Symposia Abstract Book - Main Abstract Book with Submissions and Programme (All Symposia)

The Never Ending Story: Transformative Evaluation Practices in Higher Education (0495)

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Chair: Liz Austen[1]

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Rationale Text: 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. Recent publications (Moore, Tazzyman, Bowes & Birkin, 2020) have noted the limitations of concluding 'what works' in these areas, and suggest an investment in evaluation which would move beyond existing resources (see Thomas, 2020, 2017). There are several challenges which have yet to be overcome, notably the development of evaluation capacity/capabilities, the often alienating use of evaluation language (methodologies and methods) to non-experts, the influence of political and cultural factors on evaluation practices (focus and process), and the increasing expectation for evaluation but hidden or unaccounted resources. This symposium aims to enhance the visibility of evaluative thinking and practices across the student lifecycle, noting how this evidence base is necessary for regulatory confidence via Access and Participation Plans and the Teaching Excellence Framework, quality assurance/enhancement and future strategic thinking. It will encourage attendees to reframe an emphasis on evaluation methods (what data do we have?) into a critical space of evaluative thinking (what do we want to know and why?) whilst appreciating the contingent factors of their institution and its stakeholders. The introduction to the symposium will discuss ten principles for developing an evaluative mindset within student success (teaching and learning). These principles were collated from a review of sector literature (Austen 2020, 2021) and include: Strategic alignment; Student Engagement; Theory of Change; Contextual Design; Variety in Data Types; Standards of Evidence; Indicators of Success; Stakeholder Engagement; Commitment to Capacity Building, and Resources. The subsequent papers will provide examples of these principles and evaluation in practice, reflecting on evaluation approach, methods adopted, emerging or concluding outcome findings, and the associated challenges of idealism versus realism. These topic areas include the evaluation of career progression initiatives and Covid hardship funding. These examples will be led by collegues in two higher education institutions, who all share responsibility for the evaluation strategies embedded within their respective institutional Access and Participation Plans. Those attending the symposium will hear practical examples of the management and leadership of evaluation practices in higher education institutions and the associated alignment with institutional culture. Attendees are invited to discuss their experiences and institutional journeys of 'participation' focused evaluation.

Evaluating the impact of higher education funding aimed to address student hardship (0515)

Alan Donnelly[1]

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Paper Abstract: This paper explores the findings of an evaluation conducted at Sheffield Hallam University to understand the impact of institutional financial support provided to students who are under-represented in higher education or who are facing hardship. The government has made funding available to address hardship faced by students due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with providers deploying various institutional financial support schemes to help students navigate the student lifecycle. However, there is often a lack of evidence about how these support packages help improve students’ outcomes, which is a requirement of the Office for Students. The paper seeks to address this gap by providing an overview of the evaluation of the institution’s financial support schemes, including the methodology which used a validated financial support evaluation toolkit as the framework for the data collection and analysis. The impact of the funding on recipients and the evaluative approach adopted will be reflected upon.

Great expectations: idealism and realism in access and participation evaluation (0543)

Rachel Spacey[1], Rebecca Sanderson[1]

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Paper 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.

"Don't' you, forget about P"(articipation): Reflecting on APP evaluation practices specific to student success initiatives (0607)

Liz Austen[1]

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Paper 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.

Re(connecting) career progression initiatives with impact through the implementation of theories of change (0640)

Nathaniel Pickering[1]

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Paper Abstract: This paper presents a case study from the perspective of an “evaluative practitioner” who has been working with teams delivering career progression initiatives to develop their evaluative practices. The career initiatives being delivered aimed to address inequalities experienced by graduates in labour market. The first section of this paper explores how the career practitioners were supported to translate their experience and knowledge about what works into measurable outcomes. The second half of the paper will share how theories of change for each of the initiatives the career practitioners were delivering were developed. This case study provides valuable insight for evaluative practitioners aiming to develop evaluation practices and knowledge. It will also explore why there is a lack of evidence about what higher education providers can do to positively impact graduate outcomes, and how that deficit can be countered through the development of evaluation skills in career practitioners.