |
| Who are the people in which you want to observe change? | * This evaluation explores changes in research candidates—especially the research candidates whose progress was inadequate at some time |
| What details of these changes or outcomes are relevant—such as when and where this change unfolded? In what level of detail should these changes or outcomes be described? | * This evaluation might explore abrupt improvements in the performance of CDU research candidates after their confirmation of candidature |
| What practices do you want to explore? That is, the contributions of which people, called change agents, are relevant to this evaluation | * This evaluation might explore the effects of both this online game as well as other initiatives that research administrators or managers implemented |
| What other circumstances could affect the outcomes? | * Perhaps the restructure could also have influenced the outcomes |
| How often do you want to collect and report data? | * Often, evaluators harvest outcomes quarterly or biannually—depending on the rate at which outcomes are likely to change over time |

**Phase 2: Review documents and collect data to generate provisional outcome descriptions**

During this phase, you first peruse documents, such as past evaluations, company reports, case studies, and press releases to identify possible outcomes. According to proponents of outcome harvesting, an outcome can be defined as an observable change in

* the behaviour, practices, relationships, and policies
* of individuals, teams, organizations, communities, or networks
* influenced by some intervention, intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly, positively or negatively.

For example, to evaluate an online game, outcomes might include

* greater progress of candidates, as measured in the progress reports
* reductions in the number of complaints from research candidates, as measured in HR reports

Next, you might apply other methods to collect data. You might, for instance

* survey or interview people who are likely to use the insights of this evaluation—such as research administrators
* survey or interview people who may contributed to the outcomes, called change agents, such as supervisors

Finally, use this information to generate provisional outcome descriptions. Outcome descriptions specify the outcome as well as the contributions or practices that most likely produced this outcome. Here are some examples of these outcome descriptions—descriptions that tend to range from a sentence to a page

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| Outcome description 1 |
| **Outcome**  One candidate had written only 5000 words after 4 years of his PhD. Then, within 3 months, the candidate had written over 40 000 words.  **Contribution**  The candidate had completed 20 hours on the online game but had also attended 2 hours of careers counselling. |

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| Outcome description 2 |
| **Outcome**  The number of candidates who were attending optional workshops around research skills, personal development, and career pathways increased from 20% in 2021 to 60% in 2022.  **Contribution**  The university had introduced this online game as well as a scheme to reward greater participation in training and conferences |

To substantiate outcomes, you might refer to

* the number of people who performed some helpful action, such as signed a petition, joined a group, liked a social media post, and so forth
* statistics from surveys
* testimonials or behaviours that indicate support—such as additional funding from a philanthropist mention of a topic in parliament.

Contributions may include

* training programs, support services, social networks, lobby groups, policy changes as well as festivals, conferences, and other events

**Phase 3: Engage informants to refine and to extend outcome descriptions**

After you construct provisional outcome descriptions, consult informants—typically the people who implemented practices, programs, or interventions to foster these outcomes. Specifically, present these provisional outcome descriptions to informants and then perhaps ask these individuals to

* clarify various details about the descriptions
* supply more evidence to substantiate these descriptions
* clarify how they believe the contributions, such as the program, produced the outcome
* report additional outcomes you might have overlooked

To gather information about existing outcome descriptions, you could utilise the Comments function in Microsoft Word. To gather information about additional outcomes, perhaps ask the informants to complete a survey that resembles the following example.

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| Harvesting questionnaire |
| **Outcome description**  In a couple of sentences, outline an observable change in the behaviour, actions, or relationships of some person, team, organization, community, or network. When you describe this outcome, be specific as to   * which person, team, organization, community, or network changed * what changes you observed—often in reference to some quantity or number * when and where the changes infolded * the implications, consequences, or significance of these outcomes   **Contribution**  In a couple of sentences, describe how the organization might have influenced this outcome. That is,   * which activities, practices, or policies inspired, supported, facilitated, or coerced this change? * include past contributions that might be only obliquely related to this change * include other features of the environment, such as a restructure, that could have affected the outcome |

To garner this information, you might

* conduct interviews or focus groups with informants
* distribute surveys to informants—partly to these informants are granted opportunities to consult other individuals, such as the beneficiaries of these programs

To improve these outcome descriptions, you might need to ask more questions, primarily to

* check the outcome refers to tangible measures or evidence
* collate the contributions that were implemented in previous months or years—or from previous employees and stakeholders
* confirm the rationale that justifies how the contribution influenced the outcome
* check the informants had not overlooked unfavourable outcomes
* include decisions to refrain from some change—because these decisions can also contribute to outcomes.

**Phase 4: Substantiate these outcome descriptions**

One of the limitations of the previous phase is that informants might be biased. They might, either deliberately or inadvertently

* exaggerate the magnitude or significance of these outcomes
* exaggerate their contribution to these outcomes

To overcome this limitation, during this phase, consults independent people. Specifically,

* choose people who might be informed about the outcomes but unbiased—such as donors, strategic allies, or even beneficiaries
* show the relevant outcome descriptions—or a subset of these outcome descriptions—to these independent people
* ask these people to substantiate, refine, or extend these outcome descriptions.

When you write an outcome description, attempt to characterise the diversity and richness of opinions. That is, describe rather than ignore conflicting perceptions about an outcome

**Phase 5: Analyse and interpret the findings**

During the fifth phase, you analyse the outcome descriptions to generate insights and to answer the questions the evaluation is intended to address. To complete this task, apply some of the activities that appear in the following table.

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| Activity | Examples |
| **Categorise the outcomes.** Typically, the questions the evaluation is intended to address will guide how you categorise these outcomes | In this example, the questions revolved around whether the online games benefit candidates who are not progressing. Therefore, the outcomes might be categorised according to   * the problem the candidates were experiencing—such as limited motivation versus limited capability * the improvement the candidate demonstrated—such as improved motivation versus improved skills   You might then, for example, reveal that   * 20 outcome descriptions show improvements in motivation * 15 outcome descriptions show improvements in skills * 4 outcome descriptions show decreases in motivation |
| **Categorize the contributions.** Again, the questions the evaluation is intended to address will guide how you categorise these contributions | In this example, the contributions could simply be categorized as online game versus other initiatives. The the other initiatives could be categorized as well, such as   * training events versus social events * compulsory activities versus optional activities |
| **Subject the outcome descriptions to thematic analysis or content analysis.**   * You could use [this link](https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2021-02/Introduction%20to%20thematic%20analysis.docx) or [this link](https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2020-07/Introduction%20to%20Leximancer.docx) to unearth these from these outcome descriptions. * You might uncover patterns around how particular contributions often culminate in specific outcomes | This analysis might reveal themes around how the contributions produced specific outcomes, such as   * a theme around how immersion in the game diminished anxiety and increased concentration * a theme around how candidates were more likely to persist on challenging tasks when these tasks were embedded in a game |
| **Calculate some descriptive statistics.**   * Interpret these statistics with caution because the number of instances is often low and the categorisations are rough rather than precise | You might, for example,   * explore how the frequency of each outcome category is related to the frequency of each contribution category   To illustrate   * in response to training 8 of the outcomes revolved around skill improvements and 4 of the outcomes revolved around motivation improvements * but, in response to social events, 2 of the outcomes revolved around skill improvements and 9 of the outcomes revolved around motivation   Alternatively, you might compare the outcomes across time, location, or other relevant characteristics |

**Phase 6: Help users apply the findings**

The final task is to help users—the people who can utilise the findings to reach decisions and to introduce changes—apply these findings. To achieve this goal, you might

* write a report that summarises the key findings and presents representative outcome descriptions—as illustrated in the following table
* communicate these findings in a presentation
* arrange a workshop with users to discuss possible recommendations that emanate from this evaluation.

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| Main contents of typical reports | |
| Executive summary | * Summarise each of the following sections—especially the findings |
| Background | * Delineate the events that prompted the key stakeholders to arrange an evaluation * Present the questions this evaluation was intended to address * Outline the range of outcomes and programs the organization had wanted to evaluate |
| Methodology | * Describe the methods that were utilised to identify, refine, and substantiate the outcomes and contributions * Clarify how the outcomes and contributions were analysed and interpreted, such as the methods you applied |
| Findings | Perhaps divide this section into sections—in which each section corresponds to one category or issue, such as   * candidates on probation * candidates experiencing mental health problems * candidates demonstrating limited capabilities   In each section, you might   * present some key themes or insights about this category * present some numerical information about these themes or insights * include sample outcome descriptions to illustrate these insights |
| Integration of findings | You might include a section that integrates the various findings in which   * you show how various outcomes and contributions affect one another * adopt a systems perspective |

Because you may not be aware of all the political, legal, ethical, cultural, and financial implications of changes, you would probably not suggest recommendations yourself. However, you might

* prompt users to consider the range of recommendations they might consider
* during this workshop, highlight findings that support or challenge the recommendations they propose

**Variations**

The procedure that evaluators, or harvesters, apply depend on many considerations. For example

* many evaluators will integrate outcome harvesting with other approaches to program evaluation
* if they adopt appreciative enquiry, for instance they would confine their attention only to favourable outcomes rather than explore both favourable and unfavourable outcomes