
Bridging the evidence gap - the eVALUEd toolkit training project

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Say the word 'toolkit' and people usually think of a box of spanners and hammers wielded by a person in blue overalls, but for the last few months we have been introducing higher education institutions to our online evaluation toolkit (no overalls required!) in order to inspire a new qualitative approach to evaluating electronic resources.

Evaluating electronic information services (EIS) is an essential part of the library planning cycle for a number of reasons, including helping to ensure that objectives are met, identifying successes and providing evidence of the benefits and impacts of EIS. The drive to equip our libraries with the latest EIS resources has placed a new burden on those holding the purse-strings and without well formed evaluation strategies library managers run the risk of making expensive ill-informed choices and decisions about where to invest and develop user services.

The toolkit has been developed by a research team from **evidence base** research and evaluation services, based in Library Services at the University of Central England. The development has been funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) through its fund for good management practice.

The toolkit, which is available free of charge online, is designed to support information services staff in higher education institutions in the evaluation of electronic information services. The toolkit takes a user-focused approach to the evaluation of EIS mainly through the use of qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, focus

groups and questionnaires and encourages a 'people first' approach to ascertaining how useful and effective electronic information services are.

Having a toolkit is, however, only half the story and rather like aiming to live a healthier lifestyle, investing in that smoothie maker and cycling machine doesn't in itself ensure that we get the results! In order to avoid the eVALUED Toolkit ending up stuck at the back of a metaphorical cupboard, the final part of the project has been the rolling out of a highly interactive training and coaching support package designed to demystify qualitative evaluation, enthuse and inspire library staff to regularly run evaluation projects, and encourage the embedding of evaluation into the participants' work lifecycle.

With this in mind, the training phase was designed specifically to complement the existence of the toolkit by promoting confidence and clarity around the process of evaluation. In order to ensure that the participants have had a thorough opportunity to explore the Toolkit online, a pre-course quiz and slogan competition is sent out with the joining instructions, and there are prizes for the best slogans added to the phrase 'Electronic Information Services are essential to my library because... in less than 15 words'. Recent winners include, 'if you are a distance learner they are right up your street!', 'they offer 24x7 access to resources for the 24x7 society,' and our personal favourite 'without them we would be virtually nothing'!

The training has been touring the UK and so far has visited London, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, Huddersfield and Warwick training over 100 people from 39 different institutions and has another five venues on its list before the project ends. In addition to the training days, all participants have access to project coaching support and follow-up from the project trainer, Fiona Mullany and Sarah McNicol, the eVALUED Toolkit researcher. This ensures that participants really have the opportunity to put their learning into practice with practical support and advice.

The training day begins by encouraging participants to explore the difference between quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods. Once an understanding of the relevance of qualitative evaluation is reached, we go on to look at the various methods: interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, cover the recruiting of subjects in an organisational context, the effect of incentives, and how the methods link together.

The second part of the morning teaches practical communication skills and explores the interpersonal skills needed to gain good qualitative data from people in interview and focus group situations. We have discovered that many people have actively avoided face to face evaluation methods such as focus groups and interviews simply because they lacked confidence and so this section of the training is designed to address that and ensure confidence in these areas. Feedback from participants has been excellent with over 95% reporting that their confidence in conducting qualitative evaluation had increased as a result of the training, and many noting that they had been inspired to consider using focus groups for the first time; as one participant said 'Previously I would not have been brave enough to run a focus group!'.

Good project management is an essential part of any evaluation project and so the day continues with a session on how to plan an evaluation project and provides participants with a simple method for checking that they have set themselves achievable targets. One of the participants said 'It has given me confidence and a structure for approaching qualitative evaluation as I wasn't sure where to start before!' and others have reported that learning this method has inspired them to re-engage with projects as diverse as setting up complex databases and finishing long standing MA dissertations!

Rounding off the day we return to some of the resources of the toolkit and participants complete a group exercise based around selecting real qualitative evaluation questions from four different evaluation areas and planning an evaluation project from start to finish. This gives them an opportunity not only to learn how to identify relevant questions from the toolkit resource but also to 'dress rehearse' the project plan for running the evaluation. The groups then present their plans back to each other, and this results in each participant seeing up to four project plans and four 'ready to go' sets of questions for evaluation by interview, focus group or questionnaire.

Participant reactions have been highly enthusiastic with many people reporting that they would be taking what they had learnt straight back into the workplace to share with colleagues. This means not only that the toolkit will gain a wide audience, but also that the good practice encouraged by the training is currently reaching over 500 people within the libraries and information services of higher education, a fact that

indicates the project has the power to make a real and positive difference to the sector.

Over the next few months we will be developing further training packages for information services in evaluation and evidence-based practice which in the EIS area will include 'e-measuring' quantitative evaluation of electronic services, and more generally outcomes and impact assessment and general service evaluation at a variety of levels. In addition, we are expanding our provision courses to cover other skill sets including interviewing, presentation and training skills, and project coaching which will be tailored specifically for the needs of academic libraries.

We are greatly enjoying running this training project and are confident that as a result our 'toolkit' will not remain stuck in its box. We are constantly seeking to update and improve the access to training in the areas of evaluation to ensure that people are confident users of qualitative evaluation methods and really get the best out of their resources because as the following story illustrates, being effective is not just about having access to the right tools, but about knowing how and when to use them:

'A man rang a plumber to come and fix his boiler which had been making a terrible noise. The plumber arrived, selected the biggest hammer he had, ran his hand along the feeder pipe, gave it a mighty whack and the noise stopped. 'That should sort it.' he said to the bemused boiler owner and quickly departed. A week later the man was astonished to receive a bill from the plumber for £200 and was so outraged he was straight on the telephone demanding an explanation – 'You only gave it a whack with a hammer! I have a hammer! I could have done that! How can you justify your bill?'. The plumber simply sighed and said 'You're right Sir, hitting the boiler pipe is free of charge... but knowing exactly where to hit it; that costs £200'.'

If you would like more information about the eVALUED Training and an opportunity to learn where to 'hit' in terms of qualitative evaluation or you would like to be kept informed of other training packages we will be providing at evidence base please contact Fiona Mullany on 0121 331 6253 or by email fiona.mullany@uce.ac.uk.