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Great expectations: idealism and realism in access and participation evaluation

Rachel Spacey[1], Rebecca Sanderson[1]

[1]*University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: The Office for Students launch of the 'Standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool' in 2019 was a call to arms for access and participation evaluators across the Higher Education sector, but two years on, evidence of a radical transformation of evaluation practice is mixed at best. Our presentation will consider both the expectations of Access and Participation Plan (APP) evaluations and the reality. Drawing on our experiences as APP evaluation researchers at a post-1992 English university, we will reflect on some of the principles identified by Austen (2020) in the work we have undertaken so far. We will consider regulator expectations and the realities of data collection and analysis for institutional researchers. We will also explore our role as evaluation capacity builders in the creation of a Community of Practice of university colleagues whose work contributes to the APP.

Paper: Any university in England which charges higher tuition fees for Home/EU undergraduates must have an Access and Participation Plan (APP) (formerly known as an Access Agreement) which it submits for approval and monitoring to the independent regulator of Higher Education (HE) in England, the Office for Students (OfS). APPs are a formal document setting out a university's commitment to access and participation, detailing how they will support students who are traditionally under-represented in HE to enter and succeed. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions designed to meet APP targets is a requirement of the OfS and is ordinarily undertaken by evaluation staff (professional services and/or academic staff) across the sector. At the University of Lincoln, this responsibility falls to the APP Evaluation Team based in the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) set up in 2017.

This paper will primarily draw on a project undertaken by the APP Evaluation Team: *Understanding the Impact of the Access Covenant* (AC) (Spacey and Sanderson, 2020). The Access Covenant was a range of measures to support under-represented groups of students through transition, retention, and progression with a particular emphasis on students from communities in South Lincolnshire. The intervention is illustrative of the nature of the University of Lincoln itself, which was built on a regeneration site and the region with rural and coastal areas of deprivation, has always prided itself on serving the people of Lincolnshire. The AC, which began to roll out in 2017 employs staff across different departments (including wellbeing, careers and employability, student support and the library) to provide support throughout the student lifecycle including targeted careers and employability initiatives, support with academic writing and maths, a dedicated wellbeing advisor as well as financial advice and financial assistance. A realist-informed evaluation approach employing

mixed methods included gathering data from university staff involved in AC initiatives to provide a process and impact evaluation.

The evaluation of the AC was aligned with the new expectations of access and evaluation which recommended the use of "*stronger and more robust impact evaluation plans*" (OfS, 2019, p.1). The OfS also recommended that "*evaluation is appropriate and proportionate to the investment and activities*" (OfS, 2019, p.16). A mixed methods research design was considered appropriate since the aim was to collect and analyse both qualitative data from staff involved in delivery of the services and the students who had accessed them, as well as quantitative data from students in one single study. Explanatory sequential design was used whereby qualitative methods (interviews with staff and students) were used to collect data to help explain the quantitative data collected by a questionnaire, in more depth. Biographical life-grid interviews with students were undertaken, a method which has grown in popularity in educational research (Abbas et al., 2013) and enable both the participant and the researcher to "*map life events along a timeline*" (Hudson, 2016, p.17) and help with "*the discussion of sensitive issues*" (ibid).

Several issues, emulating many of the principles identified by Austen (2020) were highlighted in terms of developing an evaluative mindset in HE, some of which we will discuss in our presentation. Firstly, we will focus on the varieties of data available to evaluation researchers. While Morgan reminds us: "*it has never been more important to collect the correct big data that will provide us with the knowledge to evolve our provision and provide a high quality student experience*" (2019), sometimes the reality of data collection can be complicated as our study highlighted staff anxieties about data and the institutional assumptions made about data in terms of its collection, access and sharing which has been identified in other similar studies (Holland et al., 2017; Stevenson et al., 2019).

Secondly, in relation to developing evaluation capacity, we discovered that practitioners felt siloed and were finding it difficult to make connections with each other. A Community of Practice (CoP) model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) was recommended as a possible solution and as part of the development of the new Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2020-25, the CoP was established. This has rapidly evolved to include a range of professional services staff, Students' Union officers and academic members of staff including lecturers and researchers. The CoP is formally incorporated into APP project governance structure to ensure the group has a voice to influence decision making, and that decisions and discussions made by senior committees are communicated to and embedded in grass-roots practices.

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