

Measuring Soft Outcomes: A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

In order to meet ever-stricter criteria community and voluntary organisations are increasingly required to evidence their achievements to funding bodies. For many organisations this is easier said than done. Traditional quantitative evidence is simple enough to provide demonstrating the numbers of service users, the numbers who successfully complete accredited courses, or those who go on to jobs or further courses. What is more problematic is evidencing the real achievements the sector makes in equipping people to cope with life, in developing interpersonal skills and in increasing self-confidence. These intangible outcomes have been notoriously difficult to measure but over the past few years considerable attention has been given to the issue and a comprehensive literature on measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled is beginning to be compiled. This article reviews the most significant publications addressing the issue as a resource guide for the community and voluntary sector and other researchers working in this field.

Background

Funders have traditionally been more comfortable with providing resources for accredited rather than non-accredited learning. The use of easily interpreted quantitative evidence enables funders to justify their distribution of resources. This funding bias does, however, create difficulties for community and voluntary organisations working with people who are neither willing nor often able to undertake accredited learning. In December 2003 the Learning Skills Council (LSC) published a consultation paper, *Measuring Success in the Learning and Skills Sector* (LSC, 2003), which recognised the contribution of non-accredited learning. *Success for All* stated that there was a need to 'define targets and performance measures in a way that recognises learning which does not lead to an accredited qualification, yet demonstrates learners' achievements' (LSC, 2003, p20). The paper seeks to encourage the introduction of a method of recognising these achievements without deterring people from accessing these learning programmes. The paper recognises that any method must not be burdensome to implement but it should enable learners to clarify their learning goals, have feedback on their progress and how they can improve that performance, and enable them to receive recognition for their learning.

The LSC intend to introduce a five-staged process linked to the *Common Inspection Framework*, these are currently being trialled around the country in the 'Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA)' process. The five elements of the process are:

- Clearly stated learning aims for all programmes
- Initial assessment to establish learners' starting points
- Identification of appropriately challenging learning objectives
- Recording of learners' progress and achievements during the programme
- End-of-programme assessment and review of the learner's overall progress and achievement (LSC, 2003, p21).

The LSC's new found commitment to recognising soft outcomes is mirrored by an increasing number of funders who are insisting that organisations provide clear evidence of the outcomes of their projects. Fortunately there is an ever-increasing literature available to help organisations devise ways of measuring their soft outcomes.

Soft Indicators: Demonstrating Progress and Recognising Achievement

The measurement of soft outcomes has primarily been concerned with encouraging and developing soft skills as part of government-inspired initiatives to increase employability. One of the early reports to concentrate on the importance of soft outcomes was produced by

ECOTEC in 1998. *Soft Indicators: Demonstrating Progress and Recognising Achievement* explored current practice and issues around qualitative outcomes achieved on innovative training and employment projects. Over two hundred EMPLOYMENT projects were examined during 1995-97 under several schemes and the report details the evidence of soft outcomes that each of the projects sought to obtain. The recording of such information was intended to demonstrate to employers, and the individual, evidence of transferable skills and abilities. Once this information was evidenced this would enable staff to be more effective in progressing beneficiaries on to higher levels of training. The information would prove valuable to funding bodies because it would demonstrate the value of interventions and the progress made by the project. Recording soft indicators and developing soft skills was considered necessary to meet the needs of employers who were more concerned about skill development to create effective employees rather than individuals being trained to pass interviews. It was argued that employers were concerned with levels of motivation, flexibility, reliability, and reassurance of a stable background, measuring soft outcomes would provide them with reassurance that they were employing the right people.

The report groups soft outcomes under three headings:

- Attitudinal skills

Attitudinal skills includes self-esteem, positive regard for others, taking responsibility for own lives, confidence, motivation, attitude, self-awareness, reduced depression/anxiety, and aspirations.

- Life skills

Life skills outcomes comprise social skills, attendance, time-keeping, personal presentation, personal hygiene, and relevant conversation.

- Transferable skills

Transferable skills include such factors as working in groups/teams, problem-solving, questioning, evaluating, initiative, language skills, and communication.

The report provides six case studies from a variety of 'into-work' initiatives which essentially provides a thumb nail sketch of those analytical tools deployed by the various projects. A variety of measures for tracking soft outcomes are cited including action planning, regular beneficiary assessments or reviews, psychological testing, identification and recording of key skills, feedback from agencies and individuals, discussions, and questionnaires. In developing soft indicators the projects emphasised the importance of relating outcomes to key and transferable skills. Such indicators should be diagnostic and transferable amongst all relevant agencies. These projects should also consider incorporating these indicators within accredited training-education-employment courses. The report mentions the dangers of over-emphasising accreditation to the detriment of core objectives, the overall sense, however, is to encourage service providers to steer towards accreditation.

The EMPLOYMENT initiative was funded by European Social Fund and set the standard for successive analysis about the measurement of soft outcomes and distance travelled. The report emphasises the need for individualised measurement and an effective evaluation of distance travelled, starting from a baseline. There needs to be flexibility to accommodate the various agencies involved with individuals over time, and training for assessors, including sensitivity when dealing with issues of personal hygiene and appearance. Beneficiaries should be involved in developing indicators, which should be relevant to the aims and objectives of the activities. Once developed the measurement systems should be incorporated within activities and monitoring at all stages and an account taken of individuals leaving and rejoining training. In considering measurement systems special attention should be paid to the requirements of employers (ECOTEC, 1998).

Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled

Two years after the publication of the ECOTEC study a two-part seminal report was produced by Dewson *et. al* for the DfEE and the Institute for Employment Studies. *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled: A Review of Current Practice* surveyed 300 ESF projects to establish what was happening on the ground and to develop a generic model for measuring increases in employability or 'distance travelled' for ESF Objective 3 projects. The report identifies weaknesses in existing practice of monitoring soft outcomes. The researchers discovered that there was poor integration with other sources of information, there were related problems with the attribution of information, subjectivity, language, and the use of different baselines to record progress (Dewson *et. al*, 2000a). The three categories of soft outcome outlined by the ECOTEC report are expanded and redefined to include key work skills, attitudinal skills, personal and practical skills, each offering a number of indicator examples (Dewson *et. al*. 2000a).

The researchers' analysis suggests that any generic model for soft outcomes is not achievable: "It would seem that there are too many different client groups to devise one particular soft indicator or model to fit all projects...Just as it is impossible to develop one model to measure soft outcomes, so too is the development of national indicators unattainable" (Dewson *et. al*, 2000, p5)

There are methods of collecting, measuring and recording soft outcomes, however, that can be applied to individual projects. The report lists various collection methods including the use of self-completion questionnaires, tests, portfolios, reviews and recorded observations. Soft outcomes could be measured by scales of feeling or agreement with statements (scale between agree strongly – disagree strongly), comparisons with previous benchmark data, reports or questionnaires, qualifications attained, and assessor's views (Dewson *et al*, 2000a). In the rush to record and monitor outcomes the researchers advise caution noting that: "The nature of the help they receive is usually holistic, integrated and geared to the individual needs of clients. A "one-model-fits-all" system to measure soft outcomes and distance travelled runs counter to this type of intervention" (Dewson *et al.*, 2000a, p24).

The second part of the Dewson *et al.* report, *Guide to Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled*, produced for the Institute for Employment Studies, emphasises the necessity for monitoring soft outcomes and distance travelled for all project evaluations. Rather than offering a generic model the authors offer general guidelines on the measurement and presentation of soft outcomes. The authors' emphasis concentrates on the development and recognition of soft skills as part of the beneficiaries' long term integration into the labour market (Dewson *et al*, 2000b, p4). The starting point of any measurement of soft outcomes is to establish a baseline from which individual progress can be measured. A variety of methods of collecting and recording information are suggested including individual action planning and goal setting, trainer/client reviews, personal journals, reflection, questionnaires, recorded observations, portfolio evidence and testing (Dewson *et al.*. 2000b, p8-9). The assessment process should serve the interests of the client and be geared towards their level of ability and comprehension. Whatever assessment method is devised the measurement should be systematic and numerical through scoring systems and scales. Within this system inferences may be drawn in order to better understand the client's external situation to determine which factors/changes are attributable to the project and which are not (Dewson *et al*, 2000b, p10).

All projects should be measured at least at the beginning and end of the project, but regular intervals throughout the project would be best practice. The assessments can be undertaken by the client, employer, project staff, or by peer assessment and used to present evidence that aims and objectives of projects are being achieved. The information should be able to influence future project evaluation and dissemination strategies, and provide useful feedback to clients and project workers (Dewson *et al.*, 2000b, p12-13). The report goes on to provide useful guidelines in developing tools such as questionnaires and in particular advice on the sort of tests that they need to meet to be effective. Both reports provide an ideal starting point for any serious consideration of soft outcomes as stepping stones leading to employment.

Richard Lloyd and Fionn OSullivan, in preparing *Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled: a Methodology for Developing a Guidance Document* for the Department of Work

and Pensions (DWP), build upon this foundation laid by Dewson *et al.*. In preparing a guidance document for ESF projects the authors conducted a large postal survey of existing ESF supported projects receiving almost 600 responses and undertook case study visits and interviews with ten further projects. The aim was to examine current practice, three years after Dewson's reports, and devise a generic model that might be appropriate for all ESF supported projects. The survey and observations revealed common elements in measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled including target indicators, scoring systems, baseline and subsequent interviews, a system for reporting results, and staff training to use the system. The different approaches to monitoring emphasised its value as an 'initial diagnostic tool and on-going motivational support' (Lloyd and OSullivan, 2003, p19). Such systems evolved over time and were subject to constant refinement. Where soft outcomes were not being measured the authors found a great deal of interest in doing so by projects provided a suitable approach was available. The report is particularly valuable in producing a list of exemplar indicators of soft outcomes demonstrating reliability, motivation/attitude, communication, presentation, work, and achievements. They also tackle issues surrounding the operational context of any system of measurement, the value of judgemental and evidence based approaches, and staff resources to run a successful monitoring system.

Lloyd and OSullivan's work resulted in the publication of the definitive *A Practical Guide to Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled*, published by the DWP, ESF and the Welsh Assembly Office in June 2003. The guide was written specifically for ESF projects on employability but is applicable to a wider audience. Soft outcomes are defined as 'those outcomes that represent intermediary stages on the way to achieving a hard outcome' (Welsh Funding Office, 2003, p5). Such a definition is at once prescriptive and pejorative interpreting soft outcomes as simply stepping stones to achieving a hard outcome. Many service users in the community and voluntary sector will not go on to achieve easily quantifiable hard outcomes and yet in achieving soft outcomes there is a social benefit to society as they are able to lead more fulfilling lives. What would become of the 90 year widower who gained the confidence to learn computing skills to write his autobiography for his family, that the researchers recently encountered. He will neither be getting a job nor going on to accredited courses and yet the soft outcomes achieved keep him active and involved rather than confined to a retirement home.

The guide develops the themes raised by the earlier report and makes some important provisos. The tools are to be viewed as an accompaniment, rather than a replacement for, the project worker's professional judgement. Measuring soft outcomes is not an exact science and any scoring system can only reflect indications of movement towards achieving soft outcomes rather than producing an exact measurement. The authors concede that there may be times when it is not appropriate to measure soft outcomes, although it appears increasingly unlikely that funders will adopt a similar stance. The guide identifies five stages in developing monitoring systems:

1. *Understanding what the process of developing a soft outcomes monitoring system consists of, how much effort it will require and planning accordingly.*
2. *Deciding what to monitor and which indicators to use.*
3. *Deciding how to measure.*
4. *Establishing baselines.*
5. *Reviewing progress to assess distance travelled.*

The guide continues to demonstrate in general terms how soft outcomes should be reported to funders. Perhaps the most useful contribution to knowledge about measuring soft outcomes is included in a fifty page section on existing projects with many helpful examples of existing practice. All the projects are devoted to issues of employability, which raises the question as to whether such indicators are transferable to learning situations where the outcome is related to educational achievement and progression, or learning situations that result neither in progression to accredited courses or an employment outcome.

Recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning

The impetus for measuring soft outcomes in non-accredited learning has come from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Learning Skills Development Agency (LSDA), in cooperation with the LSC. The LSC position paper on *Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning* was produced in 2002 and draws on Greenwood's *et al.* seminal text, *Recognising and Validating Outcomes of Non-Accredited Learning* (2001). The position paper sets out to develop a national approach to recognising achievement in non-accredited learning. The staged process envisaged has been described at the beginning of this article. The LSC's stated intentions are to drive up standards to improve the learning experience and outcomes, to make any national system of recording outcomes sufficiently flexible to have relevance to informal learning undertaken in a community based or voluntary activity. In addition the LSC state that they wish to 'ensure that formula funding does not distort the relationship between learners' needs and the learning programmes they access and that the transition to formula funding does not destabilise institutions' (LSC, 2002, p10).

The position paper has become the basis of the RARPA Project trialled around the country which is due to report at the end of July 2004 with a period of consultation with the sector lasting until October 2004, followed by publication of that consultation in mid November (LSC, 2004). At present there is little information available on individual projects being trialled but the evidence used in determining measurements includes: The records of learner self-, group- and peer- assessment; tutor records of assessment activities and individual/group progress and achievement. Learners' files, journals, diaries, portfolios, artwork; videos, audiotapes, performances, exhibitions and displays; individual or group learner testimonies; artefacts, photographs and other forms of evidence are also acceptable (LSDA/NIACE, 2003). It is envisaged that there will be a national roll out of the new approach in 2005/06, and we can expect a plethora of information detailing how to evidence soft outcomes at that stage.

Community Development

An approach which seeks to utilise soft outcome indicators for both employability and educational development has been produced by the Community Development Foundation. Richard Steer and Jayne Humm produced a report detailing the findings of a workshop to investigate measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled over Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) projects, a community based initiative for 13-19 year olds who are out of work or education, or at risk of dropping out. *Developing "Soft" Outcome Indicators and Measures of 'Distance Travelled' – Issues from the Evaluation of the Neighbourhood Support Fund* (2001), details experimental and on-going research into measuring outcomes. The authors expand the narrower definition of soft outcomes to include prerequisites to success in education, training or employment, and to maintaining positive social relationships. The report divides soft outcomes into four subsections including: key work skills, attitudinal skills, personal skills, and practical skills. The outcomes measured will vary depending on the individual client but measurements include the use of baseline and subsequent questionnaires with young people on the projects. The questionnaires are designed to cover soft outcomes such as core skills, self-esteem, aspirations and community involvement. The report is particularly useful in honestly tackling practical difficulties of establishing such measurement systems. The problems of recording information from young people with learning difficulties, intrusiveness into clients' personal lives, whether the outcomes achieved are directly attributable to the project, how comprehensive a picture is provided of the young person, and how to overcome the bias of subjectivity.

Steer and Humm's report was followed by a further report from a qualitative research project conducted by Maire Gaffney based on almost 2,000 structured interviews with young people on NSF projects. *Perceptions of Success* (2002) provides a detailed appraisal of the way projects seek to develop soft skills among their client group. Although this is interesting in its own right the benefit to community and voluntary organisations comes in the section on measuring soft skills. The sort of difficulties experienced by some projects with insufficient time and resources to develop adequate measurement systems and the problems of establishing baselines will resonate with other projects embarking on measuring their own soft outcomes. Project workers expressed concern that reduced flexibility and 'professionalisation' of the projects may alienate their client group and turn community based people and

volunteers into 'professionals' (Gaffney and Humm, 2002, p:29-30). The report strikes a very different tone from those produced from governmental departments and probably has greater applicability to those organisations, in the community and voluntary sector, which are increasingly forced down accredited routes to secure funding and yet know the value of the non-accredited courses and services they provide for their client group.

Final Thoughts

The need to measure soft outcomes and the distance travelled by service beneficiaries will not go away and service providers in the voluntary and community sector will increasingly be required to provide evidence of these outcomes to satisfy funders. The literature to date has emphasised the need to measure soft outcomes as evidence of a stepping stone linking non-accredited/soft learning with progression to a hard outcome, such as a job or taking an accredited educational course. Such an approach narrows the interpretation of social inclusion to employability and educational achievement and ignores vast swathes of the community and voluntary sector working with clients who may never access jobs or educational qualifications. There is a value to society when informal learning leads to increased motivation and feelings of responsibility, confidence and self-esteem, inter-personal skills, improved individual appearance, time management and teamwork for the individual. What price do funding bodies and society in general, put on the value of a mother with postnatal depression achieving those soft outcomes that enable her to relate to her child and feel good about herself? She might not go out to work for a few years, or take an accredited course, but society as a whole will benefit now and in the future from the improved mother/child relationship. There is an intrinsic value in achieving soft outcomes for their own sake and the literature needs to be expanded to take this into account.

The literature points the way to measuring soft outcomes to satisfy funders but can also be utilised to provide real benefits for the voluntary and community sectors to benefit clients and project workers. Measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled shows clients the progress they are making and have made. The evidence reveals to workers how the project is going and indicates directions for further developments. A system of measuring soft outcomes that is simple to use, easily understood and interpreted, and puts the client's needs at the centre of any measuring process is desirable regardless of any funding considerations. The literature provides guidance on preparing such a regime but provides no definitive answer or generic model. It is worth service providers investing time and energy in adapting some of the ideas and suggestions provided by the into-employment literature, to improve their service delivery with the added benefit that somewhere along the line a funder may decide that social inclusion consists of more than simply finding employment or gaining a qualification.

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