Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0607

"Don't' you, forget about P"(articipation): Reflecting on APP evaluation practices specific to student success initiatives

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: As the Office for Students increases expectations regarding evaluation practices, student success outcomes (attainment and retention) and student progression outcomes (graduate employment or further study) - the 'participation' part of the Access and Participation Plan (APP) - retain the least well-developed evaluative practices within the student lifecycle evidence base. This introductory paper in the symposium will discuss ten principles for developing an evaluative mindset beyond access/outreach work and specifically for student success initiatives. These principles - Evaluation Strategy, Student Involvement, Rationale for Change, Comparisons, Data Types, Standards of Evidence, Indicators of Success, Evaluation Research, Review, Resource and Capacity - were collated from a review of sector literature (Austen 2020, 2021) and are being applied in practice within one higher education institution.

Paper: As the Office for Students increases expectations regarding evaluation practices, student success outcomes (attainment and retention) and student progression outcomes (graduate employment or further study) - the 'participation' part of the Access and Participation Plan (APP) - retain the least well-developed evaluative practices within the student lifecycle evidence base. This introductory paper in the symposium will discuss ten principles for developing an evaluative mindset beyond access/outreach work and specifically for student success initiatives. These principles were collated from a review of sector literature (Austen 2020, 2021) and are being applied in practice within one higher education institution.

Evaluation Strategy: Institutions should strategically position and support the importance of evaluative thinking within all areas of the APP and beyond the measurement of KPIs. Evaluation of success initiatives should be a shared responsibility, and not the sole responsibility of academic practitioners. Institutional collaborations should be encouraged.

Student Involvement: The instruments used to hear voices of success, which aid action and response in an evaluative cycle, may no longer be fit for purpose. To explore the nuances of these reflections, participatory approaches championed in access/outreach evaluation (Stevenson et al 2019) should be encouraged. These approaches would seek the views of participants (students) in the proposed design, methods and evaluation of success initiatives.

Rationale for Change: Sound evaluations of 'what works, and for whom' should consider the rationale/theory for change and assumptions about impact before implementation; it is not

uncommon for changes in learning and teaching to be imposed or rationales to be ambiguous. To avoid institutional change fatigue, practice-based decisions should be positively framed to enable actors to take control of the 'how?' and the 'what?', and to set realistic outcomes and related measures.

Comparisons and Causality: Evaluations which are aligned to the realist tradition (Harrison & Waller 2017) focus on the context and theory of practices and are suitable for complex change, such as initiatives which seek to enhance student success. Learning from, but not comparing to, previous teaching and learning contexts might be a useful evaluative approach. Options for experimental evidence should be discussed and critiqued, methodologically and ethically.

Data Types: Very few data driven discussions disrupt the data hierarchy by challenging the dominance of quantitative data and placing practitioner reflections (Crockford 2020) at the top of the pyramid. Evaluation in success spaces need to (re)validate practitioner reflections as authentic within an emerging evidence base. Space for storytelling should be encouraged to empower those telling their story and to engage those who will listen.

Standards of Evidence: The Office for Students' Standards of Evidence - narrative, empirical, causal – provide a framework to support evaluations of impact. Those invested in innovation may have researched the approach and any previous evidence of impact and this stage of narrative evidence gathering secures a trajectory toward empirical evaluation. Institutions should be comfortable with the short-term constraints of evidencing impact and support the development of a strong explanatory narrative.

Indicators of Success. Evaluative data collection should set clear parameters and a focus for evaluative reporting. This may intersect with other systems and processes such as quality assurance and enhancement. The scope of such evaluative thinking needs mapping, alongside any emerging tensions. Associated indicators of success will need to be compared and collated. Some areas of student success will be un-evaluated or evaluated using the language of 'monitor and review'.

Evaluation Research: Institutions should be supporting dedicated evaluation research on student experiences and student outcomes. This should include funding and realistic resource allocations which allows proportionate exploration (Parsons 2017) without over-burden. Engaging with ethical approval processes ensure that evaluation research is not exploiting or coercing and can open the scope for publication beyond the foci institution. Reflective case studies are a good starting point.

Integrative Review: During the development of new practices, evaluative thinking should continuously review the evidence used. Positioning early adopters as key stakeholders, for example within an Expert Steering Group, can create ownership, further empower the creation of an evidence base, and support capacity building across an institution (Jones-Devitt et. al. 2017). This can also foster criticality and provide space for the discussion of unintended outcomes.

Resource and Capacity: Evaluation is central to understanding student success, yet this is often a hidden expectation and an assumed skill set for those working in this area. Institutions should value their staff and students by making time for embedded, continuous, evaluation activity and appropriate professional development in how to develop evaluative thinking.

- *In places, this paper replicates content from Austen (2021 forthcoming).*

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