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The evaluation of HE outreach: the market and drive to evidence effectiveness (0441)

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abstract

Evaluation is increasingly seen as important to the major funders of access to HE outreach activity in schools and colleges. This is particularly so for state-funded outreach programmes, but is also becoming more important for individual higher education institutions (HEIs) as they are expected to evidence the effectiveness of their widening participation (WP) spending. Following the demise of the collaborative state-funded Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks (in 2010 and 2011 respectively) HEIs were encouraged to pursue their own WP agendas, reflecting their institutional mission and market requirements. However, in 2014 the government announced funding for National Networks of Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs) and this was followed up with far larger-scale National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) funded over four years (2017-21).

paper

This paper will locate the renaissance of collaborative outreach and the greater need for its evaluation within the context of an acknowledgement of market failure, that is, the failure of competitive market behaviour among HEIs to 'reach out' to underrepresented groups beyond their own recruitment needs. Simultaneously, institutions are under increasing pressure from the new Office for Students (OfS) to justify their spending of money derived from student fees, especially when it fails to help government meet its own policy goals which include shifting expenditure away from supporting *access into* HE and into supporting students *through HE* and into the labour market.

The presentation will include data and reflections on four recent WP evaluation programmes, two of which respond to national policy directives that institutions better evaluate the effectiveness of their outreach and their financial support in response to OFFA guidance (OFFA 2011) and *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011), and two of which represent the recognition that collaborative outreach (and evaluation) can more effectively widen opportunities to groups currently underrepresented in English higher education than the individual efforts of HEIs.

The four projects to be discussed are:

Office for Fair Access (OFFA) Understanding the impact of institutional financial support on student success (with Sheffield Hallam, UWE, Oxford, Bedfordshire and King's College London, 2015-16)

This project involved the development of tools that institutions could use to evaluate the effectiveness of their financial support packages (bursaries etc) and included a quasi-experimental statistical model that enables the tracking of bursary recipients as a sub-cohort of all students against a series of outcomes - retention, success (degree classification) and employability. The project also developed survey and interview tools so that institutions can better understand how bursary recipients use and value this financial support.

Office for Fair Access (OFFA) Understanding the evaluation of outreach interventions to widen access to higher education to under 16 year olds in England from disadvantaged backgrounds (with UWE, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam and Derby, 2017-18)

This project aimed to identify specific activities aimed at the school pupils and how these activities were evaluated, as identified by institutions in their OFFA Access Agreements (using qualitative analysis of all 2017/18 agreements in MAX/QDA). Institutions were also surveyed and several case studies developed in order to identify models of practice, revealing a poor overall understanding of the need to effectively evaluate outreach interventions.

HEFCE evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (Sheffield Hallam with IPSE, London Metropolitan University (2015-16)

As part of the recognition of market failure this short-lived programme over 18 months mandated all HEIs to participate in regional or discipline-specific partnerships along with other providers and stakeholders (FE colleges, schools, local authorities and Third Sector organisations). The evaluation included a specifically developmental strand, encouraging NNCOs to build evaluation into their activities and to identify 'cold spots' where little outreach activity was present. The research in fact revealed few 'cold spots' but much overlap of efforts, with multiple HEIs and Third Sector organisations seeking to work with schools that had good records of progression to HE.

HEFCE Formative Evaluation of the National Collaborative Outreach Partnerships (2017-2021, CFE Research with Sheffield Hallam)

This ongoing NCOP programme builds on the lessons learned from the NNCO programme but with a targeted focus specifically on young people in schools years Y9 and Y13 that live in low participation neighbourhoods with an 'participation gap' between school leaving grades and progression into HE. As with the NNCO programme the formative evaluation contains a large 'case support' developmental emphasis designed to foster better evaluation of activities at Consortia level. Early evidence suggests that HEIs are acting collaboratively and

that additional activity is being developed in response to localised need, albeit with little evidence so far of systematic evaluation.

References

BIS. 2011. Students at the Heart of the System. TSO, London.
Office for Fair Access. 2011. How to Produce an Access Agreement for 2012–13: Guidance. Bristol: OFFA.