EVIDENCE COACHING HANDBOOK

A guide to nurturing evidence-led EdTech entrepreneurs

EdTech Hub

About EdTech Hub

EdTech Hub is a global research partnership. Our goal is to empower people by giving them the evidence they need to make decisions about technology in education. Our evidence library is a repository of our latest research, findings, and wider literature on EdTech. As a global partnership, we seek to make our evidence available and accessible to those who are looking for EdTech solutions worldwide.

As part of that mission, we have run a Course for EdTech entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa, to build an understanding and approach to harnessing evidence as they develop and scale their products. Between 2022-24, the Course supported 94 entrepreneurs in 5 cohorts. EdTech Hub is supported by UKAid, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jacobs Foundation, World Bank, and UNICEF. This work was delivered in collaboration with the Jacobs Foundation and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The views in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of these organisations. To find out more about us, go to edtechhub.org/. Our evidence library can be found at docs.edtechhub.org/lib/.

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What's inside

About the Handbook

This handbook captures our approach to providing **evidence coaching** on the EdTech Hub Evidence-Led Entrepreneurship Course.

Who can provide evidence coaching to entrepreneurs?

- Individuals and organisations who support EdTech entrepreneurs to scale their products impactfully (e.g., accelerators, entrepreneurship programmes, funders).
- Anyone working within an EdTech startup, who wants to better apply evidence to key decisions.

By sharing EdTech Hub's approach and process for evidence coaching, we hope to nurture a more evidence-led EdTech entrepreneurship ecosystem, leading to more EdTech products that scale sustainably, and help children to read, write, and count.

The Handbook contains EdTech Hub's five-step process for generating and applying evidence as a startup, with specific tools we used along the way. The process is a guide for others to adapt and tailor to their unique context and challenges.

MORE COURSE RESOURCES

- [All course content: evidence on foundational literacy and numeracy, product development, and scaling EdTech startups.]
- [The cohort-based learning handbook.]

What is an evidence coach?

An evidence coach bridges the gap between evidence and entrepreneurs, by supporting EdTech startup teams with applying evidence as they iterate and scale.

An evidence coach applies evidence at three levels:

- Tailoring the global evidence base to a startup's product and organisation.
- Working with startup teams to make sense of evidence specific to their country and education system.
- Supporting startup teams to generate and make sense of their own organisation's data and evidence.

By working across these three levels, **an evidence coach can ensure startup teams make evidence-led decisions, and seed an evidence-led culture in the startup as it grows.**

Why do we believe an evidence-led culture is important for EdTech startups?

An evidence-led culture can potentially:

- Save startups from 're-learning' lessons others have already learnt, saving themselves time, money, and pivots. This ensures startups make the most of their runway!
- Ensure startups make more informed decisions regarding their product.
- Give startups the means to demonstrate their potential for impact and scale to funders, customers, and users. All stakeholders — including governments, investors, and donors — will want to see the evidence that underpins a startup's product and approach. So too will parents, teachers, and school leaders!

EdTech Hub’s approach to evidence coaching

EdTech Hub targeted growth-stage startups based in sub-Saharan Africa for evidence coaching.

We defined this as startups with a functioning product out in the market, 5+ employees, and at least one successful funding raise.

We believed growth-stage startups were especially suited to evidence coaching because:

- They have more specific challenges, and require tailored evidence to meet them. By contrast, earlier stage startups, which are still developing their core idea, can benefit from access to less tailored evidence content.
- They are generating large amounts of evidence, as their product is out in the market.

Although EdTech Hub worked with growth-stage entrepreneurs, **evidence coaching can be valuable for EdTech startups at any stage in their journey.**

"Thanks to my coach's help, I went to the field, collected data, and tried to be as scientific as possible. I presented this data to my Minister of Education, and separately, got my first grant to pilot a new business model."

— Course participant

How we undertook evidence coaching on the course

Evidence coaching was offered to a subset of growth-stage startups on the course. These startups were assigned a dedicated evidence coach who worked with them over 12 weeks to apply evidence to a specific decision or challenge the startup was facing.

Each evidence coach worked with a startup for one day a week. In return, the startup also committed a day's time to generating and applying evidence, in line with the process.

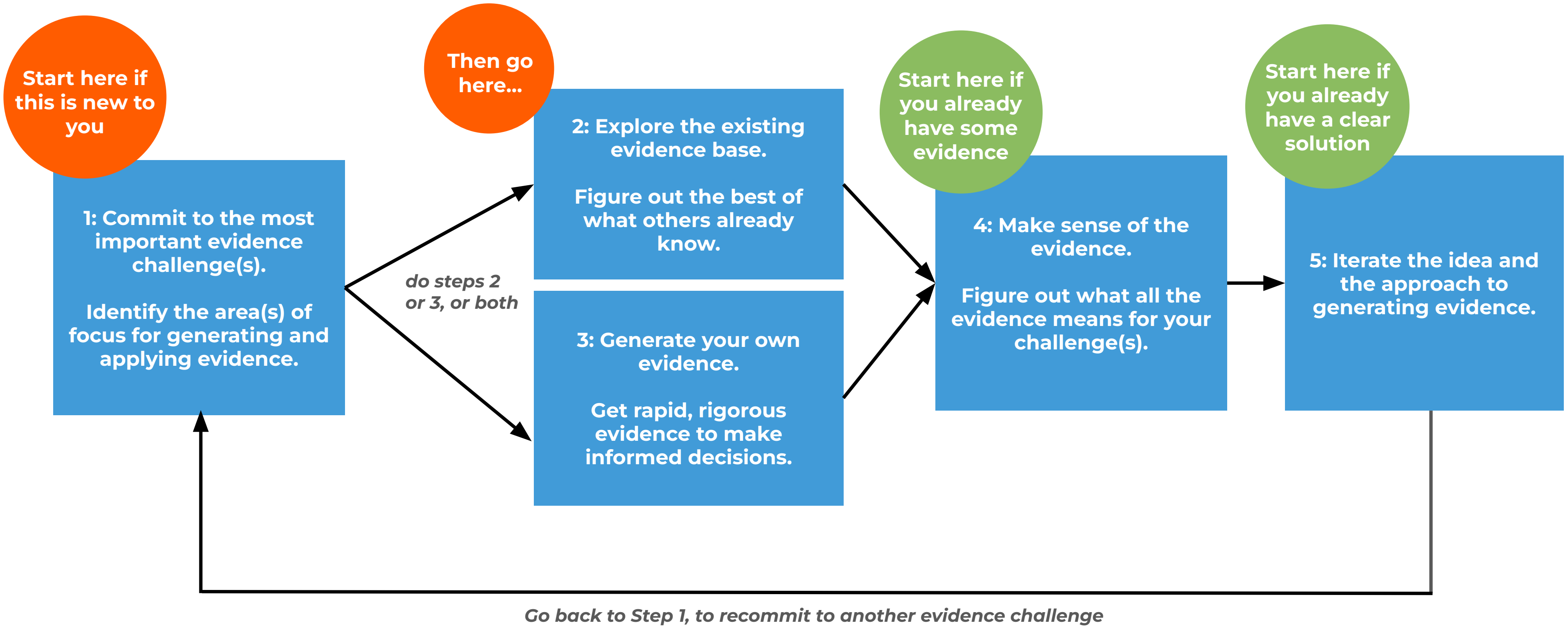
Each engagement adapted a five-step process with the startup:

1. **Commit** to the most important evidence challenge
2. **Explore** the existing evidence base
3. **Generate** your own evidence
4. **Make sense** of the evidence
5. **Iterate** the idea and the approach to generating evidence

Next, we zoom in on each step in turn, outlining the goals, approaches, and principles underpinning each one.

Zooming in on the five steps of evidence coaching

The five steps of evidence coaching provide a starting point for entrepreneurs and evidence coaches seeking to harness evidence. Take these and apply them to your own startup and context!



Six tips for being a good evidence coach

1 Spend some time getting to know the entrepreneur and their startup

EdTech Hub evidence coaches spent two weeks before the 12-week journey reading documents (e.g., pitch decks, product documentation, strategy documents) and informally speaking with different members of the startups. This shows evidence coaches’ curiosity, and builds the foundation for an evidence coach to become a trusted and informed partner.

2 Support the entrepreneur to understand the value of ‘evidence’

Evidence can help build a relationship with government, attract funding, and ensure impact in line with a startup’s mission. These principles highlight the benefits of being evidence-led!

3 Acknowledge and build on existing evidence and processes in the startup

All startups will have some emergent evidence, through conversations, latent knowledge about users and context, and initial data. Building on existing practice and knowledge will be easier and more heartening for entrepreneurs, demonstrating that what they have done so far is valuable.

4 Build flexibility into the process:

The process outlined above is not a straitjacket. Although the evidence challenge identified at the beginning of the journey should be important enough to retain the entrepreneurs’ focus, startups, by their nature, have constantly shifting priorities. Check in regularly with an entrepreneur, listen deeply, identify their evolving needs, and try to inject an evidence-led approach.

5 Focus on bringing evidence to key challenges, whatever they might be

An evidence challenge could relate to any part of the system of factors needed to scale impactfully. It might refer to the business model, product features, relationship to government, user acceptability, and so on. Whatever the domain, an evidence coach can bring the lens of generating and applying evidence, to inform evidence-led decision-making.

6 Stay rooted in the entrepreneur’s context:

Always look to root evidence in the entrepreneur's context. For example, if you use global evidence, explain straight away how these relate to their context. Or when planning to generate evidence, reflect on how those activities can fit into an entrepreneur’s existing product / service or organisational capabilities.

Evidence coaching

THE FIVE BASIC STEPS

The rest of this guide zooms in on each of the five recommended steps for evidence coaching, with suggested tools to help you work through them.

Step 1: Commit to the most important evidence challenge(s)

🎯 In this step, we explore the system of factors needed for an EdTech startup to scale their products impactfully, and identify the most catalytic challenges to focus the evidence coaching journey.

Examples of evidence challenges:

“How might we upgrade the e-literacy platform, to make it more engaging for users?”

“How might we best engage teachers and address their concerns about AHA Kit?”

“How might we package, share and get revenue from the data / evidence we generate through the elearning platform?”

Check out our recommended tool on the next slide to co-create an evidence challenge with an entrepreneur

🔑 Key principles

A narrower focus makes it easier to apply and generate evidence: Working across all aspects of the startup in 12 weeks will make it difficult to generate, grapple with, and apply evidence to a decision. By focusing on one challenge, we can create a ‘template’ process to apply to other challenges later on.

Think through the whole system: There’s an entire system of factors for startups to consider if they are to scale their products impactfully. EdTech Hub uses the ‘6 Ps’ as a shorthand for the education system: people, product, pedagogy, policy, place, and provisions. An evidence challenge can focus on any one of these factors. See the (**↑‘6Ps’ audit tool**) for more details.

Leave space for ad-hoc support: Startups will always face new challenges and opportunities where applying and generating evidence can help. Evidence coaching should combine a sustained focus on one challenge, with the flexibility to apply these approaches to new challenges as they arise.

Start with ‘how might we’: Borrowed from innovation approaches, ‘how might we’ statements are open-ended and encourage a range of ideas and possibilities. Starting an evidence challenge with ‘how might we’ emphasises that the answer will be evidence-based, rather than relying on unvalidated assumptions.

The tool in a nutshell

A two-hour session with the evidence coach and startup to identify and commit to the evidence challenge.

The session follows a diverge-converge process, encouraging startup teams to think expansively through all challenges, and then prioritise the three most important.

It ends with a Commitment Charter, for the evidence coach and a member of the startup team to sign. This signals a commitment to working together to tackle the challenge over 12 weeks.

Tool for co-creating an evidence challenge

GET THE TOOL

Steps to adapt

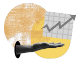
1. **Get started:** Introduce the 6 Ps to emphasise how generating and applying evidence needs to happen across a system of factors.

2. **Identify areas of focus:** For each of the 6 Ps, invite the startup team to reflect on key decisions and areas of uncertainty. Examples are provided for each 'P' in the tool itself.

3. **Encourage the startup team to be specific.** Rather than general statements (e.g., 'how can we improve our platform'), challenge them to identify precise details (e.g., 'how can we improve engagement from early primary-age children with our e-literacy platform?')

4. **Prioritise:** Introduce the impact-uncertainty framework as a way to prioritise the decisions and areas of uncertainty. A good evidence challenge is an area where the decision or solution is very unclear (high uncertainty), and that could have a big impact on the startup's ability to scale their products or services impactfully (high impact). Identify up to three high-uncertainty, high-impact decisions or focus areas.

5. **Commit:** The Commitment Charter ensures the evidence coach and the startup signal their intention to be fully engaged throughout the 12 weeks, to make progress on the evidence challenges



MORE TOOLS FOR YOU TO TRY

Crafting an evidence journey: A tool to co-design a 12-week evidence journey timeline, based on a specific evidence challenge.

*“**The timing was perfect — just as we were rebuilding our platform. The biggest paradigm shift for me has been looking at the data in our system, and how to use it.**” — Course participant*

Step 2: Explore the existing evidence base

🎯 **In this step, we mobilise existing evidence and insights on our evidence challenge.**

This stops us from 'starting from scratch', and makes sure we take into account what others already know about a particular question.

Start here to gather evidence and insights:

- EdTech Hub's Evidence Library
- EdTech Hub Evidence for Entrepreneurs Course
- Use SpringerLink and Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (Base) for open access academic texts
- FLN (foundational literacy and numeracy) Hub's Evidence Menu (a collaboration between UNICEF, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab research centre known as J-PAL, and the NGO Pratham)

See Slide 23 for full URLs of links given above.

🔑 Key principles

Some evidence is better than none: It is likely that the evidence and insights found won't perfectly or rigorously 'answer' our evidence challenge. They may provide signals, or gesture at loosely defined paths to take, or spark ideas — all of which are useful contributions.

Adapt from principles: Identify the first principles underpinning the evidence. For example, we worked with a startup trying to understand whether it could build a data-consulting revenue stream. It uncovered a survey of 300+ development partners and governments that suggests qualitative analysis is valued more than quantitative analysis (↑**Masaki et al., 2017**). The startup realised the principle that pure, quantitative data might not be enough, and started to test mixed-methods research consulting.

Think of non-conventional places to find insights: Evidence, particularly evidence on learning outcomes, can come from academic papers and reports. Evidence on EdTech revenue models is more likely to exist in blogs and entrepreneur forums. Evidence on country-specific factors is likely to be found in government documentation.

Step 3: Generate your own evidence

🎯 **In this step, we encourage startups to generate rapid, rigorous evidence on their evidence challenge.**

This may involve tweaking an existing process to gather good-quality data (e.g., adding some questions to existing user onboarding processes), or designing a data-collection protocol that tries to obtain the most high-quality evidence, with the least time and money.

Check out our recommended tool on the next slide for a quick way to test an idea.

🔑 Key principles

Balancing rigour and cost: Startups do not have the luxury of designing high-cost, high-rigour research studies. However, it is important they generate *some* evidence on key challenges. As an evidence coach, work out how they can balance rigour and cost effectively.

Real-world evidence: While seeking insights from the global and national evidence base is a good starting point, these insights have to be validated by a startup with its own users and stakeholders, in context.

The tool in a nutshell

A 45-minute interview with a key stakeholder or user of your product. It borrows from innovation and product development approaches.

Proposition testing is a structured way to test a new product or feature, getting robust and actionable evidence.

This is most appropriate when an evidence challenge is focused on acceptability, engagement, or willingness to pay for a product, new feature or service.

Tool for creating a proposition testing deck

GET THE TOOL

Steps to adapt

1. **User story:** Prior to the conversation, complete a user story for the person you are speaking to. This should outline who they are, their short-term aim, and long-term goal. Begin the conversation by asking the interviewee to validate this user story.

2. **Understand current user behaviour:** Ask the interviewee how they currently achieve the short-term aim and long-term goal.

   Asking about current and past behaviour roots the conversation in the ‘real world’ of the interview, rather than a hypothetical future. It also reveals potential competing products or approaches that users and stakeholders use today.

3. **Co-design an ‘ideal’ version:** Design multiple interactive questions and invite the interviewee to move the circles to represent the version of a product, service, or feature they most resonate with. These questions should reflect the key decisions the startup is facing. This structure compels the interviewee to make a ‘decision’ with their answer.

4. **The ‘sign up’ moment:** After the interviewee has answered all questions, ask them if they would commit to an action, This might be ‘signing up’ to use the product, a commitment to paying for it, or something else.

Step 4: Make sense of the evidence

🎯 In this step, we support entrepreneurs to take evidence — whether generated by them, or others — and apply it to their challenge.

[Check out our recommended tool on the next slide for reflecting and acting on evidence.]

🔑 Key principles

Make space for being wrong: It is likely that the evidence invalidates some aspect of the evidence challenge. This is exactly why an evidence-led approach is valuable — it saves us time and money pursuing an idea that 'doesn't work'.

Build on others' ideas: This step is a great opportunity to harness multiple perspectives, either from within the startup or key advisors and stakeholders. A diverse group can bring multiple perspectives to the same evidence, helping us to understand it better and use it to make decisions.

Iterate the idea, and the approach to evidence: The evidence should support the startup in iterating its idea against the evidence challenge. It will also make clear what types of evidence were more or less actionable. This will help build a tighter process for being evidence-led in the future.

The tool in a nutshell

The Sprint Review is a tool used in EdTech Hub Sandboxes.

It offers a simple, structured set of questions for reflecting on the evidence:

Q1: What was the plan?

Q2: What did you do?

Q3: What did you learn?

Q4: How does this affect what you do next?

These questions could be tackled together in a two-hour workshop, or through shorter sessions and / or asynchronous work.

Tool for creating a ‘sprint’ review

GET THE TOOL

Steps to adapt

1 **Ensure everyone understands the story so far:** Ensure that everyone reflecting on the evidence understands the wider context and significance of the evidence challenge(s).

2 **Review how the evidence was identified or generated (Q1–2):** Detail how we applied the existing evidence base: What sources did we use? Is the context similar to our own? Is the evidence they present from real-world implementation and behaviour? Detail the evidence we generated: how did we learn? What are the limits of our evidence? Were we able to get the evidence we had planned?

3 **Review the evidence (Q3):** Synthesise and cluster the key findings from the evidence, focusing on repeated themes, and key insights that affect the evidence challenges.

Depending on the startup and team, they might prefer to do some of this prior to the session. For example, a smaller team could share clustered findings ahead of a workshop, with the session.

4 **Think about what next (Q4):** This might include:

- Creating or refining a hypothesis (see: Step 5).
- Understanding critical beliefs (see: Step 5).
- Coming up with further evidence generation activities (see: Steps 2–3).

Step 5: Iterate the idea and the approach to being evidence-led

🎯 In this step, we use what we have learnt up to now to take action. This action might be to develop and iterate ideas in response to the evidence challenge(s), or to reconsider our approach to generating and applying evidence.

Check out our recommended tools on the next slides for outlining hypotheses for further testing and understanding the remaining critical beliefs in your idea.

🔑 Key principles

Invest based on your level of confidence: As a result of generating and making sense of evidence, how much more certain are you about the way forward on the evidence challenge?

If a little more certain, then invest a little in the idea, and a lot in continuing to generate more rigorous and robust evidence. If the evidence has provided a great deal more certainty, then go ahead and invest more time and money in the idea.

The tool in a nutshell

A crisp way to capture evidence and use it to develop a solution. This solution might be a product, a product feature, a service, or a strategic decision regarding your organisation.

Tool for creating a hypothesis

Steps to adapt

1 **Understand the hypothesis structure:** A hypothesis statement consists of three parts, shown below with an example from a startup that received evidence coaching on the EdTech Hub Evidence-Led Entrepreneurship Course.

If we…	Then…	So that…
Insert the idea here. If it is a product or service, this normally includes a user and the thing they are engaging with.	Insert a measurable outcome here. This could be for the user, or for the startup.	Insert the impact of the idea. This should reflect the startup's overall mission.
E.g. *If we used our platform data to create free policy briefings for government with paid for additional features…*	E.g. *…then they would have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their education system…*	E.g. *…so that central and local government officials can prioritise education budgets to achieve equitable learning outcomes.*

2 **Develop hypotheses, using the evidence you have so far:** Based on what you know and have learnt, develop one or more hypothesis statements that capture your evidence idea.

The tool in a nutshell

An exercise to evaluate what we still don't know, in order to inform where we might want to generate evidence next.

Based on a current hypothesis, or idea about how to tackle the evidence challenge, this exercise compels you to write down everything that has to be true for that hypothesis or idea to 'work', considering a whole system of factors.

Then, you prioritise the most critical of those beliefs. These should then be the focus of future evidence activities.

Tool for understanding remaining critical beliefs

Steps to adapt

1 **Write down all beliefs, against the 6 Ps:** Write down all the things you believe to be true in your idea or hypothesis but which you don't yet have the evidence to validate. The best beliefs are specific in what they want to know. For example (the specific beliefs are shown in bold):

*We believe that **50% of the 47 county governments** in Kenya incorporate us in their **2023–28 budget cycle,** covering **all end-to-end costs** of onboarding, delivery and maintenance.*

Refer back to the ↑'6 Ps' audit tool (people, product, pedagogy, policy, place, payer) from co-creating the evidence challenge (Step 1). The belief above is regarding the payer — try to come up with beliefs against all aspects of the education system.

This process should give you a long list of around 15–20 beliefs.

2 **Prioritise beliefs:** Identify beliefs you think are most critical. As in Step 1 (co-creating the evidence challenge), this should be a belief that has a high impact on whether the idea or hypothesis 'works', and high uncertainty as to whether it is true.
Pick 1–3 of the most critical beliefs, and focus on applying and generating evidence against those beliefs.

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