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The epistemology of effectiveness: exploring the challenges of demonstrating impact from higher education outreach activities (0389)

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Abstract

There is increasing pressure on higher education providers in England to demonstrate the effectiveness of the outreach activities that they deliver to widen participation to groups that have historically been under-represented in the sector. In particular, providers are now expected to undertake rigorous evaluations of their outreach activities and to report these to a regulatory authority in the shape of the Office for Students. However, there are significant epistemological challenges that make it difficult to draw unambiguous conclusions about the effectiveness of activities that are delivered within a complex social field. This paper will explore some of the challenges that have been identified within a recent research project commissioned by the forerunning of the Office for Students and conclude by arguing that there is a need for care in the planning and interpretation of evaluative research in this field, with more focus needed on context, criticality and reflexivity.

Paper

This paper is derived from a project commissioned by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA, now the Office for Students) in late 2017 entitled 'Understanding the evaluation of outreach interventions for under 16 year olds'. Among the objectives set for the project was an assessment of the validity of the methodologies used by higher education providers (HEPs) to evaluate their outreach activities and it is on this component of the project that this paper will focus. The data underpinning this paper comprise an online qualitative survey of 116 HEPs (comprising 55 percent of the sector), four purposive case studies of HEPs showing good practice in outreach work and an extended focus group of twelve experienced practitioners and evaluators – full details can be found in Harrison *et al.* (forthcoming).

The contemporary challenge for English HEPs is a complex one. They have a statutory obligation to provide a portfolio of outreach activities to diversify their intake of students if they wish to charge tuition fees over a threshold level (currently £6,000) and most have a long history of doing so dating back to the 1990s. However, there has been growing concern from government about the slow pace of change despite an annual national expenditure of around £725 million (OFFA, 2017a). This has led to pressure on HEPs to not only provide outreach activities, but to demonstrate their effectiveness in increasing applications and admissions (OFFA, 2017b).

Young people take decisions about higher education within a complex social field. They are surrounded by diverse influences including teachers, their families and their peers, while their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) are constructed within the wider sociocultural context of the area in which they live. Elements of their personality and values interact to shape their beliefs about the future experiences they wish to have and the role of education within them, as well as the expectations they have (e.g. Khattab, 2015).

This paper will argue that the complexity of this field means that the measurement (in the broadest sense) and isolation of the impact of individual outreach activities is inherently problematic. This paper will explore four particular epistemological challenges in detail while outlining several others:

- The use of self-report data from young people themselves, which generally focuses on their perceptions of what they might do several years in the future with respect to a concept (i.e. higher education) about which they have relatively little knowledge. At present, HEPs are heavily reliant on these data in evaluating their outreach activities, but they may be of limited evidential value due to their susceptibility to cognitive biases such as the placebo, priming, social desirability and Dunning-Kruger effects.

- The use of 'aspirations' as a key metric for predicting young people's future behaviour with respect to higher education, as is currently the case in many HEPs. There is a growing literature (e.g. Croll and Attwood, 2013; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012) questioning the relationship between a young person's aspirations, their school attainment and their future propensity to participate in higher education. In other words, an outreach activity might be successful in raising aspirations, but this might not have any relationship with future participation.

- The targeting of activities and the difficulties in undertaking counterfactual analysis, especially over long time periods. A key tenet of outreach practice is the strong targeting of young people who are felt to be disadvantaged, but to have the potential to participate in higher education. The interaction between these elements makes it difficult to construct valid comparison groups to permit rigorous causal claims being made, risking a form of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton, 1948) clouding the analysis.

- The disentanglement of the effects of individual interventions and influences, with many young people involved in multiple activities – even spanning multiple HEPs. Indeed, the impact of outreach activities is likely to be significantly smaller than the day-to-day influences of the school, with the additional paradox that close partnership working with schools is often held to be essential while making the attribution of impact exponentially harder (Harrison and Waller, 2017).

This paper will conclude by arguing that there is a danger that HEPs may make false claims to knowledge arising from overly-simplistic conceptualisations of impact that do not pay close

attention to these epistemological challenges. They may assert that an activity has an impact on young people where it does not, but the converse is also possible; the paper will also caution against the common assumption that there are 'silver bullet' activities that are effective across all contexts. Instead, it will argue for reflexive practice among those charged with evaluating outreach activities, taking a contextualised and critical approach to understanding 'what works for whom and in what circumstances' (Pawson, 2006, p.25) and avoiding 'the ludicrous idea that evaluators and researchers are able to tell policy-makers and practitioners exactly what works in the world of policy interventions' (Pawson, 2006, p.170).

References

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