SAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation

Inputs

The term *inputs* refers to the resources made available to a program, policy, or curriculum to enable its operation. More precisely, inputs provide the antecedent conditions from which some programmatic activities are to occur and, as a consequence, achieve some predetermined objectives. Put simply, inputs are what get invested to do the work.

Inputs are important to make explicit because they play a limiting function in the implementation program, policy, or curriculum. For instance, the reach of a program is dependent on its inputs, such as the funding allocated to the program, the size of the venue in which the program is delivered, or the availability of program staff with expertise in the area. Without sufficient input, the efficacy and/or the effectiveness of a program may suffer. Yet, the opposite is not necessarily true. Overinvesting in a program, policy, or curriculum does not necessarily yield greater or better outcomes, if processes are unable to take advantage of abundant inputs. Hence an accurate accounting of inputs is important to understanding the effects of a program, policy, or curriculum.

Forms of Inputs

Inputs can take multiple forms. Recognizing the different forms that inputs can take is important to their use.

Financial Inputs

Financial inputs are typically valued in monetary units and can be exchanged for other resources. Examples include funding allocation from a government, per-participant program funding, and charitable donations from foundations.

Physical Inputs

Physical inputs typically refer to the physical infrastructure and other tangible resources made available to a program. Examples include the venue in which a program operates and any specialized equipment necessary to administer the program.

Human Inputs

Human inputs typically refer to the labor and the expertise available to a program, policy, or curriculum. Examples include access to consultants, key staff, and program administrators who bring specialized knowledge and/or experience to allow for program operation. The capacity of available human inputs is also important to consider; the expertise may be there, but without a corresponding reduction in existing workload, the expert may not be able to contribute to a program, policy delivery, or curriculum optimally.

Legislative Inputs

Finally, legislative inputs typically refer to any enacted laws and/or other official policies that place either legal obligations or restrictions on the performance of particular action. Legislative inputs trigger the most immediate change in the types of input. They often provide the easiest justification for adopting a new program, policy, or curriculum.

Applications of Inputs

Inputs are generally articulated over the course of logic modeling of a program or policy. Making explicit inputs to an intervention fosters a common understanding among stakeholders regarding the resources available to an effort and which resources are critical to the operation and attainment of intended results. Accurate and precise accounting of inputs in a study or evaluation is crucial, particularly when effectiveness and accountability are of concern.

Emerging Development

In recent years, policy makers and social researchers are increasingly recognizing the complex nature of social systems and interventions. This has led to growing recognition of the dangers around oversimplifying systems, in general, and the limitations of conceptualizing interventions in linear ways, in particular. The notion that inputs precede activities and outcomes logically is starting to give way in some cases. In its place, policy makers and social researchers are beginning to accept that outcomes may feed back into a system or intervention in a recursive manner, serving as inputs.

See also Formative Evaluation; Logic Models; Program Evaluation; Summative Evaluation

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Further Readings

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