

Strengthening Evaluation Practice: Supporting Evaluation Across the Thematic Areas of Bulgaria's Programme "Education"

Overview

This document presents a summary of the OECD's report on strengthening evaluation practice across the thematic areas of Bulgaria's Programme "Education" 2021-2027. The report aims to help strengthen evaluation thinking and practice so that evidence can be generated and used more effectively to inform implementation and support long-term impact. It builds on the monitoring and operational systems already in place to offer a menu of measures that could help actors across the system understand how and why change is expected to occur. The overall aim is not to add unnecessary complexity, but to help ensure that monitoring and evaluation contribute more directly to quality, learning and impact across Programme "Education".

The report was developed as part of a multi-year cooperation between the Executive Agency "Programme Education" (hereafter, Executive Agency), the Ministry of Education and Science and the OECD to support the evaluation of Programme "Education". The analysis draws on document review, interviews with system-level actors and international examples of evaluating education and skills interventions in other European countries.

Evaluation Thinking and Evaluation Practice

Bulgaria's existing evaluation framework for Programme "Education" is designed according to the requirements of Regulation 2021/1060 to ensure effective monitoring, reporting and evaluation of programme performance. It provides important information on how funds are spent and on the scale of activities, such as the number of teachers trained, or students reached.

However, meeting these process targets does not guarantee that deeper educational goals are being achieved. Are interventions under Programme "Education" helping more children attend pre-school, reducing early school leaving, supporting the integration of marginalised learners and improving students' learning outcomes and employability? Strengthening evaluation thinking and practice can help Bulgaria focus on these questions and work towards the ultimate target of improving young people's lives.

Evaluation thinking complements existing monitoring by encouraging all actors to ask the following simple but powerful questions from the very beginning of a project or operation:

- What specific changes do we want to see for learners, teachers or institutions?
- Through which mechanisms do we expect these changes to occur?
- Under which conditions is the intervention likely to work, and for whom?
- What information will we need and when, to see whether we are on the right path and to correct course if needed?

Establishing the importance of these questions early helps to direct attention beyond the direct inputs and outputs of activities towards mechanisms of change and their outcomes. In Bulgaria, some existing results indicators already point in this direction (e.g. the number of students with improved educational results one year after participation in an operation); these outcome-oriented elements can be further strengthened.

Evaluation practice refers to the systematic and objective assessment of education policies, programmes and projects, including their design, implementation and results. Effective monitoring, evaluation and learning helps ensure that resources reach the intended target groups, that funded activities are implemented at high quality, and that they contribute to better and more equitable outcomes. It provides:

- Stronger understanding of how target groups experience interventions.
- Early signals when measures are ineffective.
- Learning about what works in different contexts.
- A basis for transparent reporting to national stakeholders and the European Commission.

Key findings

The report identifies three broad challenges for evaluation thinking and practice in Bulgaria.

1. Programme “Education” has clear objectives and a well-established monitoring system. However, **the expected causal links between activities, mechanisms and outcomes are not always made explicit**. Making these links clearer can strengthen shared understanding and support more strategic use of evidence.
2. The Executive Agency has taken meaningful steps to strengthen monitoring and reporting. It has introduced monitoring questionnaires for most procedures, asking beneficiaries to report on progress towards policy goals. It has also taken important steps to simplify financial control. However, across interviews carried out for this report, there was a broad consensus that **monitoring and reporting focus mainly on compliance**. There is therefore scope to strengthen the ways in which they can better generate learning during implementation by creating more space for beneficiaries to reflect on what is contributing to change, for whom, and under what conditions.
3. Much of the information used in monitoring comes from beneficiaries’ own reporting. However, many of the outcomes that matter for Programme “Education” (e.g. students’ performance in national assessments, completion and dropout rates over several years, or graduates’ employment status and earnings) may not be directly visible to beneficiaries and are more typically recorded in national administrative systems. **Although Bulgaria has rich administrative data, access and linkage limitations can make it difficult to use it** to track outcomes for wider cohorts or to construct suitable comparison groups. Addressing these limitations could strengthen the system’s capacity to understand results.

Lessons and recommendations

With these three challenges in mind, the report offers a menu or toolbox of measures that the Executive Agency and beneficiaries can draw on to further strengthen evaluation thinking and practice over time. The aim is not to prescribe a single model, but to provide options that can be considered, adapted, tested and refined incrementally as Programme “Education” evolves and in future programmes.

The key lessons and recommendations of the report are:

1. **Strengthening the use of theories of change can help ensure a clear and shared understanding of how activities are expected to contribute to change:** Developing more explicit shared theories of change at procedure and beneficiary or project level would help clarify how particular activities are expected to influence outcomes, through which mechanisms, and what organisational, implementation, logistical or policy conditions need to hold for this to happen. This can also guide the choice of monitoring indicators.

Providing templates, examples, capacity building workshops and regular reviews of theories of change could help to make them more useful as a tool for day-to-day planning and monitoring.

2. **Supporting all actors to reflect on what is working and not working throughout implementation can strengthen learning and make delivery more adaptive:** A stronger focus on evaluation thinking throughout the programme cycle can help beneficiaries and the Executive Agency use data to understand mechanisms, identify bottlenecks early and adjust rather than relying solely on compliance reporting or external evaluators.

Providing practical supports - such as indicator guidance, peer exchange or coaching opportunities - can help beneficiaries make sense of their own monitoring data and understand more about what works in their contexts.

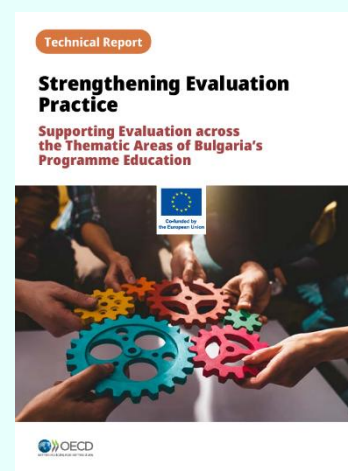
3. **Using theories of change to continue to improve indicators can make progress easier to assess and interpret:** Starting with a clear theory of change can help identify indicators for outputs, intermediate changes and final outcomes. Where possible, tracking outcomes for wider cohorts, rather than only for participants, can provide a more credible picture of programme effects and reduce confounding from participant selection. Supporting beneficiaries to link these indicators to the intervention logic can help them focus on mechanisms and early signals of change.

4. **Designing indicators with data sources and access in mind from the outset can make monitoring more informative and efficient:** Including a short “data access plan” in indicator descriptions – clarifying what data are needed, who holds them, and how they can be accessed – can prevent ad hoc requests later and ensure outcome indicators are actually measurable in practice.

5. **Strengthening system-level data access and infrastructure to support more robust evaluation:** Bulgaria has substantial administrative data, but access, linkage and interoperability challenges limit their use for monitoring and evaluation. Improving data governance and enabling secure, lawful access to linked datasets would expand the scope for tracking learner trajectories and conducting rigorous analysis.

6. **Designing some procedures with evaluation in mind can create opportunities for feasible, low-burden experimental or quasi-experimental impact assessments:** Where appropriate, implementation features such as phased rollout, capacity constraints or threshold eligibility criteria can facilitate credible comparisons without disrupting delivery. The EA and Ministry could consider planning for these options early in the design of programmes and procedures to help make them ethically and operationally feasible, for both internal and independent evaluators.

Further information



This summary is based on findings published in OECD (2026), *Strengthening Evaluation Practice: Supporting Evaluation across the Thematic Areas of Bulgaria's Programme Education*. The full report is available via the QR code below and at <https://doi.org/10.1787/c553589a-en>.

The report is an output of the OECD's evaluation support under the Agreement on multi-year support for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan of Programme "Education" 2021-2027 with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Executive Agency "Programme Education" and the OECD. Under this agreement, the OECD will conduct a series of interim and final evaluations of initiatives in five key thematic areas: 1) inclusive education, 2) integration of marginalised communities, 3) digitalisation and competency-based education, 4) vocational education and training, and 5) higher education. Further ad hoc reports respond to identified needs and aim to support

learning to enhance implementation.

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