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Virtual Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity Development in Higher Education Projects: Lessons for the Future

Abstract

Generally, project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are mandatory actions throughout the project planning, implementation and conclusion phases. Although the terms *monitoring* and *evaluation* go together, evaluation is usually conducted after the project is completed and is typically included as part of the project report, while monitoring is a continuous process of ongoing data collection and feedback. This aspect is often neglected. Although M&E guidelines for practitioners are in abundance, and advocacy for the use of specific models of M&E are aplenty, there is a deficit of scholarly publications on M&E of capacity development projects in higher education in particular. Furthermore, research guiding future M&E endeavours based on lessons learnt before and during the pandemic, is found wanting. The three authors, in different roles, are part of an Erasmus+ co-funded project that aims to build capacity for curriculum transformation through internationalisation and development of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). COIL is an inclusive approach to provide all students with virtual internationalised learning experiences without having to travel. Taking an insiders' perspective and sharing our experiences in this project, this paper should inform future M&E of capacity building projects.

Keywords: COIL, project monitoring and evaluation, Erasmus+, results-based monitoring framework, iKudu

Background

South African (SA) universities, and many in the developing and middle-income countries, often engage in collaborative projects aiming to improve the quality of education and bring about greater cooperation among academics from Europe and other countries. Regularly funded by the European Commission, projects focus on a manifold of issues in internationalisation of higher education, including student mobility; research collaboration and capacity development activities; assisting universities from developing nations, for instance to internationalise their curriculum and, recently, to develop collaborative online teaching methodologies. Generally, project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are mandatory actions throughout the project planning, implementation and conclusion phases. Although the terms *monitoring* and *evaluation* go together, evaluation is usually conducted after the project is completed and is typically included as part of the project report, while monitoring is a continuous process of ongoing data collection and feedback. This aspect, is often neglected. While M&E guidelines for practitioners are plentiful, and advocacy for the use of specific M&E models abound, there is a deficit of scholarly publications on the practice of M&E in higher education capacity development projects. Furthermore, research guiding future M&E endeavours based on lessons

learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic, is found wanting, and this paper intends to address this gap.

Initial experience of monitoring and evaluation

Recognising the importance of promoting learning mobility of individuals and groups, emphasising cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of education and thus advancing graduate attributes that include the ability to think globally (European Commission, n.d.), the European Commission often funds projects that support mobility of students to study abroad. One such programme was the EUROSA (Europe-South Africa Partnership for Human Development) project, an Erasmus Mundus Action 2 Partnerships scholarship programme coordinated by the University of Antwerp with the third author as co-coordinator. It promoted mobility for students, researchers, academic and administrative staff from South Africa to Europe (University of Antwerp, n.d.a). The EUROSA team was successful in five consecutive iterations. The evaluation role of these projects was outsourced to two external agencies: one in Europe and one in South Africa (involving the first author).

The external evaluators were invited to review the project at intervals and write a report as per European Commission requirement. External evaluation was driven by the requirements of the funder, and not really used as a mechanism for ongoing feedback and adjustments. However, at the end of the project, the evaluators noted in their report that it was too late to rectify shortcomings that emerged. As such the evaluation report served as a post-project reflection only. They proposed that, in future projects, ideally the monitoring, evaluation and advisory roles should be incorporated within the steering committee (SC) (management team) of the project, starting at the conceptualisation stage.

Academic collaboration for internationalisation of the curriculum

A follow-up project on academic collaboration with the aim of assisting SA universities to internationalise their curriculum, was funded by the European Commission. The *IMPALA* project (Internationalisation and Modernisation Programme for Academics, Leaders and Administrators, a name inspired by an agile African antelope), strived to set up a network of European and SA universities to respond to the needs of the SA higher education community (University of Antwerp, n.d.b). Although the M&E Team¹ was brought in only after the conceptualisation phase, the coordinator sought ongoing advice and feedback from them at the initial stages, as there were misunderstandings, miscommunications and confusion inter alia of roles. To overcome such barriers, and to keep the communication loop open throughout the project, for quick feedback and ability for rectifying action to be taken in real time, the M&E team set systems, protocols and procedures in place that was comprehensive enough to collate and systematically document information. Progress of each section could be tracked, timelines identified for each activity, and delays identified and explanations provided for deviations from original plans. This strategic document, coined the *living document* (LD) took on the role of a master file

¹ Comprising the first author as evaluator and the third author as the special advisor.

that was constantly referred to, as it provided a snapshot of the project at any given time. It was agreed at the conclusion of the project, that this arrangement was extremely useful to keep the project on track to achieve its aims.

Building on the successes of the IMPALA project, and the trust capital developed during this time, a group, coordinated by a South African partner, and co-coordinated by a European university, was awarded subsequent funding for a capacity building in higher education (CBHE)² project. The *iKudu* project (named after a larger antelope) aims to build capacity for curriculum transformation through internationalisation and development of collaborative online international learning (COIL). COIL is an inclusive approach to provide all students with virtual internationalised learning experiences without having to travel. *iKudu*, co-funded by 10 partners in the consortium (five from South Africa, four from Europe and one from the UK), was conceptualised to run for a period of three years and is funded to the value of almost EU 1 000 000 from the European Commission (*iKudu Consortium*, 2019).

Taking the insiders' perspective and focusing specifically on our experiences in this project (one as the evaluator, one as a special advisor, and one as working group (WG) leader), this paper considers how lessons learnt during this project could shape M&E of future capacity building projects.

Results-based monitoring and evaluation

M&E consist of three broad phases, namely I) planning, II) monitoring, and III) evaluation. Kimani (2014, p. xii) explains that during monitoring, data is systematic and frequently collected on specific indicators, and it implies "watching and checking something over a period of time in order to see how it develops, so that you can make any necessary changes". Evaluation on the other hand, involves the "systematic and objective assessment of the design, implementation and results of an ongoing or completed project" and is more concerned with the longer-term outcome and impact of the project (Kimani, 2014, p. xii). In *iKudu*, we agreed on the results-based monitoring and evaluation (RBME) framework as a systematic approach to track results and performance, based on its reflective, logical and results-oriented approach to measure impact. Stakeholder participation is one of the key components of a successful RBME system (Kusek & Rist, 2004). The ten steps linked to the three phases can be placed on a continuum, rather than considered distinct moments.

Planning starts with 1) the readiness assessment, to evaluate an organisations appetite for, and commitment to M&E. It goes beyond the *how* to also consider *why* M&E is important. During this phase roles should *inter alia* be considered, and barriers to effective M&E should be identified (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

The next four steps relate to detailing the RBME framework for the project namely 2) agreeing to outcomes of M&E; 3) selecting key performance indicators (KPIs) linked with the outcomes; 4) collecting baseline data on the indicators to understand the status quo; and 5) planning for improvements, and selecting specific tangible results targets (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

² KA2 Erasmus+ Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (capacity building in the field of Higher Education).

Once the project starts, 6) monitoring, based on the agreed framework commences and continues throughout the project involving all stakeholders. As the project unfolds, the results are carefully monitored by regularly collecting data from stakeholders, and reporting to the stakeholders on progress in terms of the agreed-upon KPIs. This ensures that focus is kept on what the project set out to achieve (Kusek & Rist, 2004). Kusek and Rist (2004, p. 113) explain that continuous monitoring uses the indicators to observe the “direction of change, the pace of change, and the magnitude of change”, but also to “identify unanticipated changes”.

The third leg of the RBME framework is 7) to assess “relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability” (Kusek & Rist, 2004, p. 114). The purpose of evaluations is to use the insights to make decisions for the future. Such decisions could include, but is not limited to change in resource allocation, change in management strategy, and build consensus on ways to deal with specific problems. Importantly the 8) findings must be reported, not only internally, but specifically to the funders, taking into account the audiences of the different reports. The organisation must 9) apply the findings to advance the aims of the project including ensuring that the M&E process 10) become part of the organisational culture (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

Lessons from the iKudu Project

With some additions and modifications, we are implementing the RBME framework in iKudu, not only in obligation to the funder, but as an outcome of the iKudu team’s commitment having seen the effectiveness of such an approach in previous projects; the trust capital within the consortium; and also the commitment to sustain the project outcomes beyond the project timeline. The project coordinator and the core team planned from the start how M&E will take place to ensure measurable indicators for every objective. The framework informed how the proposal was written and linked to responsibilities allocated to two³ working groups (WG), intentionally involving representatives of all 10 partner institutions.

The project kicked off late in 2019, and the RBME-based M&E plan (Kusek & Rist, 2004), allowed for a systematic performance-based tracking and regular face-to-face engagements. Although imbedded in the project application, the M&E team also submitted a formal M&E proposal to the steering committee (SC) for ratification. This consolidated not only M&E under, but also a strong advisory function. When the pandemic threatened to capsize the project, due to the embargo on travel, all activities, including M&E moved online.

Key deliverables

Clear key deliverables built into the project proposal were agreed upon (iKudu Consortium, 2019). Outcome 1, assigned to WG1, deals with curriculum internationalisation and including a baseline study on curriculum internationalisation and transformation in SA; the development, adoption and implementation of policies, strategies, and guidelines relevant to curriculum internationalisation and

³ Although initially three working groups were set up, each with their own team leader with stated goals, it was later thought efficient to collapse it into two as there was much overlap between them.

transformation; training 50 academics on curriculum internationalisation and transformation and publications.

WG2 was tasked with outcome 2 focusing on COIL exchanges, including creating 55 sustained COIL exchanges; training 55 academic teachers on COIL and developing guiding documents for COIL practice. A minimum of 2 625 students from both Europe and SA were identified to participate in COIL. Specific deliverables for validation and scalability were also defined.

Structures to support and enable

The selected methodology for continuous evaluation combines quantitative and qualitative strategies to track the progress made by each of the WGs. Through quantitative data collection, it is possible to track the submissions of each consortium member, providing relevant data required by management to make decisions and to track progress towards achieving the goals stated in the project proposal. Qualitative data collection, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, collating stakeholder opinions and impression, observation and informal data collection recorded in the LD keeps management and partners informed about the progress made. The M&E team and the SC continuously engage with the LD to recommend strategy change and ways to rectify possible gaps or deviations. In the spirit of the appreciative inquiry approach the groups have adopted (Jacobs et al., 2021), instead of taking a punitive approach, the evaluator and the special advisor engage with, and support institutions that start lagging behind at times. The name of the LD was changed to *Strategic Development Document (SDD)*, to emphasise strategic development processes and impact, rather than outputs and deliverables only.

M&E at different phases of the project

Having agreed to apply the RBME continuum for the evaluation process, M&E activities have been included into all phases of the project.

In the *conceptualisation phase*, the M&E team directed the planners towards clear goals and ways to achieve them. In the *planning phase*, the core team was expanded to include people with a clear vision, appropriate skills-set and high trust-level to break the goals down into SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timebound) objectives. This was a crucial exercise as it set the tone and made the objectives crystal clear. From there the key performance indicators (KPIs) were identified and responsibilities delegated. Once the applications opened, the core team responsible for setting the goals and objectives, contributed to the process of applying by collating information and linking it to the requirements of the funder. An important lesson from our experience is that the application has to be a collaborative effort as it includes narratives and budgeting, but also depends on taking ownership and a sense of belonging. Regular meetings in hybrid form, in addition to phone calls and emails, laid the foundation for this cohesion.

Project launch phase brought together all partners with the aim of creating clear understanding of the goals, objectives, delegated responsibilities, protocols, deadlines, and communication channels. The *project implementation phase* followed requiring of the M&E team to keep their fingers on the pulse of all the different sections that are working towards their objectives. As with the IMPALA Project the

implementation of iKudu was also initially beset by some confusion regarding roles and responsibilities. Establishing the SDD early on mitigated this, bringing equilibrium and stability. This document had been drawn up just before the implementation phase. Soon after the project administrators were trained in collating, capturing and documenting information and making it available to project management, implementation teams and participants. Thus, any misunderstandings or confusion that might have arisen was pre-empted and managed. Another challenge identified soon after embarking on the project, related to meeting deadlines and taking decisions at SC meetings. This resulted in introducing the LPT (Local Project Team) report. To advance impact and sustainability, the LPT also records institutional highlights, conferences, webinars and publications, and records institutionalised implementation, and ensures the regularity of institutional meetings. Short and to the point questionnaires are sent out to all institutional coordinators, prior to each SC meeting to indicate if and how what was agreed upon at the previous meeting, was executed. This information is then concisely shared at the SC. It has proven to be a non-confrontational way to hold participants accountable without alienating them. The information collected is transferred to the SDD after the SC. This strategy has stood the project in good stead as it not only gives timely feedback to project management and members but also acted as a source of information for writing up and submitting the mid-term report to the funding agency (accepted and awarded a 'good' grading by them). An unplanned and debilitating COVID-19 lockdown announced during this phase put the project in jeopardy. However, all activities were taken online and the concise, timely feedback through the LPT reports and the growing SDD kept the project on track. Online SC meetings were now held monthly, instead of in-person with longer intervals in-between. The M&E team regularly engage with the WG leaders to keep track of project deliverables, and where challenges arise, intervene in a supportive manner.

The iKudu project is still in its implementation phase. However, the *concluding phase* has been planned, ensuring that all pertinent documents and evaluation reports are collated and filed. This will also be a time to reflect on how the M&E function could be further improved for the next project based on feedback on participants' experiences while working on the project. The M&E team must then work with the core team to ensure that all relevant information is disseminated to all stakeholders during the *project reporting phase*, and to assist the core team to reflect on the journey and ensure that sustainability plans mentioned in the project proposal are set in place.

Reflection

Reflecting upon the successes of the approach, described above, the following are crucial for the success of projects. Gap identification needs to happen constantly to ensure progress at all institutions towards objectives. The M&E team, alongside the stakeholders, should always keep the deliverables and final product or destination in mind. For instance, a tangible destination in the iKudu project is establishing 55 COIL exchanges by partners in the consortium, and the reporting on this in different committees happens throughout. Tools such as the LPT reports and the SDD need to be used as it improves efficiency through timely feedback. We have also learnt that one should not wait until the end to engage the donor in the

project. We, for instance seek advice from the representative of the Erasmus+ by inviting her to some of our meetings, such as the reflective meeting at the beginning of the second year into the project.

The position of the M&E team will always be somewhat of an insider-outsider. The reality is that the project pays your salary, the funder appoints you, the beneficiary trusts you and the implementers want honest feedback. It is important that, in spite of being part of the core project team, the evaluators retain their independence towards ethical M&E.

Conclusion

We argue that M&E, together with an advisory function, should be a continuous process and that the portfolios must be embedded within the project management team. The focus then shifts from pure delivery, to assuring long-term impact and sustainability. Still, it is important that the M&E team maintains their independence so that the ability to criticise, provide honest feedback and give advice on critical operational matters is not compromised.

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