

The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education: A review of the evidence

Robinson, R and Salvestrini, V (2020)

NERUPI welcomes the commencement of TASO's research into the impact of activities to increase Access to higher education. We were also pleased to see that the review considered practitioner evaluations as well as standard academic literature, as so much of our knowledge about widening participation activity stems from innovative practitioners. We were disappointed to see Randomised Control Trials being championed as the most rigorous method of assessing effectiveness of activities rather than the one of many approaches. We also question whether it is possible to produce 'causal evidence' particularly in the complex social contexts that characterise widening participation and equity work. While it is possible to produce more evidence from a variety of sources that provide a clearer picture this will never be causal because there is always the possibility of intervening factors. Similarly, it is not possible to tease out the separate effects of each component of an intervention. We can make an informed judgement based on the evidence but it will always be a judgement.

Here we have focussed on the recommendations within the report to illustrate how a range of approaches is required to achieve our common aim of removing inequalities in Access to HE.

Report Recommendations and NERUPI Network Response

1. *To avoid overestimating the effectiveness of widening participation interventions, it is crucial to provide more causal evidence on the capacity of interventions to translate increased aspirations and awareness into a higher enrolment rate.*

Widening access interventions take place in complex contexts and the reasons for low participation among certain groups are multi-faceted. For 'contingent choosers', not expecting to progress on to HE, an intervention may be successful in meeting its aims to increase their knowledge of higher education, develop their capacity to make informed choices and open up the possibility of becoming a student. However, unrelated factors within the HEI such as admissions practices and HE culture will also have an impact as well as those outside the control of the HEI such as school performance, examination grades, family finances and employment opportunities. Assessing the impact of interventions operating in these very specific contexts requires a range of methods, including approaches that help us to reflect on and improve practice. Analysis of large data sets could provide useful insights for the sector into the impact of broader societal trends on participation rates enabling HEIs to identify where HEIs are best placed to make a positive contribution to supporting access.

2. *There is a need for more robust research on the impact of black box interventions, with a focus on teasing out the separate effect of each component. Robust monitoring and evaluation should be built into these interventions from the start.*

We agree that evaluation should be built into interventions from the beginning; indeed we would go further than this, particularly for complex interventions such as extended programmes, referred to here as 'black box' interventions. These are generally carefully designed to address a wider range of issues than is possible in a one-off intervention. They also have the potential for fostering positive relationships between participants and higher education staff and students, which research and practice indicate are important for student success pre- and post-entry. Longer-term interventions provide excellent opportunities for evaluation and research to become integral

elements of the pedagogical approach, developing agency amongst participants and providing unique understandings for the sector.

3. *There is not enough research focused on vulnerable but overlooked groups, such as mature students, carers and care leavers, some ethnic minority students and vocational students.*

We agree that more research could be helpful in addressing issues of access, participation and progression for these groups. In some cases (e.g. mature students and vocational routes into HE) there is a wealth of existing literature providing valuable insights which has not been translated into local or national policy, so a meta-analysis with practical recommendations could be very valuable. Practice within the sector to support care-leavers has developed considerably over the last ten years, and an analysis of effective practice, including care leavers' perspectives, would be timely and helpful. With regard to minority ethnic students, statistical data shows some stark inequalities. Emerging qualitative findings indicate that students are likely to find the culture of the academy challenging and that this adversely affects engagement. Research in this area would need to be exploratory, nuanced and participative with opportunities to address exclusionary practices as they are revealed.

4. *More causal evidence on the effectiveness of summer schools should also be carried out. Where randomised control trials are not practical, other quasi-experimental techniques should be applied.*

An exploration of the impact of summer schools would be interesting as these are indeed expensive, high intensity activities. These popular interventions have many similarities across the sector but also significant differences depending on their aims, associated target groups and the priorities of the host HEI. The experimental approaches recommended in the report would be of limited value unless they encompassed innovative design that could take account of the delivery context as well as external factors.

5. *More research on financial aid is recommended to ensure relevance to the English and UK context.*

Research on the impact of financial aid with the aim of identifying the most effective approach to supporting access, success and progression would be extremely valuable, once a final decision has been made about National HE.

6. *The government and its delivery bodies must facilitate greater tracking of the progression outcomes of participants in widening participation interventions over time and between the school, college and the higher education sectors. This would provide greater evidence based on actual enrolments to higher education rather than on self-reported aspirations and attitudes only, and would allow for the development of more research on interventions happening earlier in the student life cycle.*

NERUPI strongly supports this recommendation which has the potential to identify national trends and provide a clear information base, allowing HEIs to focus on research and evaluation designed to improve practice in access, success and progression to enhance student experience.