

N4.2 Caldicot Thursday 6 December 16.00-18.00

Building Rigour into Evaluation Design (0427)

Anna Mountford-Zimdars¹ *University of Exeter, United Kingdom*

Abstract

There is keen awareness of the significant amount of investment that goes into higher education outreach and student support. This has been rightly coupled with calls for justification and accountability of how these funds are spent. This is providing a great opportunity for practitioners working in widening participation and academics and other evaluation and methodological experts supporting them to *improve the rigour* in evaluation design. This can enhance our understanding of what works – and also what does not work, thus enhancing the evidence-base for practice and ultimately, improve outcomes for widening participation students.

Paper

This presentation will discuss the findings from an OfS commissioned project on developing guidance for the evaluation of outreach. The project is developing three outputs, a framework of evidencing evaluation, an institutional self-assessment toolkit and guidance to the Director of Fair Access on evaluating institutions' claims regarding the rigour and impact of their outreach. This project builds on previously completed work by the University of Warwick (Crawford et al. 2017). The current project is working with a range of university and third-sector parties. The initial aim was to gather examples of best, rigorous practice in evaluation. However, over time, the purpose slightly shifted towards simply describing what would be best practice and / or working with hypothetical scenarios. This in itself is a finding from the project as it shows that there is plenty of scope for the sector to further enhance their evaluation practices.

The previous work on outreach by Crawford et al (2017) recommended three categories of evaluation standards. The present project argues that these categories should be considered as 'types' rather than a hierarchical ordering of outreach evaluation – although confidence in findings increases as one moves up from Type 1 - Type3. The types are:

Type 1: the evaluation provides a narrative to motivate its selection of outreach activities in the context of a coherent outreach strategy

Type 2: the evaluation collects data on impact and reports evidence that those receiving an intervention have better outcomes, though this does not establish any direct causal effect

Type 3: the evaluation methodology provides evidence of a causal effect of an intervention

A theory of change is required to underpin outreach work. It is possible to develop rigorous change models and entire frameworks for planning activities, as it has, for example, been done by the University of Bath or Brightside (Hayton and Begry-How 2016, Brightside 2018).

However, once a theory of change is in place, it is most important to use the appropriate and proportionate evaluation method for an intervention. For example, evaluation needs to bear resemblance to the scale and desired impact of activities: the evaluation required for a one-off activity with primary school children and the evaluation of a high-intensity one-week long residential summer school are reasonably expected to have different evaluation strategies attached to them.

Rigour does not rest in a particular choice of method, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods can be used in a rigorous or less rigorous way. Also, Type 3 evaluations are not inherently 'better' than Type 2 evaluations. Again, rigour depends on the grounding in a theory of change, the choice of methods and their execution.

The presentation will discuss some common outreach initiatives (e.g. summer schools, mentoring, one-off activities) and common evaluation practices (experience surveys) and pitfalls and highlight how typical evaluations can be made more rigorous. One example would be enhancing evaluation by collecting individual-level data pre-during-and post an initiative rather than aggregate data.

The discussion will invite participants to consider the role of outreach and outreach evaluation in UK higher education in the context of continuing – and indeed, deepening - inequalities in wider society.

References

Brightside (2018) Theory of Change, available at <http://brightside.org.uk/what-we-do/theory-of-change/>

Hayton, A and Begry-How, A (2016), Theory, evaluation, and practice in widening participation: A framework approach to assessing impact, London Review of Education, 14 (3), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE>