

Educational Gain: What is the purpose of higher education and how do we know if it has been delivered?

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, there is a growing emphasis on evaluating the gains experienced by students. Gains from higher education include the measurable progress students make in terms of knowledge acquisition, critical thinking skills and personal growth. The Pearce Review of the initial Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) identified the lack of a “single nationally comparable metric of ‘learning gain’” (2021, p. 10) but noted the importance of the concept and recommended the inclusion of “educational gain” in future iterations. This was taken up by the OfS for TEF 2023, which assessed a provider’s own articulation of the gains it intends its students to achieve as part of a 25-page provider submission (OfS, 2022a, p. 11). This research analysed provider submissions to offer insights into how institutions are accounting for the outcomes of their students through the definitions, measurements, and application of educational gain.

Full paper

Overview

As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, there is a growing emphasis on evaluating the gains experienced by students. Gains from higher education include the measurable progress students make in terms of knowledge acquisition, critical thinking skills and personal growth. The literature covers these gains using terms including learning outcomes, student outcomes, assessment of outcomes, academic progress, gains and the phrase “learning gain” popularised by work set out by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and subsequently taken up by the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS, 2022). The Pearce Review of the initial Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) identified the lack of a “single nationally comparable metric of ‘learning gain’” (2021, p. 10) but noted the importance of the concept and recommended the inclusion of “educational gain” in future iterations. This was taken up by the OfS for TEF 2023, which assessed “a provider’s own articulation of the gains it intends its students to achieve; its approach to supporting these educational gains; any evidence of the gains achieved by the provider’s students” (OfS, 2022, p. 11) as part of a 25-page provider submission. This research analysed provider submissions to offer insights into how institutions are accounting for the outcomes of their students through the definitions, measurements, and application of educational gain.

Background

The term “educational gain” is not used in the literature. The concept of educational gains, and associated terms, covers outputs from higher education at a collective level, differing from individual student assessments. Given this broader approach, drivers for exploring educational gain tend to come from governments, international organisations or other coordinating bodies. This results in the concept being highly political, linked with high level purposes, quality, performance and accountability of higher education—and associated funding. The broader political and regulatory context is key to understanding the measurement of educational gains, as it drives *why* there is a reason to measure outcomes and sets the direction for *what* is measured.

Since the 1970s there have been calls for evaluation of educational outcomes, student performance and cost-effectiveness, amongst other areas (Hazelkorn et al. 2018). Efforts to move beyond input measures such as reputation and resources have been on-going (Ewell 1991; Cheng 2001). The development of gain metrics varies within and across countries and regions, such student engagement metrics in North America (Kuh et al. 2011), the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project through the OECD (2013), and the use of national exams in Columbia (Shavelson et al 2016). All such efforts have identified challenges in measuring gains from higher education, particularly across diverse student bodies, disciplines and higher education institutions. TEF 2023 skirted around these challenges by inviting institutions to choose how they would define, measure and evaluate educational gains in their own contexts.

Methodology and Findings

The focus of this research is on the 66 providers awarded Gold overall (50) or Gold for student outcomes (16); the remaining submissions were read, noting that a significant proportion of institutions did not mention educational gain their submissions. The submissions were content and thematically coded, drawing on frameworks from analysis of measures of learning gain (Kandiko Howson, 2019). In terms of defining educational gain, 60 per cent were developed by the provider; 14 per cent used an external definition, 12 per cent developed ‘bottom up’, drawing on the evidence provided or the outcomes intended and 35 per cent aligned with graduate attributes (which may be integrated into other approaches). Purposes of education gain included skill development (14%); social mobility (14%); achieving their “full potential” (11%); and employment (10%).

There was a distinct lack of alignment (for almost all submissions) between the definition, purpose and measures of educational gain. Rather than offering specific measures of defined educational gain, most submissions included an array of measures of higher education broadly, including league table metrics, data from the National Student Survey, institutional awards, module evaluation, external examining, employer feedback and student reflective accounts.

While the submissions offer insights into the breadth and range of the ways providers have thought about the student experience, there is very little measure of actual gain. , they also highlight. Moreover, despite a data-led regulator being in place since 2018, a lack of shared purpose across the sector and an accompanying lack of data to capture the outcomes from higher education. Analysis of the approaches to measuring educational gain exemplifies the chasm between higher education institutions and the government about the purpose of higher education and whether this is being delivered upon.

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