

## Developing theories of change for evaluation: An introduction

### What is a theory of change?

A theory of change (ToC) at its most basic is a description of how you expect something you are doing (an action, intervention or initiative) to change things for other people. For Higher Education activity this will often aim to improve the experience for students, or potential students. It works particularly well for complex initiatives or where outcomes are not expected to show themselves for some time.

Developing a theory of change involves identifying the situation (or problem) that your action is intended to change and thinking about the underlying causes of that situation. Then, a theory of change helps you to talk about the effects your action will have on people by addressing those causes and thus changing the starting situation (outcome).

*A Theory of Change is:*

*“a visual representation of a programme’s inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, [...], impacts and underlying causal mechanisms”*

*(TASO Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, nd)*

*“A systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and context of the initiative”*

*(Fullbright-Anderson, Kubisch and Connell, 1998, p. 16)*

### Why do I need one?

A theory of Change can be developed in different ways and people can want different things from it, but there are a number of reasons why it might be helpful. A Theory of Change can:

- Help people to articulate their objectives and describe what they are doing in their own words;
- help others to understand what you are doing and how you aim to create change;
- enables an in-depth examination of the issues that need to be addressed and what might make a difference;
- help to show how actions, interventions or initiatives fit into broader priorities such as promoting inclusion;
- provide an understanding of why actions are taken;
- identify what needs to be tracked and measured;
- enable people to decide key questions to guide learning from projects;
- help everyone to articulate shared concepts and how the concepts fit into their work, e.g. sense of belonging;
- enable people to come up with new interventions based on what they want to achieve, or improve existing interventions;
- identify coherence and common indicators across projects or actions fitting particular priorities
- help articulate where learning from evaluation has led to change;
- provide a way to keep your project ‘on track’ to meet its outcomes;
- Give people knowledge of the process, tools and language that can be applied elsewhere.

It is the framework to guide evaluation currently recommended by many organisations and funders, including the Office for Students.

## Where do I start?

Theories of change can be produced in a variety of ways. You can:

- draw on existing research and evaluation evidence about similar activities;
- draw on your own experience in delivering similar activities;
- draw on other people's practice knowledge and expertise or lived experiences.

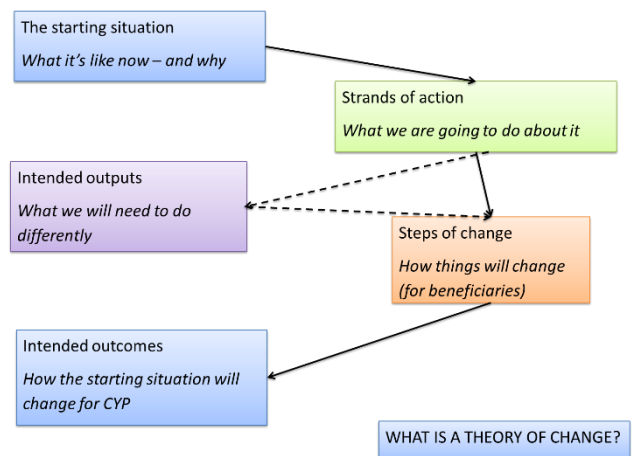
Usually, a combination of these methods is preferable, so that you have a high likelihood of producing a theory which is credible, robust, and easily measurable. This means that in order to develop your theory of change you might do one, or more, of the following activities:

1. Source key research relevant to your project. This might mean accessing and reading journal articles or research reports.
2. Hold a workshop to get input from others' knowledge and expertise.
3. Talk to key people such as policymakers, people delivering projects, beneficiaries such as staff or students, or experts in the topic of the project.

## What are the things I need to find out?

Several key questions can help to guide your discussions and develop the theory of change for your initiative (Laing and Todd 2015 p.4):

1. What is the situation you face? What are the underlying causes?
2. What needs to change in the long term? How do you want things to be different?
3. How will these changes be made?
4. What actions will you take? What will participants experience as different?
5. What effect will those actions have? On whom? By when? What will happen next? What will happen after that?
6. How will you know if change is happening? What will you see? How will you measure that?
7. What will happen for Person A, Person B, etc.
8. What might prevent this from happening?



## Further reading:

<https://www.fairnesseducation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/theory-of-change-guide.pdf>

<https://taso.org.uk/evidence/monitoring-and-evaluation-framework/evaluation-webinars/>

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