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ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF REMOTE PROJECT EVALUATION

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Abstract

When talking about project evaluation, one particularly important aspect must be considered: the methods used to carry it out. Thus, evaluation remains the only effective method to measure the success of project implementation. It is one of the essential stages of any project, along with the identification of problems, their diagnosis, the development of objectives, formulating a strategy and an action plan and implementation. Decisions to continue, modify or complete the project depend on successful evaluation. Moreover, by means of evaluation we can learn important information about resource allocation, ensuring transparency and accountability through learning.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced decision makers at institutions implementing projects to switch to another method of project evaluation or to postpone these activities as much as possible. During this pandemic and in the post-pandemic world, the correct approach to evaluation methods by evaluators has become more important than ever. Furthermore, incorrect project evaluation can lead to wasted human and financial resources.

Digital tools used in the evaluation process should be selected correctly so that in the end they provide a comprehensive data analysis picture that could add the most value to the evaluation. The use of information technology has begun contributing to remote evaluations, which has had a range of effects.

This research answers the question: what is the effect of evaluations carried out during the last two years in the Republic of Moldova on educational projects? In this context, a survey was conducted with 11 project managers who implemented educational projects from various funding sources in the Republic of Moldova between 2020 and 2022.

Keywords: educational project, evaluation process, remote project evaluation, digital tools.

Introduction

Circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic period have pushed project teams to rethink how evaluation activities will be conducted to address ethical, conceptual and methodological challenges. This change has led to a shift in the way evaluation is carried out, requiring evaluators to develop the capacity to adapt to new requirements and apply new working methodologies.

Research aims

This research is concerned with the effect of evaluations carried out in the last two years in the Republic of Moldova on educational projects. The aim was to explore the opinions of project managers. The research findings can help managers of institutions in understanding the advantages and disadvantages of remote learning. In addition to improving the evaluation process, the information is significant for institutions implementing projects when planning an external evaluation. In this context, several research questions were formulated:

- How did you find the organisation of the remote project evaluation process?
- What were the evaluation tools used?
- Do you believe that the results of the remote evaluation did not reflect all aspects that would have been covered by a traditional evaluation?
- Would you agree for future projects implemented by the institution you represent to be evaluated online?
- What were the challenges/constraints you faced in the evaluation process?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of online evaluation?
- What recommendations can you give the evaluators for a more efficient evaluation process?

A voluntary online questionnaire for data collection was designed in Microsoft Forms. It included ten questions and was completed by 11 project managers from the Republic of Moldova who implemented educational projects. The questions' answers were provided on a 5-point scale, with end points of "Insufficient" and "Fully sufficient". The questionnaire also included open questions and questions with the answers "Yes", "No", "Probably" and "Don't know". The results were analysed by the author and presented in this research without interfering with the opinion given by the respondents.

Results

Although the pandemic period is over, the respondents consider the remote projects evaluation a very important learning experience and are satisfied with the final product of the evaluation as well as the recommendations received from the evaluation process. In response to the question "How did you find the organisation of the remote project evaluation process?", the participants provided a score of 4.73 out of 5. This result is shown in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Opinion on the remote project evaluation process

When asked if they would agree in the future that projects implemented by the institution they represent should be evaluated online, only two of the respondents gave a negative answer. One responded that "*sometimes the specifics of the project do not allow for remote evaluation, because the evaluator may miss important moments that can be noticed only on the ground*". An opposite argument to this question was also expressed by one participants: "*if the evaluation process is planned correctly, then remote evaluation has only advantages by saving time, resources and*

effort." The opinions on the organisation of future online evaluations were divided and the percentage result is shown in Figure 2.
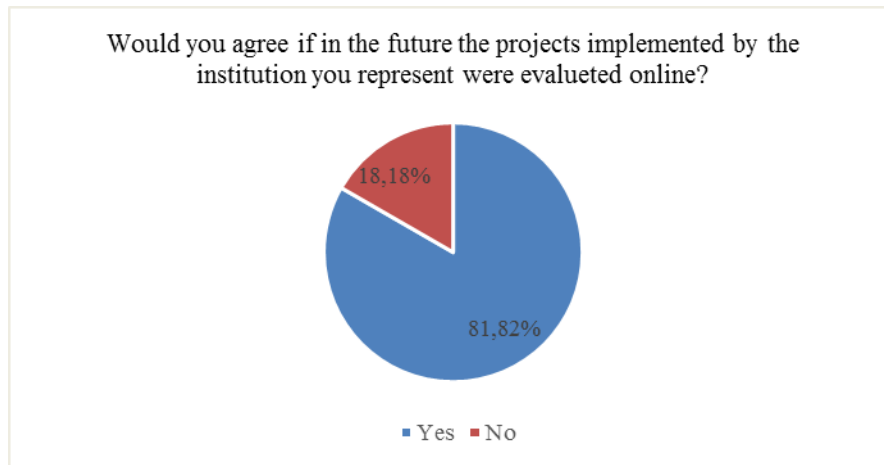

Fig. 2. The opinions on the organisation of future online evaluations

To the question, "Do you consider that the results of the distance evaluation reflected all the aspects covered by the traditional evaluation?", 3 respondents gave a negative answer. As part of the arguments supporting this view, one respondent pointed out that "*the evaluation process should have been postponed for a while in order to organise a hybrid evaluation and not just an online one*". The results confirm that the remote evaluation activity is important; 8 of the respondents gave an affirmative answer and confirmed that the evaluation organised remotely by their institutions reflected all important aspects of the implemented projects and that they did not foresee any differences were this process to have been organised in the traditional way. Figure 3 shows the result of this question.
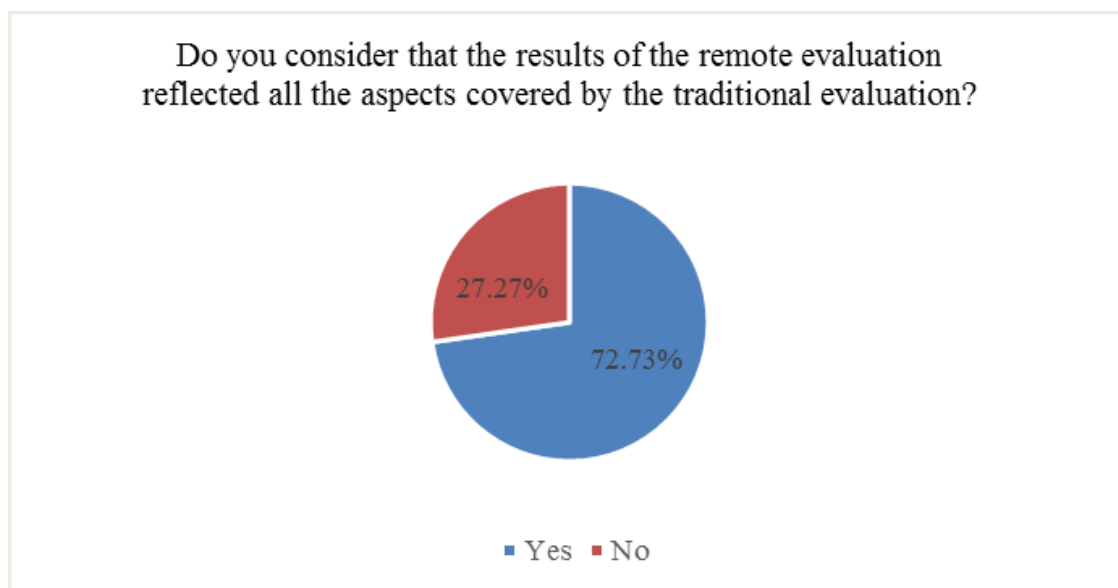

Fig. 3. Remote evaluation vs traditional evaluation

For an evaluation process to be fair, it is important to use evaluation tools effectively. In this respect, through the survey, project managers were asked what analysis tools were used in the remote evaluation process. The answers received are shown in Figure 4.
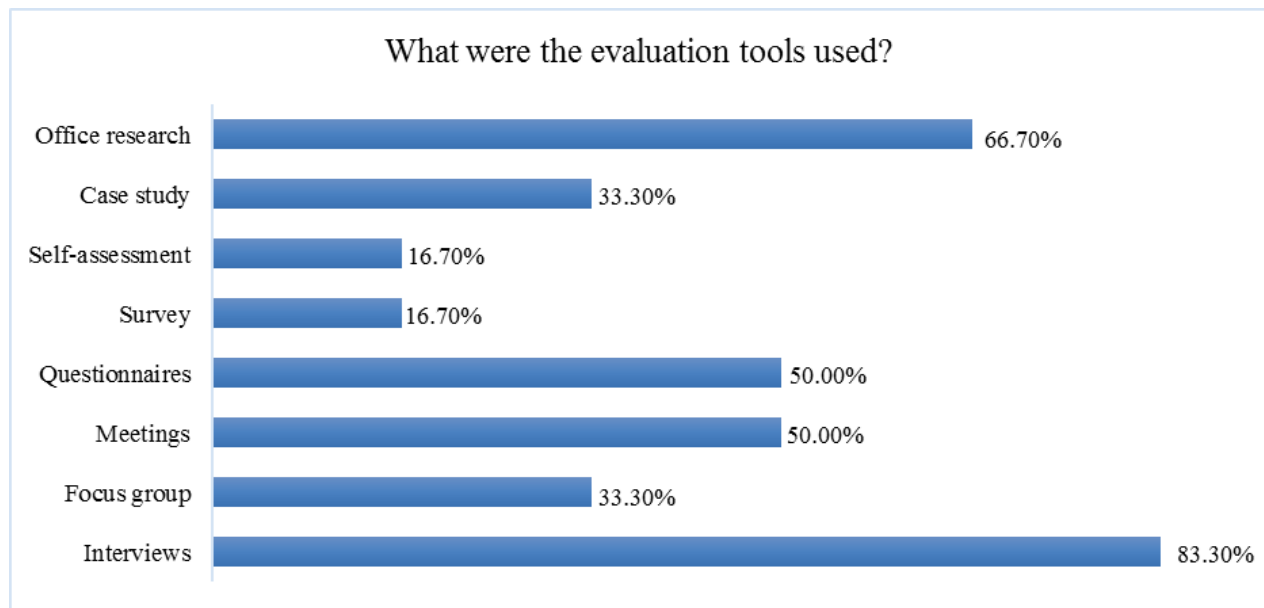

Fig. 4. Evaluation tools

Based on the answers received from the respondents participating in the survey, the following list of advantages and disadvantages of remote evaluation was prepared:

Tabel 1. Advantages and disadvantages of remote evaluation

Advantages	Disadvantages
The evaluation process is faster**.**	Decreased quality of interview data, as it is more difficult to build a relationship with the interviewee, to explore sensitive topics, or the option of discrete observation of projects, of inductive on-site analysis is lost.
Lower costs.	Standardised evaluation, without taking into account regional/country/field specifics.
Minimal effort on the part of the implementation team.	Lack of qualitative involvement of the target group due to low motivation to complete questionnaires, low participation in the self-assessment process, inadequate involvement in focus group discussions.
Attaching sources to verify the information reported (e.g., audio recordings, meeting/focus group recordings, processing of online materials).	Not all evaluators are able to apply digitised evaluation tools for qualitative remote evaluation. The information needs to be verified using more analysis methods compared to a conventional evaluation.
Involving all beneficiaries in the process by using digital tools and securing anonymity	There may be people who cannot easily access digital platforms.

(e.g., online questionnaires, individual interviews, self-assessment).	
Is less likely to face language barriers.	Difficulty in understanding some questions or limitation in giving predetermined answers. Digitisation of evaluation forms does not always offer flexibility in this respect.

Below are some of the opinions of participants in the survey on the evaluation of remotely evaluated projects:

- *"Remote evaluation is a very good alternative as it involves stakeholders in the process by means of multiple digital tools."*
- *"It would be important to involve both international and national experts in the evaluation process in order to take into consideration the local context."*
- *"We came to realise that the remotely organised evaluation process significantly eases the work of the project team and shortens the completion time."*
- *"Unfortunately, there are no purely mathematical algorithms to pass the evaluation process one hundred percent remotely. I believe that certain details which might be important could be omitted due to the lack of field phase. The hybrid method would be more easily accepted by project managers, because in an evaluation process it is not about audit or verification, but a process to learn from."*
- *"Given the modest level of evaluators' preparedness for this online transition, we noticed that the team of evaluators focused more on the positive parts of project implementation and did not give much emphasis to things that needed improvement. After all, people often learn from failures and lessons learned."*
- *"When completing questionnaires there is not always a flexibility to provide more detailed information. All materials used in the evaluation process need to be coordinated with the project team in advance."*

Conclusion

However important it is, the evaluation of a distance learning project is not an easy task, requiring professionally trained human resources, a common vision of the evaluation process, flexibility on the part of all parties involved and maximum engagement throughout the process.

A basic condition in ensuring the quality of remote project evaluation is the evaluator's proficiency. The evaluator should take into account the following principles: *professionalism, ethics and integrity, clarity, confidentiality, independence, reporting and usability.*

- *Professionalism*: In designing, conducting and managing evaluation activities, the evaluator must possess key evaluation competencies. The evaluator must be professionally qualified and have relevant educational experience and professional training. The evaluator must have specific technical knowledge and be familiar with the methodology or approach required for a given evaluation to be carried out, as well as certain managerial and personal skills. The evaluator is responsible for their performance and the quality of the delivered product.

- *Ethics and integrity*: The evaluation must be organised in such a way as to ensure transparency in the work and in accordance with specific laws, regulations, rules and policies, thereby ensuring fair treatment.
- *Clarity*: The information submitted by the evaluator must include a clear description of the evaluation planning process and methods used to carry it out. The purpose and context of evaluation, resources required for evaluation (financial, technical and personnel related) must be specified and made known to all those involved in the evaluation procedure.
- *Confidentiality*: The evaluator must protect the identity and confidentiality of the individual persons providing the information. The evaluation must be designed and conducted in such a way as to protect the dignity and rights of all stakeholders. All those involved in the evaluation process must take responsibility for contributing to a successful outcome.
- *Independence*: The evaluator must be independent of the implementing/funding authority and selected through a competitive process. Value judgements should be made without emotional involvement to the greatest extent possible. The evaluator's position must be neutral from a political, religious and other point of view.
- *Reporting*: The evaluation report should be logically structured, contain conclusions, lessons learned and clear and well-founded recommendations, without information that is not relevant to the overall analysis. Similar to the whole evaluation process, the evaluation report should highlight the impartial position of the expert. Conclusions should be explicitly justified so that stakeholders can analyse them and subsequently apply them in practice.
- *Usability*: Evaluation should be planned, conducted and reported in such a way as to encourage close follow-up on and use of evaluation results by stakeholders. The project management unit is responsible for the use of evaluation results and implementation of measures following the recommendations of the evaluation expert. Evaluation must be taken into account in the planning, design, implementation and monitoring of projects, as well as in the development of objectives and indicator systems.

Finally, the results of the evaluation must be owned both by the evaluated institution (for initiating/continuing/reorienting development procedures) and by the evaluator (for improving methodology and evaluation tools, and for substantiating development policies and strategies).

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