"You've got to prove your worth maybe in a way which, you know, universities traditionally didn't quite need to". Evaluating widening participation interventions for cohorts of young people pre-16. (0428)

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Policy interest in the evaluation of HE-delivered widening participation activities has grown over the last 15 years (Dytham and Hughes 2017; Harrison and Waller 2016; Harrison and Waller 2017; OFFA 2013). Most HEPs have tended to prioritise evaluation of activities for post-16 cohorts. Recent research stressing the importance of early intervention, however, has encouraged interest in outreach for pre-16 young people (Chowdry et al 2012; Crawford et al 2017; Gorard et al 2012). Although the evaluation of general WP outreach is viewed by practitioners and researchers as presenting a number of methodological challenges (Crawford et al 2017; Gorard and Smith 2006; Hayton and Stevenson 2018; Harrison and McCaig 2017; Harrison and Waller 2016; Torgerson et al 2015), recent findings suggest that practitioners view the evaluation of pre-16 outreach evaluation as throwing up additional logistical and epistemological challenges (Harrison et al *forthcoming*). In 2017, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) commissioned research into the delivery and evaluation of outreach targeted specifically at this younger cohort.

The overarching project was underpinned by a mixed method approach, including documentary analysis / a sector-wide survey / case studies / and interviews with key stakeholders. This paper focuses specifically on research into how Higher Education Providers (HEPs) and Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) design, deliver and evaluate this work, with a particular focus on organisations from both parts of the sector, exhibiting well-developed approaches.

Method

Via purposive sampling, four HEPs (out of 116 responses to an online survey) were selected on the basis of reporting substantial volumes of pre-16 outreach activity and stronger evaluation practices, with care taken to ensure a mix of institution types and regions. Case studies were subsequently constructed from i) telephone interviews with key staff, ii) responses to the sector-wide survey, iii) analysis of Access Agreement data and iv) documentary evidence, such as evaluation reports or tools.

Third Sector Organisations were selected via convenience and purposive sampling to represent organisations of different sizes and focus. We undertook semi-structured telephone interviews with relevant staff in eleven organisations, and, for the purposes of this paper, selected four regarded as having 'highly developed' evaluation approaches. Interview transcripts were coded in Nvivo via a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

We also held a participatory workshop, comprising representatives from participating HEPs and TSOs, to test and sense check the emerging findings.

Outcomes

Focusing on two different parts of the HE sector enabled us to compare and contrast their approaches and explore the pressures and drivers unique to each, and their impact on the intervention and evaluation practices each adopted.

The nature of activities varied significantly between the two parts of the sector; HEPs delivered a broad range of outreach activities (campus visits, mentoring and tutoring, summer schools and interventions designed to increase academic capital and/or attainment). Two of the case study institutions also offered some participants sustained engagement in longitudinal programmes. On the other hand, TSOs tended to specialise in narrower and well-defined activity provision, with interventions taking place over a short timeframe, with few opportunities to work with the same participants over a longer duration.

Different interventions types engendered different evaluation approaches. HEPs tended to evaluate on an activity-by-activity basis and, except for longitudinal programmes, not to take a holistic view of cumulative impact at institutional level. They also drew on a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. HEP evaluators tended to focus primarily on deferred progression to HE outcomes and put less emphasis on evaluating meso- or micro- level impacts.

TSOs were much clearer about objectives and methodologies underpinning both activities and evaluations. They were more likely to draw on a well-developed theory of change and use psychological constructs such as 'growth mindset' or 'self-efficacy' to structure intervention objectives and measures. They also tended to evaluate against intermediate development steps rather than high-level outcomes. TSOs also expressed a preference for quantitative outcomes, viewing them as more robust than qualitative data. This was driven in part by a clear use-case for evaluation outcomes in formative and summative reflection at organisational and delivery levels.

Both HEPs and TSOs tended to rely on questionnaire-based pre/post evaluation design as their primary approach, usually focusing on the need to capture attitudinal / perceptual changes occurring for individual participants. HEPs tended to formulate their own questionnaire prompts on the basis of common-sense assumptions, but rarely sought out validated assessment tools. In contrast, TSO questionnaire design was more likely to be rooted in a theory of change. Measures or prompts were often derived from existing and validated tools and often related to the psychological constructs being used (e.g. self-efficacy).

Evaluation cultures tended to be more fragile in HEPs, with evaluation sometimes driven by individual members of staff in a context of high staff turnover. In contrast, TSOs reported that evaluation underpinned organisational culture from the top down and evaluation teams were often well-resourced. They also often ensured there was a close two-way feedback loop between evaluation and delivery activities. TSOs played down suggestions that evaluation was primarily conducted for potential funders, arguing that it was more important as a formative and reflexive organisational activity.

Nonetheless, the research revealed a number of 'blind-spots' in sector-wide approaches to evaluation; organisations were uneasy about relying on participants' self-reported data, but were generally pragmatic in their approach, perceiving a lack of accessible alternatives. There was a general failure to acknowledge the methodological pitfalls of self-reported data; only one institution acknowledged the risk of priming effects, for example, and none mentioned the Dunning-Kuger effect or similar biases.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding different organisational structures and objectives, some characteristics of TSO evaluation approaches could be usefully transplanted into a HEP context. A more rigorously theorised approach to activities and interventions and developing robust and effective evaluation measures and/or establishing a close two-way relationship between evaluation and intervention

delivery functions could benefit HEP evaluation outcomes. HEPs have the advantage of being able to enable and support longitudinal relationships with young people, something that the short term nature of TSO interventions and lack of collaborative infrastructure often prevents.

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