

SECTION 7: EVIDENCE OF EVIDENCE USE: HOW DO YOU SHOW THAT YOU HAVE USED EVIDENCE IN YOUR DECISION-MAKING?



By the end of this section you will be able to understand the importance of creating audit trails which demonstrate evidence-informed decision making in higher education



To extend your learning, complete the Critical Checklist for Using Evidence Effectively activity at the end of this section, in relation to a planned intervention or activity



To apply your learning, review the case study to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Analysis and synthesis

Think about how you know you are being sufficiently analytical.

One of the biggest problems when using any kind of [evidence](#) is moving from description to analysis to synthesis. Use the following exercise about levels of critique to sharpen your skills when analysing evidence.

Worked example:

Situation	Level of analysis
The cat sits on the mat	Purely descriptive - <i>states what can be seen</i>
The cat sits on the mat: we need to explore why it's sitting there	Description plus limited critical analysis - <i>what can be seen plus we begin to reason and question</i>
The cat sits on the mat: having weighed up all available evidence, we can demonstrate an understanding of why it might be there	Extension of critical analysis into synthesis - <i>what can be seen plus comprehensive reasoning of all available evidence</i>
The cat sits on the mat: we perceive that the existing evidence does not explain adequately why it's there. We need to devise further ways to help explain the significance of this situation	Synthesis moves towards more comprehensive critical evaluation; represents recognition of the limits of existing knowledge upon which to build new explanation(s) - <i>what can be seen plus an evidence-informed approach acknowledging we need to examine gaps and maybe gather new evidence?</i>

Task: identify ONE piece of evidence arising from a situation of your choosing and see if you can progress it in a similar way to the 'cat' above. Place the situations (or facts) in the left-hand columns in the diagram below and align with the corresponding levels of analysis in the right-hand columns. This can be very useful to complete when considering how to become more analytical.

Situation	Level of analysis
	Purely descriptive
	Description plus limited critical analysis
	Extension of critical analysis into synthesis
	Synthesis moves towards more comprehensive critical evaluation; represents recognition of the limits of existing knowledge upon which to build new explanation(s)

Reporting and dissemination

It is really important to be systematic and thoughtful about how evidence and findings are reported. Considering who you are trying to influence and why is crucial at the outset. A well thought out communications plan can provide a useful way to keep on track with when and how to report evidence and it also ensures that it will maximise influence. Ask yourself some critical questions about what you are going to do with evidence you find:

1. Have you got a communications and information-sharing (dissemination) plan before you start any form of inquiry?
2. How and when are you going to produce outputs? For example, will you be writing any interim findings, summaries, extended report?
3. Internal dissemination by project team? Such as Students' Association and University committees, internal conferences, internal media communications
4. How to launch findings? For example, you could do a 'soft launch' at the end of the project at the host institution, if appropriate. If any of the work is sponsored, your funder might want a 'harder' official launch before anything else occurs
5. Publication of output? Where will anything be hosted as there are lots of options here, including:
 - a relevant website
 - external and internal project members to promote via own networks
 - newsletters, blogs, email promotion and face-to face-meetings
 - social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook
 - promotion to practitioners via any established organisational networks
 - promotion to senior leaders either directly or via their identified network
 - conference presentations by project team or individuals
 - open access to raw data to allow continued analysis of the topic area by other researchers or those gathering further evidence.
6. Check for any embargos or any other restrictions on publication and/or data sharing?

Action plans and activity logs

Action plans and activity logs can provide detailed outlines of tasks required to accomplish a goal and should be considered as really useful evidence of process. There are lots of freely available planning templates that can be downloaded but the easiest way is to create your own based on the following SMART principles:

Be **S**pecific

Use **M**easurable processes

Set **A**ttainable targets

Have **R**elevant goals

Ensure **T**imescales are taken into account

Scenario modelling (forward thinking)

Scenario modelling (also known as scenario planning) is an evidence-informed process used to improve decision making when creating possible future directions. During the process, current driving forces and potential drivers of change are explored in depth and evidence is gathered to examine the strengths and challenges of each possible future.

Sayers (2010) constructed *A Guide to Scenario Planning in Higher Education* which provides lots of worked examples of how evidence can be used to construct forward-facing alternatives. She states:

'Scenario planning does not claim to predict the future in entirety, it does increase awareness of the external environment and broaden the range of possible futures which are under consideration (and what policies and strategies would be best in each case.) In straightforward terms, it helps organisations to 'prepare for what we don't think is going to happen' (p 5).

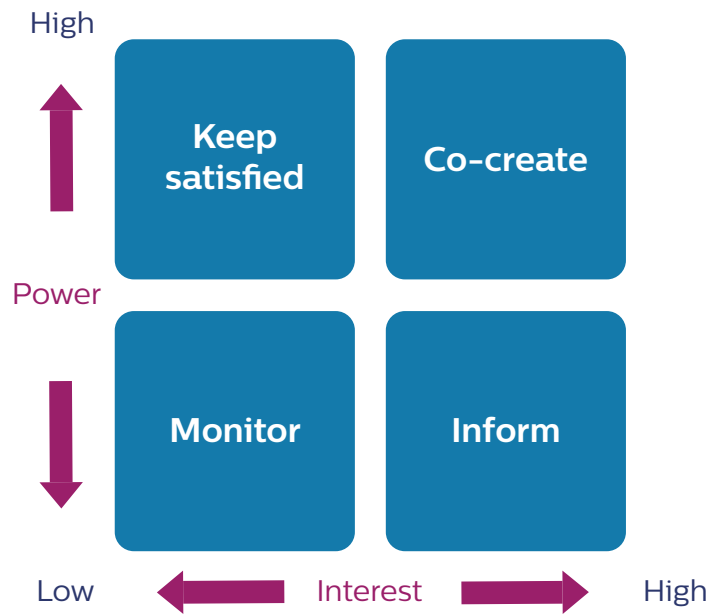
You might consider using and documenting scenario-modelling processes, as outlined above. They can provide a low-risk approach in helping to develop some evidence-informed alternative versions of possible futures within specific contexts. These can be revisited as very useful forms of contributory evidence when making decisions at a later point.



Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholders are individuals (or groups) who affect, or are affected by, a project or strategy. There are many ways to identify stakeholders you might want to include when using evidence to inform organisational change. Using a template to consider level of influence within any specific context, along with level of interest, can identify the right people to help in any evidence-informed process or initiative.

The following stakeholder analysis template can be used when planning any evidence-informed process:



This results in four obvious combinations:

- Stakeholders identified with *low power* and *low interest* should be *monitored*
- Stakeholders identified with *high interest* but *low power* should be *kept informed*
- Stakeholders identified with *high power* but *low interest* should be *kept satisfied*
- Stakeholders identified with *high power* and *high interest* should *become co-creators*.

‘Power’ in this context doesn’t necessarily relate to organisational hierarchy, it concerns those you consider have power in the particular area of change. For example, if you were collecting some form of student voice evidence around assessment then the President of the Students’ Association and the Director of Learning and Teaching might have more power than the Principal in this context.

Focused and differentiated recommendations

- When considering and/or auditing use of evidence, don’t forget to give some thought to how you feel the evidence should be used for change in a focussed manner. A good way of doing this is to consider who you think might find the evidence of most use and how? Accessibility is often considered when planning how to disseminate findings, so things like executive summaries are used frequently to incorporate headline messages alongside consideration of methods of communication.
- Do also remember to provide focus alongside accessibility. For example, if you have some differentiated recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and students, then you can always draw attention to those audiences in any specific summary.

To summarise

- Do ensure that you consider how to audit your use of evidence throughout
- Don't assume that complex information is always easy to analyse
- Do produce a stakeholder plan so that you can be rigorous about engagement
- Do think about planning the focus of any dissemination of findings

The Critical Checklist for Using Evidence Effectively at the very end of this section will help you to cover all the obvious things concerning questions to ask yourself about using evidence, types of evidence, thinking critically, existing data and collecting data. If needed, revisit each section throughout this Guide and access the activities and case studies to ensure that you can answer the checklist questions confidently and competently.



Evidence Essentials Seven

It is important to know why you need to plan and audit how evidence is used to inform decision making (either by yourself or others). Doing so will allow you to justify your reasoning and any changes in direction. It also assists in the capture of unintended outcomes.



References and Further Reading

Bell, J and Waters, S (2018) *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers*, London: Open University Press and McGraw Hill Education

Lock, D (2013) *Project Management*, Farnham: Gower Publishing Limited.

Sayers, N (2010) *A Guide to Scenario Planning in Higher Education*, London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Digital glossary for this section

[Data](#)

[Evidence](#)

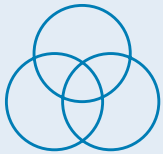
A CRITICAL CHECKLIST FOR USING EVIDENCE EFFECTIVELY

USING EVIDENCE



1. Have you considered why gathering evidence is useful?
2. Does the proposed approach to gathering evidence help you?
3. Why is it often important to gather more than one source of evidence?
4. Have you considered how you will evaluate the evidence you found?
5. What impact do you hope the evidence might have?

TYPES OF EVIDENCE



1. Which kind of evidence is most important to fulfil what you need to do?
2. Do you need to collect primary or secondary data, or both?
3. Is there a type of evidence that is valued most within your organisation?
4. What will you do if you can't find any useful evidence?
5. Are forms of evidence always clear cut?

THINKING CRITICALLY



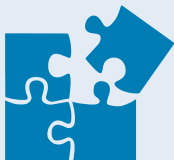
1. How do you know that you have critiqued or gathered the best available evidence?
2. Does the evidence presented have organisational or contextual significance?
3. What assumptions underpinned your research questions or inquiry?
4. How do you know that your assumptions were correct?
5. How will any learning from the evidence be put into practice?

EXISTING DATA



1. Why was this data collected in the first place?
2. Have you looked at the data quite critically rather than accepted it as a 'truth'?
3. Is there a shelf life for data and, if so, for how long?
4. Does data need to be accessible and when might restrictions be needed?
5. What are the limitations within single sources of data?

COLLECTING DATA



1. Do you need to collect data in order to answer a question?
2. Why is the process underpinning how data is collected so important?
3. Have you considered ethical issues fully before collecting any data?
4. Have you considered any impact on participants in addition to findings?
5. Have you considered how any unintended consequences will be reported?