

The Higher Education Field Academy: The impact of research-engaged approach to Widening Participation in Higher Education (0068)

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Outline:

UK governments of all hues have long aspired to widen participation in Higher Education (Marginson 2015) but while much progress has been made since SRHE was founded, access remains unequal (Bolivar 2011; HEFCE 2013). The Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) seeks to raise successful university application rates from state-educated and disadvantaged teenagers by, unusually, involving them in *original university research*, which helps them develop skills and knowledge needed to foster competitive, confident HE applications.

HEFA was devised in 2005 by (AUTHOR NAME) (University of NAME) for Aimhigher's *generic* summer school programme, intended to raise the HE aspirations of disadvantaged young people interested in *any* subjects. Aimhigher summer schools ran over 2+ days and aimed to inspire learners by enabling them to experience HE student life and study (HEFCE 2005; Hatt et al. 2007; HEFCE 2007; HEFCE 2012). NAME aimed to exceed these requirements by additionally helping learners develop knowledge and transferrable skills needed in order to *fulfil* their raised academic aspirations: through participating in original research, learners would make genuinely new discoveries useful to others, in the expectation that this would pique interest, gain respect, boost self-esteem, instil skills and generate positive attitudinal changes more effectively than taking part in passive observation or replicative activities.

HEFA's chosen research focus is inhabited historic rural settlement, a long-term research interest of AUTHOR (Lewis & Aston 1994; Lewis et al. 1997), an acknowledged research priority (Wade 2000; Oake et al. 2007) whose built-up state prevents large-scale excavation. AUTHOR adopted a sampling approach involving numerous standardised, small, quick excavations in spaces such as private gardens to source finds which, once dated and mapped, reveal changes in settlement extent and layout (Jones and Page 2007; Lewis 2007; Gerrard and Aston 2008). This strategy is perfect for HEFA, which needs all learners to complete the same activity within a tight timescale (Lewis 2007a, 136-8).

Achieving WP aims requires these excavations to be part of a broader life-and-learning programme: these are supported using digital presentations, written guides, hands-on demonstrations and dialogue, recognising that different learners prefer different learning methods (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) (Gardner 1983). HEFA learners are initially didactically briefed on equipment usage and recoding protocols, but learning thereafter mostly adopts a more constructivist approach as learners move beyond this 'zone of proximal development' to actively participate in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and understanding (Hein 1998; Piaget 1963; Cole et al 1978). After completing their two-day excavation in a rural settlement, learners spend the final day within a university, finding out how their discoveries contribute to research during a taster lecture when they contextualise and map their finds for the first time, before touring and dining in student halls and participating in a workshop about university. Afterwards, learners submit a written report on their excavation using the records they themselves have kept.

Learners' fieldwork and written reports are assessed (helping them recognise the skills they have developed on HEFA) using a robust framework of range descriptors developed in collaboration with Cambridge Assessment (Johnson & Lewis 2013). All assessed

skills are transferrable, and include technical skills such as data collection/ processing/ analysing, measuring and recording, working to set standards and health and safety requirements; 'PLTS' (personal, learning and thinking) skills (National Curriculum n.d.) including verbal communication, structured working, creative thinking, reflective learning, working with persistence and team working; and writing skills including report-structuring, research, referencing, technical writing, and IT. This assessment develops conscious awareness of valid competences, which helps boost achievement and self-confidence.

HEFA is a robust, effective programme, formally endorsed by the OCR exam board, which over ten years has inspired and upskilled 5,000+ learners across six counties (Lewis 2014a). Feedback shows that 91% of learners rate HEFA 'good' or 'excellent' and 84% enjoy HEFA more than they expected, findings amply supported by learners' enthusiastic voluntary free-text comments (Lewis 2011a, 24-29). The number intending to apply to university is boosted by 26%, while 84% of participants feel more positive about going to university after HEFA than before. 80% of respondents report that HEFA helps them develop new skills, with the impact on working in organized, sustained and cooperative ways rated particularly highly.

HEFA's longer-term impact is tracked at the end of year 11 and shows 80% of former participants then planning to study 'A' levels (the easiest route to university), with intended university subjects ranging (alphabetically) from Accountancy to Zoology: Medicine is currently the favourite followed by Natural Sciences. School staff also consistently rate HEFA extremely highly, and its wide-ranging positive impact has led schools and communities over more than a decade to invest tens of thousands of hours in HEFA.

HEFA's USP - involving learners in research - can be seen to be central to its success. 'Finding things' consistently ranks top of the list of HEFA aspects which learners most enjoy; while seeing how their finds are used like pieces of a jigsaw to build up a bigger body of knowledge and understanding in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts confers a genuine sense of achievement which helps boost academic confidence. The *responsibility* inherent in the HEFA experience is also transformative: learners appreciate being trusted as adults to carry out something which is neither dumbed down nor capable of correction or repetition. This has helped reluctant learners rise to the challenge as enthusiastically as top academic performers.

Over time, the volume of data from HEFA excavations has increased and commensurately advanced understanding of settlement development (eg Lewis 2014b), enabling each cohort of HEFA learners to see ever more clearly the impact of the work they are carrying out. In advancing research as well as social aims, the HEFA 'research-active' model has also increased academics' interest in WP.

Conclusion:

HEFA has inspired and upskilled thousands of learners, while also advancing academic knowledge and understanding, enhancing its value to young people, host communities and researchers alike. HEFA investigations involve learners in archaeology, but its success raises the question whether this immersive 'research-engaged' WP model could usefully be extended to other subjects.

(1,000 words)

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