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Unknown Knowns: Implicit Epistemological Hierarchies in the Evaluation of Widening Participation Activities

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Abstract: Comparing respective guidance documents issued by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Office for Students (OfS), I argue that the introduction of a new HE regulator in 2018 resulted in a shift in the positioning of the evaluation of widening participation outreach in HE policy. I suggest that the resulting changes have significant implications for the configuration of key evaluation stakeholders and that these reconfigurations, in turn, have implications for the epistemic relationships at play in the evaluation process. In particular, the way in which a mode of evaluation is configured in policy can determine who has the power to shape dominant definitions of meaningful evidence and whose situated forms of knowledge are considered to constitute robust evidence.

Paper: The importance of effective evaluation is a recurrent theme in recent HE widening participation policy (Harrison 2012; Harrison and Waller 2017a; Harrison and Waller 2017b; Harrison et al 2018). When Les Ebdon assumed the Directorship of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in 2013 it marked a step change in approach. In the foreword to his first Access Agreement guidance Ebdon noted that the new guidance marked an 'increased emphasis on the need for evidence and evaluation.' (OFFA 2013:3), underpinned by the need to 'demonstrate to Government the value of investment in this area.' (OFFA 2013:3).

The establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018 introduced an intensified policy concern with theory-driven evaluation, via practical guidance on the use of Theory of Change approaches (OfS 2019a and OfS 2019b). Indeed the new guidance serves to reposition HE managers and outreach practitioners, rather than policy makers, as the primary audience of evaluation outcomes – thus marking a stronger steer towards evidence-based practice than had previously been the case. This change in dominant has significant implications for the positioning of key evaluation stakeholder groups relative to dominant forms of knowledge and to responsibility for defining what constituted 'robust' evaluation evidence.

As constructed in policy, the key stakeholders of HE-based WP evaluation are the senior policy stakeholders themselves (Government, HE regulators), senior institutional policy managers (who

make strategic decisions about institutional direction and spend), outreach practitioners (who make practical decisions about implementation and delivery) and activity participants in the outreach activities (who are more likely to be sources of data than recipients). Evaluators themselves have assumed an increasingly important role as policy pressure has driven the need for further professionalization.

Alongside this constellation of stakeholder groups, different forms of knowledge circulate through the evaluation process. In the dominant OFFA model of evaluation (2006 – 2017), for example, senior policy stakeholders are positioned as the primary audience for robust evidence of “what works” in the domain of WP outreach. As such they define what counts as robust evidence. In most cases, this tends to be framed as a top down approach resting on a scientific / clinical model of evaluation and an explicit (e.g. Gorard and Smith 2006; Torgersen et al. 2014; Younger et al 2018) or implicit (see Thomas 2000; Harrison and Waller 2017, Whitty et al 2015) orientation towards positivist conceptions of evidence. This perspective typically invokes a methodological hierarchy, with RCTs at its peak (Evans, 2003; Chen and Garbe, 2011) with other forms of evidence such as ‘case studies, cohort studies and expert opinions’ relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, with the implication that they are ‘deemed as less reliable’ (Petersen and Olssen 2015). In terms of the other stakeholder groups, evaluators are tasked with developing technical and procedural (Ryle 2002) knowledge about evaluation methodology, while practitioners are positioned as secondary audiences for evidence. Participants appear predominantly as the objects of ‘extractive’ (Kendon et al. 2007) research.

Perhaps as a reaction to this positivistic dominant, and / or to the significant practical issues of adopting trial-based evaluation designs across complex social programmes, commentators across the sector have begun to evidence an interest in realist or other theory-driven evaluation approaches (see for example, Harrison and Waller 2017b; Brown and Formby 2018). In contrast to OFFA’s evaluation model, such approaches promote the practical and experiential knowledge of outreach practitioners as integral to efforts to develop a programme theory capable of supporting more robust causal evaluation measures (Pawson and Tilly 1997; Pawson 2013; Harrison and Waller 2017b). At the same time, given their orientation towards the practice domain, such approaches tend to bracket off the needs of senior evaluation stakeholders and promote the evaluator into a position of epistemic authority, able to arbitrate between, and interpret, the constituent practical and experiential knowledge of outreach practitioners to develop a detailed programme theory.

An alternative model, which is relatively slow to gain prominence in the UK sector, is collaborative evaluation (e.g. Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; O’Sullivan 2004; O’Sullivan 2012; Rodríguez-Campo and Rincones-Gómez 2012). Evaluation designs in this mould often draw on the rationale, epistemology or methodology of Participatory Action Research (e.g. Kendon et al. 2007a; McNiff 2013; Wicks et al. 2008), and incorporate practitioners and or/ participants as co-creators of the evaluation process and its underpinning epistemology. This has the advantage of freeing evaluators from any assumed responsibility for creating and imposing the conceptual frameworks around which practitioners experiential and practical knowledge are framed. As such, they subvert traditional research orientations that construct the researcher as ‘the “expert” and treat the researched as objects of research, rather than subjects with whom research is conducted’ (McFarlane and Hansen 2017: 80).

The current OfS model is more closely aligned with Realist approaches than was the case with

previous OFFA guidance. It draws on theory of change approaches to involve practitioners in the construction of theories about how an activity is assumed to work (OfS 2019c). Like other theory driven-approaches it implicitly brackets off the needs of senior policy stakeholders, and consequently their ability to define or constrain the knowledge outcomes of evaluation. At the same time, however, it retains a positivist orientation in its emphasis on the type 2 (pre-post 'empirical' designs) and 3 (Trial-based 'causal' designs) constructed by the OfS Standards of Evidence guidance (OfS 2019b). It also positions evaluators as the experts (c.f. Kesby et al. 2007) and reduces participants to objects of the evaluation process, or 'information providers'(Enosh and Ben-Ari 2010: 125).

Nonetheless, the positioning of practitioner epistemology remains ambiguous in the new OfS configuration. In particular, there is slippage between evidence-based and evidence-informed practice. Whilst these terms appear to be used synonymously in the guidance, in other practice based disciplines, for example Nursing or Social work, the difference between these positions is crucial in creating space for the practitioner's experiential knowledge and the professional judgement which depends on it. These disciplines are often characterised as being divided between academic and practice cultures (Sheppard et al 2000). The notion of practice is sometimes rooted in 'phronetic' knowledge; 'practical wisdom' or judgement that draws on the expertise and situated contextual experiential knowledge of practitioners (e.g. Petersen and Olsson 2015; James et al 2019). This recognises the dynamic and contextually bound nature of practitioner's experiential knowledge and its importance to delivering effective outcomes. This can also be taken a step further, I suggest, by respecting the phronetic knowledge of evaluators – as they are freed to make practice-based decisions about the evaluation methodologies and approaches required to provide practitioners with the evaluation outcomes most useful to them and their developing practice.

Essential Bibliography

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