

Improving access and participation in higher education

A case for enhancing evaluation evidence

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Fair access and participation have been key elements of national higher education policy in the UK for the last two decades. The aim is to ensure that all young people, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to attend and succeed at college or university.

In 2023, new guidance was introduced by the Office for Students (OfS) to regulate access and participation to higher education in England, along with increased expectations around the quality of evaluation evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of any initiatives. But these expectations were not accompanied by a change to the standards by which the strength of evaluation claims is actually assessed.

This policy brief explores the types of evidence needed to support effective evaluation of activities designed to widen participation. Working with staff in evaluation and management roles in a cross-section of higher education providers, this qualitative research captures current and emerging practice in evaluation of access and participation activities. It develops a set of recommendations to support evaluation capability-building in higher education. These reflect the complexity of organisational change taking place in the sector to address equity concerns.

Context

Higher education participation in the UK continues to reflect socio-economic inequalities in society. Over the last two decades, reducing inequalities and widening participation have been key elements of national policies, both to strengthen the graduate labour market and to address social justice concerns.^{1, 2, 3}

In England, higher education providers (HEPs) intending to charge higher tuition fees are required to gain approval for their plans to widen participation, including setting out their funding commitments. As a result, they have developed a wide range of activities to encourage degree-level study by young people from communities with limited knowledge of higher education. These include residential summer schools, subject tasters and higher education application advice days for school and college students, as well as improved support for undergraduates. Evaluation to assess the effectiveness of such activities has always been a requirement and standards of evaluation evidence were developed in 2017, and updated in 2019, to provide a benchmark to support providers.

In 2017, the Higher Education and Research Act established the OfS as the regulator for higher education in England.⁴ In 2023, the OfS introduced new guidance for HEPs requiring them to set out their targets and strategies for increasing access and success for underrepresented groups in Access and Participation Plans (APPs).

These APPs represent the most recent iteration of regulatory reporting for widening participation required of HEPs and have resulted in significant changes to the organisation and delivery of activities. Rather than committing to deliver one-off events, HEPs are expected to develop more complex intervention strategies that address national and local risks to equal opportunities. Intervention strategies are multi-layered and can include a range of activities across the student lifecycle, as well as a commitment to whole organisational changes. The requirement for more rigorous evaluation evidence was also a key feature of the 2023 guidance, along with an expectation to publish evaluation outputs and share them in a newly established Higher Education Evaluation Library (HEEL).

Despite these significant changes, the standards of evidence were not updated in line with the new evaluation requirements. They now appear unable to capture the complexity of the innovative work taking place as part of the new intervention strategies introduced in HEPs.

1 Burke, PJ (2012). *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond widening participation*. London: Routledge..

2 Whitty, G, Hayton, A and Tang, S (2015). *Who you know, what you know and knowing the ropes: a review of evidence about access to higher education institutions in England*, Review of Education.

3 McCaig, C (2025). *The changing policy language of widening participation in the English HE market: from WP to 'fair access' and 'social mobility'*. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Volume 27 (2), pp 8-32.

4 Office for Students (2019). *Standards of evidence and evaluating impact of outreach*.

The OfS standards of evidence

The standards of evidence, developed in 2017 and 2019, were designed to support higher education decision-makers by providing a framework for consistent judgements when assessing evidence about the effectiveness of a particular policy, practice or programme. They have been regarded as useful in promoting transparency and accountability by providing a shared reference framework and common language.

The standards classify evidence into three types⁵ (see Table 1 in appendix):

- Type 1 – A **narrative** description or theory of change around activities or programmes.
- Type 2 – **Empirical enquiry** that draws on data and/or reports of an intervention.
- Type 3 – Methodologies that indicate a **causal effect** of any initiative introduced.

Our research

To capture the complexity of emerging access and participation practice in a range of higher education settings, we undertook in-depth qualitative research with staff in evaluation and management roles from a cross-section of HEPs. The research confirms that the introduction of standards of evidence initially offered many benefits. They helped providers to develop clearer evaluation strategies, build evaluation capability and strengthen the quality of evaluation practice. The standards have also supported more consistent communication with the regulator and colleagues across higher education, providing a ‘common language’ and a ‘touchstone’ for the sector on evaluation. They have played a role in building an understanding of what constitutes useful evidence for decision-making, pushing providers to implement increasingly robust approaches to assess the impact of interventions, along with greater certainty that interventions are making a difference.

However, the research also highlighted risks associated with the standards in their current form. There is a tension within the sector around whether the standards imply a hierarchy of methods, in particular whether experimental methods such as randomised control trials (RCTs) represent a ‘gold standard’ for widening participation evaluations. Experimental methods are considered a strong design in proving causality in many fields of research such as medicine. But in complex social situations, they can

⁵ Office for Students (2023). [Standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool](#).

be less useful as they are unable to explain the reasons for a particular outcome.

There is also a danger of the standards becoming a 'shorthand' for a methodological distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, limiting the extent of their usefulness and diluting their original purpose. What's more, experimental methods are not always appropriate, for example in evaluating improvements to service provision, curriculum design or learning and teaching innovations. Neither are they appropriate for capturing the views and experiences of underserved and underrepresented students. Other types of evidence that use qualitative methods can provide very valuable insights to inform decision-making on APP interventions.

In a higher education setting, experimental methods present significant challenges, including ethical constraints with random assignment, difficulty maintaining true control groups and contamination between groups. HEPs report that they are more likely to use quasi-experimental approaches, where these are supported by developments in data infrastructure, such as tracking systems and student records systems.

Participants also identified a range of factors that are shaping current access and participation evaluation, creating challenges for designing appropriate evaluation methods. While there was broad agreement that the most expensive interventions – such as curriculum development and service improvement – warrant the strongest forms of evidence, these interventions are often complex and beyond the scope of experimental approaches, with experimentation in the strictest sense is seen as risky and only relevant for access and participation work in some exceptional cases.

Focusing on measurable rather than meaningful outcomes was also identified as problematic and risks encouraging a 'tick box' approach for the regulator rather than providing useful findings to promote dialogue and discussion within organisations to improve performance. A key finding of the research is the trade-off between generating precise unbiased answers to narrow questions of impact and producing more uncertain answers to complex questions.

A broader perspective, exploring several factors and encompassing a range of viewpoints, can be more effective in informing decision-making. The research shows that this more expansive approach, which the current standards cannot encompass, is already emerging in practice. HEPs in the sample are taking a comprehensive approach to evidence-based decision-making, where questions about how something works and its impact are explored in tandem as the intervention progresses. They then use the evidence to inform decisions as to whether the access and/or participation intervention proceeds to the next phase, reverts to a previous phase, is repeated or stopped.

In addition, APP interventions are planned and developed using theories of change, making theory-based evaluation and case-orientated

methodologies better suited to evaluation in this context. When used as part of mixed methods evaluations, these approaches help to identify the causal structures and mechanisms that underpin understanding of effectiveness and provide evidence of impact over time.

Recommendations

We make the following recommendations to the OfS:

- Maximise the role of the standards of evidence as a tool for evaluation capability-building, using a cumulative, layered approach to evaluating interventions.
- Enhance the definitions for types of evidence:
 - Type 1: Ensures that there is a rationale for the intervention and understanding of what the outcomes and intended impacts are, supported by evidence.
 - Type 2: Collects evidence to test whether the outcomes and impact from the intervention are better than might reasonably have been expected without the intervention.
 - Type 3: Collects evidence to show that it was the intervention that led to the outcomes and impacts rather than other factors.
- Impact evaluation should be used alongside other types of evidence gathering – such as process evaluation and practitioner reflection – to inform evidence-based decision-making.
- The language of the standards should focus on the claims that can be made as a result of the evidence and the implications for evidence-based decisions.
- The standards should be enhanced to demonstrate that impact claims can be supported by a range of evaluation designs. They should recognise that theory-based qualitative approaches and case-orientated evaluation designs can be used to provide sufficiently strong evidence where the data and methods are sufficiently robust (see Table 2 in appendix).
- The standards should set out expectations for incorporating contextual understanding into impact evaluations. These should ensure that evidence includes sufficient insight into the practical conditions required for replicability and support the transferability of findings across HEPs.
- Further guidance is needed to support providers in strengthening their evaluation and make more effective use of evidence. In particular, HEPs would benefit from practical advice on how to strengthen their impact evaluations within each of the evidence types, and how to apply these appropriately across different contexts.

- Further research would be beneficial, particularly in relation to:
 - Developing sector consensus on the specific requirements for different types of mixed methods and causal reasoning evaluation designs.
 - Learning from other evaluation frameworks.
 - Further testing and validation of survey questions in existing evaluation frameworks to increase the availability of standardised tools.

Conclusion

Within a changing higher education landscape and increased complexity of widening participation interventions, there is significant evidence that the current standards of evidence are becoming unfit for purpose, hindering rather than supporting strategies for greater equity in the sector.

If standards of evidence are to continue promoting effective practices and ensuring transparency in evidence-based decision-making, there is an urgent need for a revised set of standards to support providers in the collection and use of evidence. The revised framework needs to recognise the importance of methodologically diverse approaches, particularly for complex types of access and participation interventions and contexts.

Key questions to be addressed include:

- What counts as impact, recognising contribution as well as attribution?
- What types of impact evidence are most useful for institutional decision-making?
- How is impact evidence used alongside other types of evidence as part of cycles of reflection and review?

Change is essential if the higher education sector is to meet its equity and widening participation ambitions and improve fair access, student success and progression. Evaluation approaches that can support innovation and measure effectiveness are an essential element of the process. Our proposals address the evaluation challenges faced by HEPs and would support them in developing useful and proportionate evaluation that leads to increased equity and wider participation for students.

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NERUPI is a community of practice for those seeking to reduce inequalities in higher education access, participation and progression. With over 60 member organisations, it is able to share expertise and explore new approaches to enhancing student experience as part of a community of praxis. NERUPI holds regular events, online and in-person, exploring key issues for addressing inequalities in higher education. Its network provides opportunities to disseminate insights from recent research, explore practical strategies for embedding findings into higher education culture and practices, and underpins collaborative research activities.

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Appendix

Table 1. Current OfS standards of evidence framework

	Description	Evidence	Claims you can make
Type 1: Narrative	The impact evaluation provides a narrative or a coherent theory of change to motivate its selection of activities in the context of a coherent strategy	Evidence of impact elsewhere and/or in the research literature on access and participation activity effectiveness or from your existing evaluation results	We have a coherent explanation of what we do and why Our claims are research-based
Type 2: Empirical enquiry	The impact evaluation collects data on impact and reports evidence that those receiving an intervention have better outcomes, though does not establish any direct causal effect	Quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post intervention change or a difference compared to what might otherwise have happened	We can demonstrate that our interventions are associated with beneficial results
Type 3: Causality	The impact evaluation methodology provides evidence of a causal effect of an intervention	Quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post treatment change on participants relative to an appropriate control or comparison group who did not take part in the intervention	We believe our intervention causes improvement and can demonstrate the difference using a control or comparison group

Table 2. Proposed enhancements to the standards of evidence framework

	Criteria to meet this Type	Claims that can be made*	Evidence required	
Type 1	Explains what is being done and why The impact evaluation provides a narrative or a coherent theory of change to motivate the selection of activities in the context of a clear strategy	Claims of policy There is a coherent explanation of what we do and why, based on research and reasoning	1a) Evidence of impact elsewhere or in research You have evidence of impact elsewhere and/or in research on access and participation activity effectiveness 1b) Proven or promising practice from existing evaluation results You have run the intervention before and have internal evaluation data showing it worked, or showed promise 1c) Logical causal chain with corroborating evidence You have defined a logical causal chain for outcome/impact and have evidence to corroborate that the intervention could be expected to bring about a positive change 1d) Emerging evidence of beneficial results You have initial evaluation results showing that the activities are related to beneficial results in line with the objectives	Reasoned practice
Type 2	Shows positive outcomes without proving causality The impact evaluation collects data on impact and reports evidence that those receiving an intervention have better outcomes than might otherwise be expected	Claims of worth We can demonstrate that our intervention is associated with beneficial results against a counterfactual	2a) Pre/post change or comparison to non-participants You have quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post intervention change or a difference compared with what might otherwise have been expected 2b) Causal reasoning with programme theory You have defined a logical causal chain for outcome and impact and systematic quantitative and/or qualitative evidence from causal reasoning that demonstrate that the programme plausibly explains the outcomes in your context	Promising practice
Type 3	Demonstrates that the intervention caused the observed outcomes The impact evaluation methodology provides evidence of a causal effect of an intervention	Causal claims We can demonstrate that our intervention causes improvement and the difference it makes	3a) Quasi-experimental design with an appropriate comparison group You have a positive result from of a treatment change on participants relative to an appropriate comparison group that did not take part in the intervention from a quasi-experimental design 3b) Randomised controlled trial (RCT) You have a positive result from a treatment change on participants relative to a control group that did not take part in the intervention from a randomised experiment 3c) Non-experimental causal inference methods You have a defined logical causal chain for outcome/impact and have systematic quantitative and/or qualitative evidence to demonstrate that the intervention is an explanatory variable for the observed outcomes in your context and you have ruled out alternative explanations	Validated practice

* The standards focus on setting the evidence that the providers would need to back up their claims to impact. However, if an evaluation generated evidence of no (or negative) impact, this still provides insight on what (doesn't) work.



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