Access and Widening Participation in College HE

Briefing Paper 4: Thinking about Evaluation

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Introduction

This is the fourth in a series of briefings on aspects of college higher education (HE) sponsored by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Action on Access. The briefings describe key concepts and models of practice and realistic ways to implement widening participation policies and practices. The briefings will be useful for all colleges that receive the HEFCE student support grant. The other guidance notes in this series of briefings examine:

1. Measures and indicators;
2. Student success and retention;
3. Evaluation

Context

Over the last few years widening participation has become an evidence-based practice for all providers regardless of their tuition fee levels. The continuation of the Student Opportunity Grant, a crucial income for many colleges, could be contingent on effective evaluation. OFFA and HEFCE have been urging institutions to sharpen their evaluation strategies and embed them consistently into planning in order to align institutional investment with demonstrable achievement and the recent Government Green Paper suggests that this is likely to continue to be the case. It is now not sufficient to rely on annual monitoring of performance against targets to chart institutional progress. Colleges and Universities are expected to develop a more nuanced account of the way their strategies and activities impact on learners to change behaviours and produce positive outcomes both at the level of the individual and the wider community.

OFFA’s guidance on evaluation is useful for all colleges regardless of whether they are required to produce an Access Agreement. It states:
A strong evidence base is crucial to making further progress. We encourage you to review your evaluation plans alongside the development of your access agreement, so that you have a strong rationale to inform your programmes and activities to improve access, student success and progression.¹

HEFCE recognises the challenges that evaluation sets for institutions along with the benefits² and has moved from offering guidance to developing a national outcomes framework which will support the Student Opportunity allocation.³

While there are national imperatives around evaluation for those institutions which qualify for access agreements and the Student Opportunity Fund, the benefits of evaluation are equally clear both at the level of national policy and the individual institution and should drive good practice per se. Essentially evaluation will identify what is working and what is not. It will facilitate targeted resource allocation, it will promote improvement through good intelligence (formative evaluation) and it will provide a retrospective analysis which shows distance travelled at the end of a project (summative evaluation). Why then if the benefits are so apparent do institutions struggle with evaluation as a practice?

The Challenge
To be successful, evaluation needs to be built into an activity or project from the outset. This means first of all deciding whether the project should be evaluated. The extent of evaluation should reflect the strategic significance of the activity and whether it is likely to yield rich evidence. Then decisions have to be made about what evidence will be collected, the timescales for delivery, the research questions which will be asked, the outcomes which will be anticipated, the intended audience for review and report. Finally resources and training should be allocated to the evaluation process and it should be articulated with the institutional planning cycle.⁴

Some programmes may have been started with monitoring but not evaluation, some may have been evaluated from the start but then radically changed or merged so that the data becomes inconsistent, some may have become embedded in general institutional practice and benefits for disadvantaged students cannot be disaggregated. Institutional ownership, resource allocation, staff development, good planning and consistent evidence are all vital for successful evaluation.

¹ How to Produce an Access Agreement 2015/16, Introduction, para 22
² Annex A Widening Participation Strategic Assessments: guidance on developing evaluative approaches to widening participation activities and commitments, circular letter 24/10
³ Two linked reports were published in July 2015: Student Opportunities outcomes framework research: in-depth study, and Data return project (CFE Research)
⁴ The HEA toolkit series on HE Outreach to Widen Participation for Practitioners includes an excellent paper on evaluation which addresses planning and a range of methodological approaches.
Monitoring or Evaluation?
Monitoring is essential in order to know whether targets are being met and funding spent as planned. It provides mainly quantitative outputs (as opposed to outcomes which involve wider impacts on learners and communities) and will answer questions like “did we recruit to target in terms of our widening participation cohort?” by counting how many students from POLAR 3 quintile 1 enrolled.\(^5\) It will not tell you why they came or how they responded to the programme. It is tempting to argue that because recruitment targets are being met then outreach activities must be successful but without evaluation of those activities such a conclusion is unfounded: your widening participation students may have come to you as a result of another institution's outreach, the socio-economic profile of your catchment area, your general marketing campaign, or pure chance.

Like monitoring evaluation tends to take place on an annual basis but unlike monitoring evaluation can provide via a focus on learner outcomes a nuanced picture of provision which will mature over time and will enable a critical response in terms of improvement measures. Evaluation of your outreach activities will tell you about the effectiveness of links between outreach and recruitment. Evaluation of learning and pastoral support facilities will demonstrate impact on retention, or careers advice and work placements on levels of employability. In the context of widening participation evaluation is less interested in numbers and more in the individual learner and the ways behaviour and attitudes are modified by interventions at all stages of the learner journey. This means that the information it returns is not merely about an activity but about the learners’ response to it. If evaluation identifies a low impact from activities or provision then it may also reveal why this is the case and adjustments can be made.

How to Approach Evaluation
Evaluation requires robust data, intelligent analysis and a certain amount of design.\(^6\) So the first question which needs to be asked is what provision do I want to evaluate and what do I want to know? You may have a new outreach programme for years 9-13 with a partner school, reorganised your community open evenings, run progression advice sessions for apprentices, or have recently redesigned your learner support services in order to improve student retention and success. These would be more likely candidates for evaluation than, say, an annual trip to the local university or college for Year 11 students, which, unless part of a larger programme should probably be just monitored for student satisfaction. Multifaceted projects frequently reflect high levels of investment and provide opportunity for rich findings about the outcomes of their operation.

The primary focus of evaluation is impact on students, on success and progression rates, on the institution, its partners, and the wider community. However, the evidence

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\(^5\) It is vital to have robust ways of identifying widening participation students. See briefing one on Measures and Indicators for an explanation of POLAR quintiles.

\(^6\) The Student Opportunities outcomes framework: in depth study argues for research methodologies such as controlled random testing and comparator studies as a gold standard but accepts that this is often not possible or appropriate and that qualitative or good enough data have their place in evaluation.
takes time to build and it is useful to have some way of categorising it. Kirkpatrick's Levels is a useful tool which divides impact into four areas of increasing complexity. The Levels are:

**Level 1 Reaction:** what was the learner experience of the activity?

**Level 2 Learning:** what was learnt? (For example, experiential learning from a visit to a university or college, factual learning from an IAG session on student finance, skills learning from a masterclass)

**Level 3 Behaviour:** has behaviour, attitude or perception been changed as a result of this intervention? (For example, are students more ready to learn as a result of a study skills support programme, more focused on their progression? And has this translated into improved progression and success rates?)

**Level 4 Results:** has the programme/activity/service/provision had an impact on the wider environment? (For example, has the outreach programme given the partner school more insight into the potential of borderline students? Or the study skills provision had some input into the college's approach to teaching and learning? Or the progression advice sessions improved rates of progression by apprentices to HE provision?)

Because the levels involve increasingly complex evidence which takes time to mature, the higher orders of impact will only become available over a period of years.

**Evaluation Plan**

It is helpful to formulate an evaluation plan which will identify what you hope to find out against time scales, what datasets, questionnaires and focus groups are required, who will receive the evaluation report, how it will feed into institutional or departmental planning and how it will be used to readjust the project for the following year. For colleges with a small HE provision this could be achieved by an annual WP meeting which analyses both monitoring returns and evaluation evidence and on the basis of this sets a WP plan for the following year including any changes to the evaluation process.

**Research Questions**

The most important question is whether the provision works; does it fulfil its objectives? But the answer to this question will only be determined by the answers to a number of intermediate questions. Some of those more quantitative answers will be provided by monitoring - how many students are on the outreach programme/use the learner
support provision and how many progress to HE/drop out. But, taking the outreach examples, we learn a lot more about the interaction between programme and learner in terms of evaluation outcomes by using the Kirkpatrick levels and asking such questions as:

- How did learners respond to elements of the activity/programme (Kirkpatrick 1)?
- What did learners gain from specific elements of the activity/programme? (K2)
- How have perceptions and/or behaviours been changed by the intervention/provision? (K3)
- Which elements of the intervention/programme do learners and teachers feel have been most successful in
  i. raising awareness of HE,
  ii. building confidence
  iii. encouraging a positive work ethic? (K3)
- How many learners accessing the outreach programme achieve GCSE results above predicted grades or school averages? Or how many apprentices accessing the advice sessions improved their performance? (K3)
- How many Year 11 outreach learners progress to Years 12 and 13 (in the partner school or other institution) compared with the rest of the school? Or how many outreach learners/apprentices progress to HE compared with the rest of the school/cohort? (K4)
- Is there any association between levels of participation in the programme and progression to HE/improved performance in GCES/A levels? (K4)

These questions (many of which can be flexed for other activities such as student retention and success) will show how the programme operates over time, how it raises awareness, changes behaviours, delivers better achievement and increases understanding of how tutors and learners react to different elements. The intelligence derived will answer the question about whether the provision is working with a rich diversity of evidence and introduce an element of comparison which strengthens its authority.

**Kinds of Evidence**

Evidence for evaluation can be both quantitative and qualitative and the two kinds work well together to provide a rounded picture. The questions above will require quantitative data to establish that outreach students firstly belong to the widening participation community as defined by national measures,⁷ secondly are performing above expectations and thirdly progress to HE. Data may also reveal a link between the scale of improvement and intensity of participation. This is vital evidence and it will take time to build. However, it is important to collect all evidence consistently from the first year even if it takes three years to establish a trend.

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⁷ See Access and Widening Participation in College HE Briefing Paper 1: Widening Participation Measures and Indicators, February 2015
But it is the qualitative evidence, achieved by questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews which will throw light on how this improved performance is achieved and may identify causal links or significant association between activity and outcome. Very often in complex programmes it is difficult to ascribe discrete causes to effects. However, with targeted questions students may, for example, reveal which interventions enthused and helped them and how that in turn gave them greater confidence and wider aspirations. Teachers may talk about the way the students have responded with greater punctuality, a better engagement with their studies in class and improved output in terms of homework and how that attitudinal change can be linked with their experience on the outreach programme on the one hand and improved grades and progression on the other. Equally they may indicate elements in the programme which are less successful, which need more time, better organisation or a different ordering. With large programmes it may be more practical to sample amongst the stakeholders.

**Timescales**
At the outset it is helpful to establish a baseline as far as possible on the preceding year’s performance in relation to the datasets you intend to use for future evaluation. This will enable you to see any changes or possible impacts over the first year though these should be treated with some caution until a trend is established. This takes time. Each year will be a milestone on the journey and it is important to keep key questions consistent from year to year.

**Data**
A general principle is that amassing large amounts of data can only lead to confusion if the data is not relevant to the evaluation questions. Consequently it is vital to identify at the outset what will be helpful and what not. Taking the example of a series of voluntary evening workshops for a group of advanced apprentices designed to encourage and support them to progress to HE provision the following data would be useful:

- All widening participation students involved in the scope of the evaluation defined by two consistent national measures of disadvantage both geographical and socio-economic (POLAR, IDACI, FSM, First in Family etc.)
- Number and/or type of events provided and attended by individual learners
- Predicted/actual outcomes/achievements for the cohort with any value added measures
- Progression rates to HE for the cohort
- Tracking data on final employment outcomes
- Drop-out rates for the cohort

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8 There is some useful work on questionnaire design and a range of templates in the Aimhigher Greater Merseyside evaluation Toolkit [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk)
9 Published evaluations of cognate provision could provide some perspective on the first year results.
10 AoC is currently in consultation with the HE Access Tracker (HEAT) service and HEFCE to ascertain how colleges can access this service and track students over time
Comparison of progression rates with advanced apprentices from widening participation backgrounds not attending workshops.

The comparative element is important in order to show that those attending the sessions are more likely to progress than those who do not. This also establishes the possible association between the intervention and the improvement which can then be investigated by qualitative means.

The same caution about redundancy should be extended to qualitative data. The learner’s journey is the focal point of evaluation so the quality of the student coffee bar is of far less importance in this context than whether they were better informed, enthused or made more confident by the outreach event they attended. Equally questions to lecturers, students and employers should focus on attitudinal change and the way in which it can be linked with the progression workshops, such as:

- Have students demonstrated any changes in: work ethic, punctuality, confidence levels, progression/career aspirations?
- How many students have achieved or progressed beyond or contrary to expectations?
- Can these changes/achievements be associated with the workshops? If so, which?
- Is intensity of participation a factor?
- What aspects of the programme should be strengthened/abandoned and why?

These questions should tell you whether the programme is changing attitudes and improving performance, whether the degree of participation in the programme can be identified with that improvement, and whether changes should be made to the programme based on perceptions of impact. However, it is important to look at the evidence over a period of years to ensure that the indications are sound.

Communicating the Outcomes
This is an important element in the process. Annual evaluation reports add to the institutional understanding of its widening participation work at strategic and operational levels and promote the development of an evidence based planning culture. They should be formally presented and incorporated into the planning process. At this point resources for the next year should be confirmed or adjusted. But some reports can also provide valuable insights for FEC partners in the community and should be disseminated to education leaders, the local authority and employer partners as appropriate. Aimhigher partnerships found that partners were much more likely to assist with evaluation if they shared in the outcomes and that the annual report was a place to thank contributors and celebrate collaboration.

The National Outcomes Framework
The Student Opportunity outcomes framework research and its sister project on data returns, commissioned by HEFCE, reported in July 2015. Both reports are pitched at national and sectoral levels and emphasise the paramount importance of robust
evaluation for reasons of accountability (justifying public spend on widening participation activities), establishing value, impact assessment (on the individual and society at large), benchmarking (identifying differences between institutions) and defining what works. The ambition behind the research was to identify the parameters for a national framework for institutional evaluation which could authenticate the benefits of student opportunity funding and inform government policy. The emphasis, therefore, is on robust research with Random Controlled Trials (RCTs) and the use of comparator groups as a gold standard. However it is recognised by both reports that, at the institutional level, there are significant problems with this level of approach and the data return project was cautious in the face of these to advocate any radical change to data returns.

Although much of the outcomes framework research is directed at the problem of making national evaluation coherent and rigorous, it allows that longitudinal studies and qualitative evidence have a valuable contribution to make and offers a practical evaluation model to institutions. The methodology proposed in the paper seeks to establish a causal relationship between inputs, resources, activities, outcomes and longer-term impacts both individual and societal. These logic chains are presented as a working model in relation to outreach, retention, student success and supporting disabled students and linked with examples of the kinds of evidence which would be relevant at each stage in each of the four key areas. In addition there is an indicator bank which lists relevant datasets, metrics and research questions. While it may be some time before such a framework is implemented it would be good practice to use as much of its proposed methodology as is feasible and appropriate.

**Reflective Questions**

1. Which of our widening participation projects merits full evaluation and why?
2. What do we want to find out?
3. Do we have enough capacity and resources at the right level?
4. How do we build this into the institutional/departmental plan?
5. How do we engage partners – schools, HEIs, other colleges, learners, parents/student unions, other departments, senior management?
6. How do we build evaluation into the annual work schedule?
7. How does this fit with annual monitoring?
8. What additional data do we need and how do we get it?
9. If the proposals for a national outcomes framework were adopted how would we respond?