

Evaluating student success in English higher education: context, definitions and discourses

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper draws on three chapters from the new volume *Delivering and Evaluating Participation after Access: Higher Education in a Marketised System*, co-edited by Liz Austen and Colin McCaig and published by Emerald Publishing in October 2025. This edited volume brings together expert practitioners in many areas of student success in the English (or UK) HE system, with a particular focus on those accessing and participating in HE from underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups. Chapters in the book fall into two major themes: **student success activities carried out by HE providers (what do we do?); and the evaluation of these activities (does it work?)**. These themes will be among those illustrated through four research-informed case-study chapters contributed by practitioners working in the 'participation' space across a range of HE providers.

Full paper

The starting point for this book, and the proposition that we will deliver to SRHE colleagues, is that delivering success in HE for underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups has traditionally been seen as different to outreach work designed to enhance wider access. For example, the two spheres of work are often carried out in very different contexts encompassing: age-ranges engaged with; physical sites of delivery; activities engaged in; and learning environments. These reflect essentially different purposes: outreach has traditionally been concerned with raising either (or both) the aspirations or educational attainment of disadvantaged young people in compulsory schooling, such that they may have

more realistic chances of progressing to higher education should they apply; student experience and success work, on the other hand, is based on identifying ways in which these cohorts can be supported once they are enrolled and often dispersed among the rest of the student body. Here the purpose is focused on retention, attainment, and eventual progression in terms of graduate outcomes. Where access work can and often is seen as part of institutional marketing, student success work is located in the pedagogic sphere of teaching and learning and professional support services, and often subdivided between diverse academic departments and centralised directories. This divide has, until recently, been mirrored in approaches to evaluating impact. Evaluation and delivery across outreach and student success is now firmly located within the Access and Participation agenda.

Theoretically informed and contextualised within the English marketplace which clearly impacts widening access and participation work (McCaig 2018; McCaig, Rainsford and Squire 2022), this volume foregrounds authorial perspectives from four case studies, reflecting the sub-division of the book into interventions to enhance success (what institutions do) and how they are evaluated for effectiveness (how institutions know if they work). Each focus on the identification of a problem and then the component parts of a theory of change (evidence base for change, rationale, context, assumed outcomes and design of activities) or evaluation plan (measures for outcomes, methods, findings, conclusions).

This paper will present an overview of the policy context in which this activity takes place before introducing the 'participation' agenda and a critique of what institutions do to support student success.

The case studies will then be introduced, focusing on two types of intervention; interventions which are designed and delivered by central services and exist in spaces outside of courses, and interventions which are designed by practitioners and delivered to students within courses. These chapters focus on theorising financial support for students and the design of an inclusive curriculum and evaluating learning gain/work readiness and simulated placements.

At SRHE 2019 a symposium titled '**Transformative Evaluation Practices in Higher Education**' (Austen, Pickering & Spacey) successfully anchored evaluation practices in a 'participation' space within the SRHE context. To extend this discussion, conclude by suggesting that much of this APP work points to a new synthesis of discourses and practices drawn from quite distinct professional fields – WP outreach, quality assurance and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Taken together, they provide us with a unique take on how these policy/practice regimes have

migrated into the student success space, how they are likely to evolve. We conclude with a robust critique of the default *risk of failure* discourse that sets the agenda for so much of this work, and urge a rethink of how the Labour government elected in 2024 could re-engineer the OfS to encourage the regulator to acknowledge the *failure of risk* as a market mechanism.