Policy Support Fund (PSF) 2024-25 funded project: Feasibility of enhancements to the Office for Students (OfS) Standards of Evaluation Evidence for Access and Participation Plans

REPORT 2

PRACTICES FOR EVALUATION STRENGTHENING: LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH PARTNERS

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Evaluating & Researching University Participation Interventions

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report sets out findings of the Policy Support Fund (PSF) 2024-25 funded project: Feasibility of enhancements to the Office for Students (OfS) Standards of Evaluation Evidence for Access and Participation Plans. The OfS standards of evidence[1] were developed to support evaluation capability building in higher education and to help decision-makers make consistent judgements when assessing evidence about the effectiveness of a particular policy, practice or programme.

The aims of the research were to:

- Enhance universities' capacity to produce effective evaluation evidence for widening participation interventions and fulfil their Access and Participation Plan (APP) commitments.
- Develop recommendations and tools enabling the transfer of effective practices across the higher education sector.
- Inform national OfS guidance on evaluation methods supporting transfer of best practice from impactful programmes.

The report focuses on the learning from the research regarding the challenges faced by providers seeking to implement rigorous APP impact evaluation, and how these are being addressed. Report Two: It highlights areas of development to strengthen the evaluation approaches, in context, provides examples from the case institutions of planned evaluations and describes their evaluation capability strengthening activities.

The report should be read in conjunction with *Report One: Research Report and Recommendations to the OfS*, which draws out findings from the research in relation to how providers have engaged with standards of evidence, and how the standards are conceptualised; discusses changes in the framework for evaluation of access and participation interventions since the standards were developed; summarises the key findings and sets out recommendations emerging from the project for the OfS.

1.1 Background

Doing evaluation well is important to identify which interventions are making a difference, and those which are not having the desired effect, in order to promote learning about what works and ultimately ensure that access and participation monies are used in the most effective ways that benefits outcomes. Understanding the impact that access and participation interventions are having matters in order to be able to identify effective practices and to deliver improved widening participation outcomes and impacts for students in higher education.

The evidence base for access and participation interventions has been criticised for being underdeveloped nationally, which has raised concerns about the extent to which what is being delivered is based on evidence of impact.[2] One review concluded the widening participation tends to be activity-led - rather than outcome/theory led - and concerned with data generation rather than critical thinking (Austen et al. 2021).[3]

Standards of evidence are not new as a tool for improving practice and effectiveness by learning from publicly funded initiatives. Numerous frameworks have been developed to help structure how

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[1] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluating-impact-of-outreach/

[2] Blake, J. (2022, 8 February) Next steps in access and participation. Speech given by John Blake, the Office for Students' Director for Fair Access and Participation. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/next-steps-in-access-and-participation/

[3] Austen, L., Hodgson, R., Heaton, C., Pickering, N., Dickinson, J., Mitchell, R. and O'Connor, S. (2021) Access, retention, attainment and progression: an integrative review of demonstrable impact on student outcomes. York: Advance HE. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/access-retention-attainment-and-progression-review-literature-2016-2021

evidence is collected, interpreted and assessed.[4] The standards in higher education were first published in 2017 as a result of a joint HEFCE/OFFA initiative, with a focus on evaluation of outreach interventions, particularly as a strategy to raise aspirations and attainment of young people from groups under-represented in higher education (Crawford et al., 2017).[5] In 2019, the OfS adopted and extended the standards as part of their general access and participation plan guidance[6].

The standards of evidence promote transparency and accountability by providing a shared reference framework. They support evidence-based decisions about which interventions are effective in generating desired outcomes and impacts, and therefore the best use of access and participation resources. They are based on three types which generate different kinds of evidence of impact:

Type 1) narrative evaluation - knowing what will generate impact and why (including existing evidence of the benefits);

Type 2) empirical enquiry - evaluation to measure the difference made by activities and practices compared to what might otherwise have been expected to happen;

Type 3) causal claims – to identify whether the outcome and impact was a direct result of the activities.

Experience shows that using evidence to improve practice and decision-making is much more likely to happen when the environment for change is right. The OfS evaluation self-assessment tool[7] allows providers to assess the conditions in place internally for impact evaluation and to identify steps for improvement in relation to four dimensions of their evaluation work: the strategic context; programme design aspects; evaluation design aspects; and frameworks for evaluation implementation and learning from evaluation.

1.2 Why was this project undertaken?

The period since the original standards of evidence were first developed has been a time of significant change in the English HE landscape. The OfS, has brought together regulatory and funding levers. Access and Participation Plans (APPs) operate alongside the general 'conditions of registration' (minimum expected performance measures) which funded providers must conform to (OfS, 2022d), and the monitoring of equality, access and participation, and quality assurance functions. Teaching excellence is a central theme in the accountability discourse, and an important aspect of quality assurance. The overlaps between APP and other internal QA and external (regulatory) mechanisms have become more obvious. Coupled with this is increasing concern for student involvement and the importance of demonstrating a 'whole provider approach' (WPA). The OfS continues to emphasise external (as well as internal) knowledge development with requirements to publish evaluation outputs. The Higher Education Evaluation Library (HEEL) is being developed as a repository for sharing evidence. In this context, the research sought to identify the effect of standards of evidence on current approaches to evaluation, consider how evidence standards for impact evaluation can be extended and enhanced to take account of contextual factors, and identify evaluation approaches that have most influence in different institutional

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[4] Some examples include the GLA's Project Oracle (for youth provision); NESTA's standards (for innovation funding); and Reclaiming Futures (for justice system reform).

[5] https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/6246443/Crawford_Claire_UoN_2017_The_Evaluation_of_the_Impact_of_Outreach.pdf

[6] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluating-impact-of-outreach/

[7] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/

contexts, in order to produce recommendations, and materials to support learning from evaluation of widening participation interventions.

1.3 How was the research undertaken?

This was a collaborative project involving in-depth research and a collective consultation process with seven case institutions which were chosen to represent the diversity of provision across the English higher education sector. A reference group supported the reporting and were involved in agreeing the outputs. Information on the research partners and methods are given in Annex 3.

1.4 This report

Section 2 summarises the common challenges in implementing evaluation of APP activities, based on the research with case institutions.

Section 3 identifies concrete areas of action and innovation that demonstrate how different types of providers are seeking to strengthen the evaluations of their various access and participation initiatives in order to address the challenges to evaluation and their evaluation capability building developments.

Section 4 sets out some findings and makes recommendations for university leaders regarding evaluation strengthening.

Annex 1 describes the research method.

Annex 2 provides examples from the case institutions of current and planned evaluation activities that are being put in place to strength APP evaluation and how these fit with the institutional context.

2. KEY CHALLENGES FOR ACCESS & PARTICIPATION PLAN EVALUATION

2.1 Evaluation Design & Methodology

- **Struggles to prove causality in complex educational environments.**
  Educational outcomes are shaped by numerous interdependent variables so isolating the effect of interventions is difficult - especially for longitudinal outcomes which take time to become known. For example, targeted student success initiatives aim to support widening participation students with low attendance or attainment, but isolating the impact on degree attainment from other factors like personal circumstances or other forms of support including external support is complex.
- **Difficulty measuring intangible outcomes.**
  Many outcomes identified to address higher education equity risks are qualitative or subjective. For example, standardised tests may not capture deeper learning or critical thinking; concepts such as confidence and belonging are central to educational success, but difficult to measure because they are context-dependent and not directly observable, and rely on individual perception, which can be biased or inconsistent.
- **Limited evaluation frameworks** tailored to creative, vocational or specialist settings.
  Vocational learners may have varied entry points and goals, complicating evaluation design, models often fail to capture the nuanced, personalised learning that occurs in creative or specialist environment, especially where outcomes are developmental and not easily standardised.
- **Time and resource constraints.**
  Capacity issues can limit the scope, duration, or methodological rigour of evaluations. The case institutions have dedicated WP evaluators or evaluation teams who support evaluation planning and oversight/management, but most evaluations rely on overstretched WP practitioners and academic staff to implement the evaluation design.

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2.2 Data Interpretation issues

- **Difficulties analysing and making sense of data when there is no access to a counterfactual or a comparison group.**
  Small providers and highly selective institutions may struggle to find appropriate counterfactuals, limiting causal inferences. Institutions with more diverse student populations may find it easier to construct meaningful comparison groups for quasi-experimental designs, but there are still challenges in identifying comparator groups in large diverse institutions because of the problem of dealing with inter-sectionalities and isolating the participation effects amongst the target group(s). There can be particular challenges in identifying a comparison group for remedial interventions since students might only be identified when something goes wrong (e.g. struggling to access well-being).

- **Difficulty controlling for extraneous confounding variable.**
  Educational outcomes are affected by a wide range of factors including background, motivation, school policies, and so on. Without proper controls, it's hard to attribute changes solely to the intervention. Plus, many A&P initiatives are delivered alongside broader student support services. As already noted, attributing outcomes directly to a single intervention becomes problematic when students engage with multiple forms of support.

- **Complex Student Demographics.**
  Measuring the effectiveness of interventions is difficult when improvements are incremental or vary by cohort. Universities that serve a highly diverse student body, including large proportions of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students, mature learners, disabled students, and care leavers have the challenge of evaluating interventions across intersecting identities – making it difficult to isolate the impact of specific initiatives on individuals and groups. Integrating data across systems (e.g. academic, wellbeing, financial) in order to get a holistic view of student journeys can be complex and does not tell the whole story. Student datasets rarely capture the full nuance of student experiences or the indirect effects of interventions, and reliance on quantitative data can overlook qualitative outcomes like student satisfaction, sense of belonging, confidence, or resilience.

- **Difficulty Controlling for implementation factors.**
  Educational settings are affected by a range of variables which may be out of the hands of evaluators - e.g. teacher quality can vary, what's planned isn't always what's delivered. Disruptions such as policy changes, strikes, or curriculum overhauls can intrude mid-evaluation and muddle outcomes. Many interventions are co-designed and delivered in different ways across different departments, plus practitioners and academics delivering access and participation interventions may take a developmental approach and change their approach over time. Inconsistent implementation will affect the reliability of evaluation findings making comparisons difficult and will confound the evaluation results (was it the design or delivery of it that failed?).

2.3 Data Limitations

- **Difficulty tracking long-term, non-linear progression.**
  Accessing high-quality, granular data - especially on student progression, belonging, and outcomes - can be difficult. Even when data is available, interpreting it in a way that reflects the lived experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds requires sensitivity and nuance.

- **Designing scalable evaluations with small sample sizes.**
  Evaluations in small institutional settings or for programmes with small activity cohorts is problematic in terms of the numbers being too small to provide statistical power, which limits the extent to which data can be used to show the participation effects. High attrition rates (dropouts) can also skew the data and reduce reliability and interpretation of results.

- **Data Infrastructure issues.**
  Larger institutions often have robust student outcomes data systems but may struggle with siloed departments and inconsistent data sharing across teams. Smaller or newer institutions may lack the technical capacity or staff expertise to conduct complex evaluations, as well as facing data issues.

- **Data Quality issues.**
  Inconsistent or low-quality data collection methods jeopardize reliability. For example, logging participation in progressive programmes usually requires buy-in from those delivering to spend time collecting participation data. Historical or baseline data may not exist or may be recorded in incompatible formats.

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- **Access to data issues.**
  Depending on the context, participants and stakeholders may be hard to research, especially in remote or under-resourced areas. This can be a particular problem for outreach, for example, gaining informed consent to use outreach participants' data for evaluation can be complex, especially from minors and their guardians.

2.4 Evaluation culture and stakeholder engagement challenges

- **Limited institutional leadership on evaluation.**
  Evaluations are more likely to be embraced and used for learning In institutions with a strong culture of evidence-based practice. There is potential for disconnect between strategy and operational delivery. Research-intensive universities may prioritise evaluations leading to publication and Research Excellence Framework (REF)-style impact, making them more receptive to in-depth evaluations - but the approach can be bureaucratic and divorced from practice. Elite institutions may face reputational risks in surfacing inequities, leading to more cautious or selective evaluation practices. Teaching-focused or widening participation institutions may be more mission-aligned with equity goals but tend to have fewer resources for evaluation infrastructure.
- **Patchy engagement from academic staff and practitioners.**
  Varying understanding of evaluation purpose and methods can be a barrier to embedding evaluation into APP activities on the ground. A collaborative approach is needed since where evaluation is seen as compliance-driven, delivery staff may be resistant or disengaged, affecting data quality and evaluation implementation fidelity. Aligning priorities and ensuring consistent participation from all stakeholders raises logistical and cultural challenges. Aligning staff across departments for consistent evaluation is particularly challenging in large institutions with devolved decision-making.
- **Reliance of self-reported measures.**
  Methods which rely on self-evaluation for example questionnaire surveys can have low reliability without support or triangulation with other types of evidence.
- **Inconsistent feedback practices.**
  Ensuring feedback is consistently gathered and actioned is challenging in complex organisational settings. Capturing lived experience beyond raw performance data can be particularly challenging in vocational settings where students are in dispersed settings.
- **Difficulties engaging students in evaluations.**
  There is an issue of feedback fatigue resulting in disengagement over time, making it harder to gather meaningful feedback from students.
- **Gatekeepers.**
  Teachers, parents, administrators and others who evaluators rely on for access to evaluation participants may be sceptical or protective of how students are being studied. This can lead to non-cooperation or biased implementation of data collection tools.

3. EVALUATION STRENGTHENING ACTIVITIES

3.1 Opportunities for strengthening evaluation designs

- Promoting and facilitating **theory of change models** which underpin programme design and provide a framework for theory-driven evaluation. All the case institutions employed theory of change to guide intervention and evaluation and ensure there is alignment between activities, outcomes, and measurement. However, ensuring these frameworks are rigorous, scalable, and adaptable across different initiatives, and remain a 'living document' that continues to guide the delivery and evaluation takes significant effort. Key to embedding theory-driven evaluation into practices are: **co-design** of theories of change with stakeholders and students; identification of specific objectives and outcomes for each target group within their intervention programmes; and definition of **specific indicators** for each link in the causal chain.
- Combining **quantitative metrics with qualitative methods** (such as narrative case studies) to develop a richer picture and capture nuanced impacts. Numbers are important to tell part of the story; and can be enhanced by assessment of the lived experiences to provide depth. Most evaluations were seeking to use

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mixed methods - e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups - alongside outcomes data analysis to triangulate findings and understand the "why" behind the data.

Evaluation example: Sustained and progressive outreach at a small specialist institution (Leeds Conservatoire)

Leeds Conservatoire's 'Zero to Hero' outreach programme is a music-led initiative for Year 7 and 8 pupils from underserved backgrounds which aims to develop creative skills, academic confidence, and HE awareness. The evaluation blends student and staff insight. READ MORE

- **Longitudinal tracking** of outcomes beyond the first year. Immediate outcomes (e.g. confidence) may not reflect long-term success (e.g. graduation, employment) so evaluations should aim to follow students over time with mechanisms for longitudinal tracking where possible. A common approach tended to involve surveys or administrative data to collect data pre- and post-intervention and data from tracking or monitoring systems where the existing data sources aligned with the outcome indicators.

Evaluation example: BrightMed Access to Medicine Programme (University of Sussex)

BrightMed is an award-winning programme that builds a long-term relationship with underrepresented students from Year 9 onwards. The evaluation uses a mixed-methods strategy grounded in a clear theory of change. READ MORE

- Using **intermediate indicators** as proxies for measuring complex, long-term outcomes (e.g. application rates, confidence, sense of belonging). When long-term data is limited/unreliable it can be helpful to focus on triangulating process evaluation and intermediate outcomes. Validated scales can be useful here, especially if these are underpinned by existing evidence to show the relationship between intermediate indicators and longer term outcomes. Some case institutions utilise the NERUPI framework to evaluate outcomes like confidence, belonging, and agency.

Capability building example: Validating Institutional Survey Tools for APP Evaluation

University of Sussex is enhancing evaluation practice by developing a core institutional survey with validated questions designed to support APP evaluation of interventions aimed at student success and progression.

Key Approaches

Institutional Survey Development: A new APP-aligned student survey has been developed, which is being integrated with student registration. This includes validated questions to gather consistent baseline and outcome data to support comparator analysis across different cohorts and activities.

Working towards Causal Evidence: Combined with existing student data, the new survey is a means of embedding correlational and quasi-experimental designs into long-term APP evaluations, where data availability supports this.

Governance & Expertise: Development of the survey is being led by a task-and-finish group with academic survey design experts, supported by the centralised Research & Evaluation team within Strategic Planning. This team has a remit for designing and delivering APP evaluations, advising APP delivery leads, building evidence capacity and evaluation capability, and coordinating an Evaluation Community of Practice.

Privacy Compliance: University privacy policy has been updated to enable secure, lawful access to student data for evaluation.

Anticipated benefits of this capability building approach

- Supports more robust, comparable, and integrated evaluation across programmes
- Enhances staff capability through shared tools, guidance, and institutional infrastructure
- Fosters a sustainable culture of evidence-based decision-making and reflection

- **Triangulation** of more than one source of evidence was a common approach to evaluation strengthening. This usually involved drawing on more than one kind of evidence (quantitative and qualitative data) from different sources (e.g. participants, stakeholders, observational evidence etc) and backing this up with strong implementation evidence.
- **Collaboration** on evaluation tools and methods. Collaboration with evaluation experts had proved useful to some case institutions to strengthen design integrity. For example, a collaboration with TASO had helped develop a more advanced evaluation plan (although this level of detail isn't always feasible for every

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initiative). A small specialist institution had partnered with the SEER partnership[8] in order to draw in additional expertise, increase capacity for data analysis and reporting, and make evaluations more scaleable.

Evaluation example: The Black and Asian Talent Programme (Loughborough University)
Loughborough University's Black and Asian Talent Programme supports around 400 students from Black and South Asian heritage backgrounds. Confidence and belonging outcomes are evaluated through theory of change models and mixed methods drawing on case studies and student voice. The evaluation is seeking to understand whether and how the programme is addressing inequalities in placement and progression outcomes, including through a quasi-experimental outcome evaluation design. READ MORE

- Drawing on **existing frameworks** and tools. To ensure data collection tools are accessible, valid, and reliable, some evaluations were utilising existing frameworks for evaluation and validated tools. Some were exploring the potential for evaluation capability building involving use of off-the shelf evaluation toolkits (e.g. Student Financial Support) - with adaptations to the specific context if required. Another useful approach was inclusion of validated tools in questionnaire surveys where these fit with the learning objectives. Some used standardised measures (like the Generalised Anxiety Disorder scale for mental health outcomes). Plus there was an example of a methodology for evaluation being rolled out between providers (evaluation of racially inclusive practice). There were also examples of collaborative working between providers for support, planning; and the potential for implementation of comparative evaluations across providers.

Evaluation example: Racially Inclusive Curriculum development at University of Law
The University of Law's (ULaw) racially inclusive curriculum work is aiming for meaningful structural changes to what students are taught and how it connects to their lived experiences. The approach is underpinned by a theory of change and ULaw has aligned its evaluation with a tested sector toolkit from Leicester University (Campbell, 2022), allowing both consistency and sector comparability. READ MORE

3.2 Opportunities for strengthening data analysis and interpretation

- Application of **intersectionality frameworks** to target underrepresentation. For institutional strategies targeted at student risks, intersectionality frameworks were used to design interventions that reflect real student experiences in light of multiple disadvantage. Evaluation of these types of initiatives required disaggregated data to identify for subgroups (e.g. care leavers, students with BTEC qualifications). These types of initiatives tended to be framed as participatory and developmental, involving co-creation activities to centre marginalised voices in activity planning and evaluation. For some APP activities the focus was on individualised outcomes that run alongside educational outcomes.
- Using **quasi-experimental methods** or natural experiments to create comparison groups. Several of the larger institutions in the sample with established and integrated student data systems were aiming to use quasi-experimental methods and for some new initiative there was also potential opportunities for setting up 'natural experiments' (e.g. when staged policy changes or staggered rollouts created scope for setting up comparisons across cohorts).
- Tackling the challenges in controlling for confounding variables, then involves collecting detailed baseline data on student characteristics to understand pre-existing differences, in order that techniques such as multivariate regression or statistical matching (e.g. propensity score matching) can be used to isolate the effect of the intervention from other influencing factors. Theory of change models help clarify causal pathways and make assumptions explicit, offering a structured framework to interpret outcomes. However, many case institutions were finding that further refinement was needed - particularly in defining matching criteria and adequately controlling for variables like prior attainment, demographics, or socio-economic status. Despite the complexity, such approaches demonstrate how thoughtful evaluation design can strengthen claims about causality in non-experimental settings.

Evaluation example: Transition support interventions (University of Hertfordshire)
At the University of Hertfordshire, a new transition programme is being developed to support students from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds - specifically those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and from the lowest Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintile. The evaluation is focusing on four key

[8] https://appliedinspiration.co/

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indicators: confidence, self-efficacy, use of academic support services, and first-year retention. READ MORE

- Using **theory-driven mixed methods evaluation approaches**. A theory driven evaluation approach tended to draw on impact oriented and process oriented questions (linked to testing a theory of change) and was designed looks for evidence to corroborate or refute specific evaluation questions. This included evaluating the uptake and engagement factors as these mediate the success and are 'triggers' for the impact (for example if the theory posits that sustained engagement leads to improved knowledge, behaviour, or wellbeing, then engagement becomes a predictor of outcomes). Evaluation in these examples drew in process evidence alongside impact evidence to understand the implications of context.
- Accounting for delivery variability through **comparative analysis**. Programmes delivered across different departments or by different staff may vary in quality and approach, plus there is a tendency for practitioners and academics delivering access and participation interventions to adapt their approach over time as part of a continual improvement approach. This can create challenges for evaluation, although may be helped by identifying core components that should be consistent and monitoring the fidelity to the programme model to take account of variability in delivery across departments or facilitators that can then be factored into the analysis of evaluation evidence taking a comparative approach. This was a pragmatic approach designed to identify and scale effective practices while taking account of the context and the objective of adapting to local needs but requires resources and central coordination of the evaluation effort across a complex programme.
- Encouraging **reflexive academic practice** to embed evaluative mindset into the work. On the ground, this was being taken forward through developments such as using student participation and outcomes data to spot underrepresentation/disparities in outcomes; using theory of change models to interpret student needs and address the structural barriers; using qualitative evidence to surface lived experiences; paying attention to issues of impact and scalability, paying attention to unintended consequences and reflecting on the underpinning assumptions.
- Applying a causal story that integrates multiple data sources and **tests alternative explanations**. There is potential scope for methods such as contribution analysis to support evaluation strengthening by contributing to the causal narrative. To work well the approach requires the initiative's intended pathway to be mapped and rigorously tested, and would add additional weight to the causal argument in an observational study by testing the plausibility of the observed contribution to change (and therefore is another potential way of dealing with confounding variables and addressing issues such as selection bias in order to explore/explain the implications for the outcomes).

Evaluation example: Contextual Admissions & Offers at LSE

LSE's evaluation of its contextual admissions policy - where eligible students receive offers with lower entry requirements by recognising the context in which applicant's prior achievement occurred - builds on an evaluation of contextual offer making reported in 2025[9] which sought to capture the institutional impact of contextualised admissions and the mechanisms by which the policies operate. READ MORE

3.3 Opportunities for mitigating data limitations

- Leveraging **institutional infrastructure**. There is an argument to be made that evaluation is most effective when supported by data systems, ethics processes, and reporting tools. Key evaluation strengthening activities in case institutions included collaboration with internal institutional teams (e.g. data analysts, ethics boards) early on to both streamline evaluation and ensure compliance. Several of the case institutions had funded development of shared dashboards for APP activities, which drew in student level outcomes data (usually including disaggregated data (e.g. by ethnicity, disability, age, care status)). Integration of Graduate Outcomes survey extensions to include post-qualification trajectories was a further anticipated development. Putting in place data sharing and streamlined procedures for ethical approval for evaluation work was building the foundation for evaluation to be applied across the portfolio of APP work.

[9] Schulte, J. and Benson-Egglenton, J. (2025) Evaluating the impact of contextual offers in highly selective institution: results from a mixed-methods contribution analysis. Higher Education Quarterly, 79(1). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hequ.12580

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Capability building example: University of East London APP Intervention Dashboard

At UEL, a 'What Works' team has been appointed and going forward enhanced progress tracking against objectives and targets will be enabled through the development of school level APP data dashboards.

Key Approaches

Portfolio-Based Monitoring: Captures all APP activity by cohort, subject area, and student characteristics - enabling a data-driven, institution-wide view. Dashboards are used to track participating student cohorts by school, subject cluster, and student characteristics facilitating a data-based practice approach for enhanced institutional monitoring.

Evaluation Tracking & Prioritisation: Flags which activities have a theory of change, evaluation indicators, and where they are in the reporting pipeline.

Collaborative Design: The What Works team co-develops the dashboard with project leads, tailoring evaluation questions to outcomes.

Data Integration: Participation is tracked alongside student, household, and academic characteristics to support robust, contextualised analysis.

Health Checks & Reporting: Regular dashboard-based 'health checks' are used to generate intervention-level outcome reports and surface evaluation gaps.

Benefits of this capability building approach:

- Enables targeted use of evaluation capacity, prioritising where deeper analysis is feasible
- Facilitates consistent evaluation design and oversight across a diverse set of projects
- Builds a data infrastructure that can support future experimental or quasi-experimental designs
- Drives shared responsibility between delivery teams and central evaluation expertise

- **Cross-programme and pooled data** to work with small sample sizes. For some key access and participation outcome indicators, there were examples of evaluations drawing on pooled data across programmes with similar objectives to increase statistical power. For example, on case institution is applying 'indicator suites' across activities within their outreach intervention strategy. This approach was being strengthened through techniques such as: clarity on the intervention model approach underpinned by theory of change; inclusion of contextual factors, use of comparisons and/or replications in the evidence base; and use of multiple datasets (e.g. data from multiple points in time, longer periods of follow-up).

3.4 Opportunities for strengthening evaluation culture and stakeholder engagement

- Developing **evaluation culture.** There are promising opportunities to strengthen evaluation culture and stakeholder engagement by prioritising the development of an evaluative mindset. By demonstrating effective leadership on evaluation and a strong commitment to continuous learning and the promotion of collaborative practices across stakeholders, the case organisations were aiming to nurture a culture where evaluation is not only expected but embraced and embedded into everyday delivery, as a tool for learning and improvement.

Capability building example: Access and Participation Evaluation Strategy (APES) at University of Hertfordshire

The University of Hertfordshire serves a diverse student population with a complex landscape of risk factors, ranging from socio-economic disadvantage to mental health challenges. Therefore there is a need for a robust, institution-wide approach to evaluating its access and participation work. To address these challenges, the university developed APES—a strategic framework that embeds evaluation into the lifecycle of every intervention.

Key Approaches

Planning support: Models have been developed to guide intervention design including theory of change templates, designed to create a coherent evaluation ecosystem by standardising planning and reporting.

Evaluation templates: Evaluations are stored in a format that is easy to navigate and understand, using templates aligned with the university's Access and Participation Evaluation Strategy (APES).

Evaluation Evidence Library which includes completed evaluations of APP-related initiatives. Staff can use the library to inform the design of new interventions or refine existing ones based on prior evidence.

Evaluation Tracker: A shared system is used to monitor progress across initiatives.

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Centralised support: Staff draw on support from a small Data and Evaluation team and access to institutional data dashboards.

Benefits of this capability building approach:

- A model for strategic, embedded evaluation practice across the institution aligning with the university's commitment to evidence-based decision-making in tackling inequalities
- Empowers staff to design evaluations that are consistent and aligned with the university's broader goals for equity and inclusion
- Sustainable system for both accountability and learning
- The Evaluation Evidence Library captures lessons learned from past and ongoing projects, enables cross-departmental learning, and supports staff development, by making evaluation findings visible and reusable
- Supports evidence-informed decisions that evolves practices based on what works

- Collaborations for **stakeholder engagement**. Effective evaluation in higher education relies heavily on cross-departmental collaboration, drawing together academic schools, student services, and external partners to support institution-wide strategies - especially in access and participation initiatives that span multiple, decentralised areas. One of the central challenges is shifting mindsets, gaining stakeholder buy-in, and embedding evaluation into routine practice. Institutions have responded with the strategies that include early integration of theory of change models, the establishment of central evaluation teams to ensure consistency and quality, and the development of Communities of Practice that foster shared learning and support. The research highlights that stakeholder engagement thrives best when evaluation is framed as a collaborative, developmental tool—one that benefits staff and students alike by focusing on learning rather than judgment and actively involving them in the co-design of evaluation processes.
- Building evaluation capability through development of **training, resources and standardised tools** to support evaluation. Most of the case institutions were encouraging the adoption of mixed-methods toolkits for both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Additionally, the use of standardised tools, and flexible templates and frameworks like NERUPI, have helped build confidence and comparability across programmes. Agreeing a consistent way to prioritise resources for evaluation by agreeing what data and evidence will be used across different types of interventions had been important for a small provider in the sample.

Capability building example: Strategic Evaluation Design Framework at Leeds Conservatoire

Facing limited evaluation capacity, Leeds Conservatoire has developed a proactive, embedded approach to ensure that all APP activities are evaluated proportionately and consistently from the design stage.

Key Approaches

Front-End Evaluation Planning: Evaluation is integrated during activity design to avoid ad hoc, resource-intensive work later.

Activity-Level Prioritisation Tool: A custom tool determines evaluation requirements based on the intensity of activity (e.g. contact time, number of engagements). It categorises activities as: Low-intensity (focus on knowledge/attitude change via simple feedback and school-level tracking); Mid-intensity (adds evaluation of skills development); and High-intensity (includes evaluation of behaviour change, triangulated outcomes (e.g. teacher/parent input), and tracked progression data).

Baseline & Improvement Focus: Collects early data to set performance baselines and support ongoing improvement.

Partnership with SEER: External consultancy provides support with evaluation design and data analysis.

Benefits of this capability building approach

- Ensures consistent, scalable evaluation across all APP projects
- Makes best use of limited internal resources
- Sets clear expectations for project leads and delivery staff
- Supports strategic alignment with APP goals and regulatory frameworks

- **Building evaluation capacity** by linking it into staff continued professional development (CPD) programmes. Development of training sessions and resources for staff on evaluation was a common theme. There is potential for evaluation training into HEA fellowship pathways and CPD frameworks. As well as developing staff CPD to increase knowledge and expertise in evaluation across the institution, one case institution was utilising the opportunities from staff-led research projects to increase the capacity for

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undertaking evaluation studies. Staff undertaking PGCHE or Masters in Education qualifications are encouraged to embed APP-related research into their studies - linking academic development with institutional evaluation goals. Some of the case institutions were delivering sessions training staff members in data literacy to improve data quality and interpretation. This was part of linking APP evaluations to evolution as data-driven organisations (i.e. treating data and data systems not just as a technical asset, but as a strategic driver of decision-making and innovation, as part of an evaluative culture).

Capability building example: ULaw: Building Staff Understanding to Support Evaluation and Equity

The APP process identified that ULaw has a number of unexplained equity gaps. ULaw recognises that building staff understanding of student challenges is a critical foundation for tackling gaps, driving forward improvements and institutional change.

Key Approaches

Training & Awareness-Raising: Delivered through curriculum development sessions, academic support training, staff networks, and a new *Active Ally Network*.

Research-Informed Insight: Staff are exposed to thematic research on underrepresented groups to prompt reflection and equity-focused practice.

Workload Modelling: Evaluates available staff capacity to engage in equity and evaluation activity institution-wide.

Integrating Evaluation with Staff Development: Staff undertaking **PGCHE or Masters in Education** qualifications are encouraged to embed APP-related research into their studies—linking academic development with institutional evaluation goals.

Benefits of this capability building approach

- Strengthens collaboration between academic staff and the WP team
- Builds institutional evaluation capability in a non-research-intensive context
- Encourages reflective, contextually grounded inquiry aligned to APP goals
- Promotes knowledge-sharing across the academic community beyond compliance

- Developing centralised resources for **reporting and sharing** evaluations. As well as shared resources to support effective planning and implementation of evaluations, case institutions were working on mechanisms for transparent reporting of evaluations in a way that helps to put evidence-based learning and decision making into ongoing access and participation practice. The emphasis in the case institutions on 'closing the feedback loop' through the effective use of evaluation findings not only highlights the role of evaluation staff in supporting a positive environment for reflection and change, but also the role of central coordination in helping others within the institution to deliver high-quality provision as part of a continual improvement approach. Networks for sharing learning from evaluation, communities of practice, and repositories for disseminating evaluation results were some ways in which evaluation teams in the case institutions were facilitating this. In some cases, communication of raw evidence/results in accessible formats - such as dashboards - was also a feature and these appear to encourage clarity and build engagement of stakeholders. By embedding evaluation evidence into the reporting process, evaluations can serve not only as retrospective analyses but as proactive instruments for improvement - strengthening stakeholder engagement and promoting evidence-led decision making across institutions.
- Deepening student engagement in evaluation through **co-creation and participatory approaches**. Various approaches were identified at institutional and project/programme level. These included structured evaluator training schemes that build student capacity to lead and shape evaluative activity; student representation within evaluation steering groups; longitudinal student panels to track lived experiences over time; staff-student partnerships to co-design interventions and evaluation; and use of qualitative research method such as focus groups and qualitative interviews to explore students' perceptions. These types of approaches illustrate a wider sector shift toward participatory evaluation where student voice becomes integral to institutional learning and improvement.
- Using **'outcome harvesting'** to work backward from observed changes to identify how interventions may have contributed to them. While it is not always explicitly named in institutional strategies, case institutions were tending towards outcome harvesting-like approaches where cause-and-effect relationships are unclear or where multiple factors influence change. This is emerging particularly in relation to marginalised groups because of the overlap with participatory processes in identifying and verifying outcomes. For example, one case institution plans to collects student-led reflections on change (e.g. confidence, belonging) such as through an engagement programme and student panel, and by including qualitative research into project

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and programme level evaluations. Another is gathering student narratives and survey data to identify shifts in awareness and belonging, then maps these back to intervention design. These approaches have enabled evaluators to identify observable changes in aspects related to student behaviour, confidence, or engagement.

Capability building example: Co-creation with students approach at LSE

LSE has embedded co-creation with students—especially through partnership with the Students' Union—as a core principle of its Access and Participation Plan (APP) strategy.

Key Approaches

Collaborative Design & Delivery: The latest APP intervention for low-income students (IS3) was co-designed with LSESU, who also co-leads its delivery and evaluation.

Institutional Culture Change: The approach aims to rebalance power dynamics, foster mutual learning, and promote student confidence, metacognition, and belonging.

Inclusive Education Panels: Students participate in termly Student Education Panels (SEPs) and sub-panels to reflect on themes like assessment, transition, and digital learning. Outputs include recommendations shared school-wide and showcased in practice events.

Evaluation Internship Pilot: A new APP Evaluation Internship will enable students to co-design and co-deliver evaluations, promoting authentic student voice in assessment processes.

Benefits of this capability building approach

- Strengthens institutional capability and understanding of students' requirements
- Aligns with inclusive education values
- Supports long-term cultural transformation—while acknowledging and navigating potential barriers like power imbalances and inclusivity gaps.

4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Key Findings

All the case institutions were working to embed evaluation into the design and delivery of initiatives, rather than treating it as an afterthought. This shift required cultural change - encouraging staff to see evaluation as a tool for learning, not just accountability. Policies and resources were needed to support cultural transformation and stakeholder engagement, along with strong institutional commitment and leverage of institutional data systems.

Evaluation is influenced by the context of higher education provision. Specialist, post-1992, and elite institutions face distinct challenges in terms of evaluation design and data interpretation. Most evaluators in case institutions were working on methodologies for theory-based impact evaluations: the theory of change framework provides consistency in overall approach whilst being flexibly applied across various projects and programmes, plus it can help to plan for learning to improve delivery.

Other helpful practices identified in the research include: making evaluation a foundational part of project planning (i.e. embedded at an early stage); alignment between goals, activities, and outcomes and clear success metrics; track Interventions using dashboards or databases to monitor progress and results over time. Formative and summative evidence was being used as part of an iterative evaluation approach across the intervention lifecycle.

Evaluation should not be 'for its own sake' but used strategically to inform action. Different stakeholders in evaluation benefit in different ways: practitioners were looking to adjust delivery based on real-time insight; those in strategic roles were aiming to inform broader programme design and resource allocations; and governance teams wanted to ensure alignment with institutional and OfS priorities.

4.2 Recommendations For University Leaders

- **Design for evaluation from the start**: use theory of change in planning, identify specific outcomes indicators and define the data points, focus on priorities that matter, beyond basic compliance, and that help to identify the causal pathways by which the investment makes a difference.

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- **Measure what matters:** apply prioritisation tools to tailor evaluation depth, use validated frameworks, track intermediate outcomes (like agency, resilience, confidence), report inter-sectionalities and gaps as standard.
- **Grow evaluation capability through academic practice:** link staff qualifications with live APP evaluation, encourage practitioner-research projects, build Communities of Practice.
- **Focus on utility to different (priority) audiences:** use findings in real time, match evaluation depth to intervention maturity, embed evidence into decision-making cycles, use insights throughout the project lifecycle and not just at the end.
- **Blend qualitative and quantitative methods** in order to develop a rich picture, and to strengthen generalisability and explanatory power. Align the impact evaluation work with ongoing process evaluation, monitoring and tracking systems.
- **Build support for evaluation:** establish central evaluation support, use dashboards or databases to track interventions and outcomes, invest in shared tools to support data collection, linkage, tracking and analysis, foster cross-team collaboration and evidence sharing.
- **Co-produce with students:** identify what most matters to students and include student narratives in evaluation.

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ANNEX 1: RESEARCH METHOD

The research was undertaken in partnership with a group of seven higher education providers which cut across different provider categories, contexts, and student populations (Table A1.1). The sample was purposively chosen to ensure a varied range of contexts and viewpoints across the English higher education sector. Evaluation leads in institutions were invited to participate as project partners at the end of 2024, through a direct approach from NERUPI (the Network for Researching University Participation Initiatives).

Table A1.1: Profile of Partner institutions

Student Group*	Finance Group*	Size of student body	Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN) (*benchmark*)	Designation/Mission group
High tariff	QI £100m-£200m	15,001–25,000 students	6.5 (*8.2*)	Research-intensive
Medium tariff	QI £100m-£200m	More than 25,000 students	6.2 (*5.9*)	Post-92/Million+
Medium tariff	QI over £200m and less than 70% of income	15,001–25,000 students	8.9 (*8.2*)	Research-intensive
Low tariff	QI over £200m and over 70% of income	More than 25,000 students	7.2 (*10.0*)	Post-92/University Alliance
Specialist: creative	Specialist: creative	Fewer than 5,000 students	13.3 (*15.9*)	Conservatoire
Specialist: other	Specialist: other	15,001–25,000 students	13 (*14.2*)	Private provider
High tariff	QI over £200m and less than 70% of income	10,001–15,000 students	3 (*3.9*)	Research-intensive Russell Group

*OfS categorisation

In the first stage of the research the partners took part in an initiation meeting in January 2025, at which the project was discussed. Colleagues began to share details of their approach to evaluating impact of access and participation activities. There were group work activities to consider how data and evidence were being used within the case institutions, and the implications for the standards of evidence and the project. The second stage involved a series of in-depth interviews with colleagues in partner institutions. Nineteen interviewees (mainly in-person) were completed in total broken down by role as follows: evaluation leads and evaluators (12); managers/leaders (including service and academic leads) (7). Interviews were designed as 'key informant interviews' – i.e. targeting colleagues recognised for their insider knowledge and unique perspectives on the topic. This method is distinct in focusing on information-rich sources and aiming for depth of insight rather than breadth. A semi-structured interview script was used which included both general questions and provider specific questions. The interviews were supported by desk research to draw further insights into the evaluation approaches within the institutions including scrutiny of the latest APP documents.

The fieldwork topics were wide-ranging but included a concern to ascertain:

1. What effects are the standards of evidence having on current approaches to evaluation?
2. How do decision-makers in universities obtain knowledge about effective practices, what information do they need, and what role does impact evaluation play in this?
3. How are the standards supporting evidence-based decision making within institutions?
4. How are the standards supporting understanding of replicability and transfer of proven and promising practice including knowledge transfer across different institutional contexts?

The data from the interviews and desk research was analysed in two ways:

1. Qualitative analysis working towards exploratory findings with the aims of extrapolating some conclusions (and making some tentative generalisations).
2. Identification of specific approaches and methods in examples of evaluations in order to explore decisions and approaches in different settings where different issues and solutions are experienced (in order to describe and explain approaches to undertaking impact evaluations and the use of evidence in decision making).

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ANNEX 2: CASE INSTITUTIONS – EXAMPLE EVALUATIONS

Evaluation example 1: Loughborough University

Institutional Context

Loughborough University is a medium-sized, campus-based research intensive university delivering fulltime undergraduate provision. The University has an outstanding reputation for sport and sports-related subjects, although students are engaged in a range of subject areas across Business and Economics, Social Sciences and Humanities, Design and Creative Arts, Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. The vast majority of students are under the age of 21 (98%) and over 85% enter with A-levels or equivalent qualifications.

Priorities

The latest APP[10] sets out five intervention strategies focused by lifecycle stage which are: Pre-16 attainment and access to Loughborough interventions (IS1); Success-Continuation/Completion Interventions (IS2); Success-Degree Awarding Interventions (IS3); Progression Interventions (IS4) and Culture and Belonging (IS6) which is a cross-lifecycle programme which contributes to other strategies by cultivating an inclusive environment which fosters students' sense of belonging.

Key evaluation challenges

While the Access and Participation (AP) Team provides strategic support for evaluation, its effective implementation requires active engagement from practitioners and partners. Key challenges include integrating evaluation seamlessly into service delivery, creating incentives for academic collaboration, and driving consistency in approach across all areas of work. The majority of APP programmes use theory of change as the basis of programme design and evaluation from the outset, serving as a strategic foundation for aligning activities with intended outcomes. The AP Team provide ongoing guidance, training and support with theory of change development and evaluation execution, ensuring effective and meaningful evaluation throughout the programme lifecycle. The ambition is to increase the number of strong Type 2 and Type 3 causal evaluations (and specific opportunities for this have been identified in the APP in addition to evaluations reported at the intervention strategy level). Achieving consistency in terms of buy-in and ongoing use of theory of change as the basis for evaluating is challenging across all APP interventions. It has required a personal, gentle and non-judgemental approach to build expertise. A tiered evaluation approach ensures that the most rigorous evaluation is focused on interventions addressing the highest-risk areas. The organisation of intervention strategies by lifecycle stage means that clear outcomes and impacts can be identified in each case, but there is a need to continually review what is being delivered. In a dynamic delivery environment, emerging evidence can lead to programme changes during the course of an evaluation. While this responsiveness is valuable, it also presents challenges in maintaining consistency and ensuring that evaluation remain relevant and robust over time. Also the existence of several cross-lifecycle approach interventions (for example on culture and belonging) mean that the contribution of different activities across the institution to the achievement of singular objectives could be hard to unpick.

Evaluation example: Black and Asian Talent Programme

Intervention description	The Black and Asian Talent Programme is a two year programme supporting c400 students and seeks to address equality of opportunity in placement and progression outcomes for students from black and Asian heritage backgrounds (part of the Loughborough University Student Success Academy).
Activities	Activities include: a community and support network of peers to share knowledge in a professional capacity; opportunities to meet employers who are actively looking to attract candidates of black and South Asian heritage, having understood the importance of diversity within their workforce; support and advice to further develop students' skills in the recruitment process; inclusive 1:1 Placement and Transition Support Peer Mentoring for students in Year 1 and 2, working with final year students with shared lived experiences and providing students access to external organisations and employer partners with sector-specific mentoring and insight days.

[10] Loughborough University Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29 , https://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/access-participation/

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Evaluation approach aims	The evaluation seeks to collate qualitative and quantitative evidence to assess achievement of the intermediate objectives, particularly on whether students have secured a placement after participation in the Future Talent Programmes. The securing of a placement has historically been correlated with good degree awards and increased employability rates . This evaluation will aim to conduct a quasi-experimental design (QED) to compare participants with non-participating students to assess the impact on placements and employment.	
Organisation	The evaluation strategy is underpinned by a theory of change and evidence-based practice, which are being developed by the Project Lead and staff in Student Success Academy working with the AP team. The Access and Participation sub-committee will review evaluation findings/case studies.	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will Loughborough University measure?)	How will Loughborough University collect it?
	Short/intermediate term Students develop professional skills and can relate these to their studies. Students better understand the different career options available and what is required to realise their aspirations. Students are more motivated to achieve their academic goals.	Surveys Case studies
	Longer term: Reduction in degree awarding gap. Students make a positive transition into the workplace and adapt to a professional graduate working environment.	Quasi-experimental design to assess the likelihood that: • students will secure a placement; • students' employability will increase after participating in Black and Asian Talent Programmes.
Choice of evaluation design	The methods are consistent with Loughborough University's overall approach which seeks to employ mixed methods designs to understand what works, why, how, and for whom. The APP evidence framework is aiming to generate Type 2 and 3 causal evidence using student outcomes data and quasi-experimental designs where proportional and appropriate to capture impact.	
Conditions which underpin the approach	The Black and Asian Talent Programme is an intensive intervention with defined target participant groups for which a QED is possible because the outcomes are captured in student data systems.	
Strengths	The approach explores short/intermediate and longer term outcomes using different types of data and evidence (quantitative and qualitative) to explore the progress to achieving the outcomes in the theory of change. The evaluation is working towards a QED in order to achieve the most robust evidence of causality possible in this context.	
Limitations (and potential mitigation)	Attributing causation is difficult for these types of targeted programmes because of the number of confounding factors affecting the outcomes. Importantly those who participate in the Black and Asian Talent programmes may be more motivated and face different individual circumstances to those who do not take it up. The issue of subjectivity and response bias in terms of qualitative research also need to be considered when interpreting the results.	

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Evaluation example 2: Leeds Conservatoire

Institutional Context

Leeds Conservatoire (LC), an affiliate of Luminate Education Group, is a small specialist provider offering full-time, three- or four-year undergraduate courses in Music and Drama. Courses are vocationally-based, with practical, industry-focussed tuition which is designed to appeal to those who wouldn't consider themselves to be more traditionally academic.

APP Strategies

The latest Access and Participation Plan identified three intervention strategies: Access (IS1): A range of initiatives such as Partner Schools Scheme, bursary-supported Junior Conservatoire, summer schools, CPD for educators, and financial support for auditions; Role Model Coaching (IS2): A dedicated coaching scheme led by role model staff and alumni; Success (IS3): Specialist services covering disability support, health and well-being, financial aid, employability, and skills development. The strategies are designed to support students throughout their academic journey, from pre-application to progression into further study or employment. These strategies include two suites of activities and one stand-alone program, aligned with the approach of 'Teaching the Whole Student,' ensuring both academic and pastoral development.

Key evaluation challenges

Limited resources, constraints on staff time and lack of expertise for evaluation are the major challenges. Evaluation planning and oversight is led by the Access & Participation Manager, with contributions from specialist staff and external evaluation support. Evaluation of access activities is facilitated by recruitment, liaison, and outreach teams, while success-related activities are delivered through individual specialist services (the Specialist Evidence, Evaluation and Research (SEER) team from Applied Inspiration). LC employs a high number of part-time and fractional staff which present some challenges in embedding institutional priorities and achieving consistency. The APP manager provides updates throughout the year for managers to disseminate to their teams, awareness days and training opportunities.

Evaluation example: 'Zero to Hero' intensive outreach programme

Intervention description	'Zero to Hero' is an intense outreach programme for pupils in years 7-8, which targets students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (IMD Quintiles 1 and 2), FSM-eligible students and students from the Global Majority.	
Activities	A programme of activities are delivered in schools and on campus which is designed to raise attainment through musicianship skills and support awareness of pathways of music.	
Evaluation approach and aims	The evaluation will generate Type 1 and Type 2 evidence and aims to establish whether the intended outcomes are being achieved in line with the theory of change for the programme.	
Organisation	Access activities are facilitated by recruitment, liaison, and outreach teams. Activities are overseen by the Access & Participation (A&P) Manager, with approvals and reviews carried out by the EDI&AP Committee, chaired by the Vice Principal. Reports are shared with various institutional boards for further oversight.	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will LC measure?)	How will LC collect it?
	Cognitive and metacognitive outcomes. Motivation and engagement in learning. Self-perceptions about academic abilities and confidence. Improved awareness of HE/pathways to HE.	Baseline and annual student survey exploring interim outcomes and perceptions of Improved creative skills outcome. 2-3 student focus groups per annum from 2025-26, to explore key themes from surveys.
	Predicted/mock assessment grades. Creative skills. Achievement of Arts Award certification.	Annual end-of-year Teacher/Staff Survey exploring perceptions of achievement of outcomes for students.

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Choice of evaluation design	The evaluation design was informed by intended and projected standardised outcomes being adopted by SEER (which provides opportunities to increase the sample size, helping to mitigate the issue of small datasets).
Conditions which underpin the approach	Collaboration through the SEER service has meant LC has access to tools that would otherwise be unaffordable. The outcome measures draw on TASO guidance on best practices for evaluations with small cohorts and use validated scales. From August 2025, the A&P service will consist of key managerial and research personnel.
Strengths	The approach is achievable given the operational constraints and will ensure generation of evaluation evidence is embedded in delivery and results can be reviewed as they emerge. Evidence is triangulated from different sources (students and teachers). As a smaller provider, LC is well-placed to respond with agility to interim findings and emerging data. The approach supports formative as well as outcome evaluation to assess whether the activity is meeting the objectives and targets. LC aim to be responsive in flexing activity, responding to students and improving practices. Use of some standard measures means that evidence of outcomes can be reviewed along side other activities to consider the strategy as a whole and to understand how activities work together.
Limitations (and potential mitigation)	As a small, targeted activity the datasets will be small, which limits quantitative analysis of trends (although using a standard approach means that some evidence can be aggregated to allow for more robust quantitative assessment). The other limitation is the focus on short term/intermediate outcomes as proxies for longer term impact. However, concerning access activity, LC have noted the possibility of implementing tracking via the HEAT service, which would open up possibilities for assessing the longer term outcomes for participants (which will be explored via SEER). Appropriate data sharing arrangements have been put in place to facilitate this development.

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Evaluation example 3: University of Law

Institutional Context

University of Law (ULaw) is a leading for-profit provider of legal education and training, focusing on providing applied, practical learning to prepare students for real-world careers. ULaw offer degrees across multiple campuses and an online platform, making education more accessible to commuter students.

APP Priorities

The latest APP identifies four interventions strategies which aim to tackle replication of sector-wide inequalities in HE recruitment (IS1) (encompassing attainment raising support, online outreach engagement with third parties and contextual admissions for some groups); cost pressures (IS2) (which includes IAG around student finance and various student financial support; replication of inequalities in the professions (IS3) (which includes an advocate scheme, curriculum development and academic support activities, staff training, role models, professional preparation and engagement with employers and PSRBs); and barriers to student engagement (IS4) (which aims to deliver improvements in information and communication of support to students, better use of data/analytics and targeted disability support).

Key evaluation challenges

Lack of institutional knowledge, staff resource and staff time in relation to our access and participation work are the key challenges to APP evaluation. The WP team undertakes core evaluation work and increases capacity by supporting other staff to undertake high-quality evaluation of WP activity. ULaw is working towards all WP project owners having undertaken theory of change training by the end of 2025/26. Small sample size can be a challenge, especially for highly targeted interventions. For many interventions the outcomes relate to institutional or sector change and are complex and difficult to attribute to the interventions. One of the biggest challenges is that ULaw has many unexplained gaps. Evidencing causality is complicated due to the considerable number of factors influencing student behaviours and outcomes. There is an aspiration for Type 2 evaluations, with quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post intervention change, or a difference compared to what might otherwise have happened, but it is not currently feasible to have a counterfactual or comparator group for all activities.

Evaluation example: Racially inclusive curriculum development work

Intervention description	Inclusive curriculum development work at ULaw is part of an intervention strategy to prevent replication of inequalities within the Law profession, by increasing the completion rate of target group students and reducing attainment gaps.
Activities	Curriculum development work includes projects via an Inclusive Learning Group (ILG) (examples include staff training and development of resources); and involvement of Diversity & Inclusion Advocate and Widening Participation Champions in curriculum design (such as module reviews and curriculum review projects).
Evaluation approach aims	The evaluation is based on the evaluation of the racially inclusive curricula toolkit developed by Leicester University[11] which set out a mixed methods evaluation approach designed to assess what works in relation to improving racially inclusive best practice in taught curricula, the ways in which these kinds of interventions work, and what are the parameters and limitations for these kinds of approaches in relation to creating positive change.
Organisation	The activities will be developed collaboratively via project based work enabling staff and students to critically question and work to address the inequalities of the professions. The evaluation officer in the WP team provides support and maintains detailed information on each project, including the theory of change[12], evaluation methodology and timelines. Staff complete a project proposal form, which auto-populates the WP database and flags the submission to the WP

[11] Campbell, P. et al. (2022) Evaluating the racially inclusive curricula toolkit in HE. Available at: https://player.flipsnack.com/?hash=OTc1OUFBRkY4RDYrMTlhZDB3NDhhNg%3D%3D&p=14

[12] ULaw has made a commitment that all WP project owners will have undertaken theory of change training by end of year 1.

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	Evaluation Officer. The WP team undertakes core evaluation work. The Evaluation Officer prepares the evaluation and documentation for consideration by the Data Research and Evaluation (DRE) working group.	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will ULaw measure?)	How will ULaw collect it?
	Following Campbell (2022) effectiveness is measured against the following: Sense of relevance between taught module content and the lived realities and histories of students from minority ethnic backgrounds Confidence and racial literacy of staff Differences in assessment and award outcomes between students from White and minority ethnic backgrounds Levels of course satisfaction among students from minority ethnic backgrounds	Qualitative evidence will be drawn from focus groups interviews with current undergraduate students and academics. In terms of quantitative evidence, the aspiration is a matched difference-in-differences approach, however, current data limitations mean the analysis may be limited to the pre-intervention and post-intervention trends.
Choice of evaluation design	Given ULaw evaluation capacity constraints, the choice of mixed methods design seems practicable and allows the focus to be put on student outcomes. ULaw has been discussing the approach with other Universities and the proposal is for a similar methodology, which will allow for comparative evaluation which feeds into sector knowledge. The design includes some pre/post comparative data, along with work to address the how and why questions, which is achievable within the ULaw context and will deliver learning to help inform the work to better support APR students and will therefore benefit the institution and students.	
Conditions which underpin the approach	The Data, Research and Evaluation (DRE) working group have responsibility for consideration of all WP projects and the staff internet sets out a clear process flow (available to all staff), which outlines each step from project inception to final reporting. The WP Project Database contains detailed information on each project, including the theory of change, evaluation methodology and timelines. Staff complete a project proposal form, which auto-populates the WP database and flags the submission to the WP Evaluation Officer, who prepares the documentation for consideration at the next DRE working group meeting. The University's legal team and Data Protection Offer (DPO) have helped to develop relevant data sharing agreements and privacy notices for participants. Ethical approval is also obtained through the University's Ethics Committee. The University's Business Intelligence Hub supports with data analysis through the provision of accessible dashboards.	
Strengths	The development of a project theory of change means evaluation is embedded at the activity design stage. There is ownership within the delivery teams and the project owner works with the WP Evaluation Officer to develop the methodology and work through the evaluation planning process. The approach supports a process of improving over time and provides different types of data to support evidence-based decision making: including quantification of changes in outcomes for black and Asian students, along with qualitative data to understand how ULaw can best support students and understand their barriers and experiences, including the unintended/unforeseen outcomes and barriers which tutors might not be aware of. Using a framework that has already been tested is also strength, as is the potential to combine/compare results across other institutions. The qualitative evidence will demonstrate the transformative potential of the interventions in relation to improving minority ethnic students' senses of relatability and enjoyment of their taught curricula, and will highlight causal factors which underpin uneven experiences and gaps.	
Limitations (and potential mitigation)	A key potential limitation for evaluation of racially inclusive curricula interventions is understanding the extent to which practices are being reformed (which relies	

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on course instructors' self-reported data making internal validity problematic). Also it's difficult to attribute causality as there might be spill-over effects (students attending different types of modules and participating in multiple projects within the APP). There remains questions over what made the difference made to the outcomes. ULaw have subscribed to the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and intends to use this for student as well as outreach participant tracking, which could set up the possibility for future use of quasi-experimental evaluation designs, although this is as yet unclear.

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Evaluation example 4: University of Hertfordshire

Institutional Context

The University of Hertfordshire is a large Post-1992 institution whose vision is to 'power the potential' of students and for them to have fulfilling careers with impact locally, nationally and globally. Students are drawn from over 140 countries, and there is a large Postgraduate cohort. The APP student cohort represents approximately a quarter of students. Three-quarters (75%) of full-time UK-domiciled, undergraduate students have one or more WP characteristic.

APP Priorities

The latest APP identifies an overarching institutional objective and five targeted institutional strategies organised by priority risk groups. Interventions targeted at male students (IS1) include review of pedagogic approaches, an academic societies project and alumni/employer career mentoring. Interventions targeted at students who identify as Black or Asian (IS2) include anti-racism projects, race and ethnicity equity research fund, student advocates, inclusive learning, teaching and assessment and awarding gap action plans, and a leadership project for racially minoritised students. Interventions targeted at students with BTEC entry qualifications (IS3) include staff development and a tailored academic skills programme. Interventions addressing the needs of students who declare a mental health condition (IS4) include disability advocates, research and groups, new well-being roles, student and staff education sessions, therapeutic projects and resources for employers. Students who have been eligible for Free School Meals and Students from deprived areas (IMD Q1) are targeted by IS5, and interventions include a bursary scheme, transition support, an opportunity fund and internships, and careers support.

Key evaluation challenges

Historically, whilst there has always been a structured programme of evaluation in the widening participation team, however, projects that took place outside of the scope of the team in the wider institution would often take place without an evaluation plan in place or be inconsistent in their approach to evaluation. This distributed model requires central support to ensure that evaluation is consistently integrated into the design and delivery of all APP-related work. The Access and Participation Evaluation Strategy (APES) is being put in place to provide a strategic framework that embeds evaluation into every intervention. Embedding an evaluative culture and ensuring consistency in evaluation planning and reporting across departments takes time and resources, especially since frontline staff are time-poor and may lack prior experience or confidence in evaluation methods. The APES requires facilitation and continual reinforcement by the Widening Access and Student Success team, to avoid a risk of evaluation being deprioritised.

The University of Hertfordshire serves a highly diverse student body, including large proportions of students with multiple WP characteristics. The University has developed several Tableau dishoards for use in access and participation work, and incorporated WP characteristics (including FSM, entry qualifications, etc.) into existing dashboards used for reporting on the student lifecycle of admissions, continuation, awards, completion and progression. Evaluating interventions across intersecting identities is complex because it can be difficult to isolate the impact of specific initiatives on individual groups. For example, measuring the effectiveness of interventions in closing attainment and progression gaps is difficult when improvements are incremental or vary by cohort. Interventions are often co-designed and context-specific, making standardisation difficult, plus initiatives are often delivered alongside broader student support services: making it hard to attribute outcomes directly to a single intervention. The University is aiming to adopt quasi-experimental evaluation designs to compare matched groups (e.g. participants vs. non-participants) in order to accommodate for variability in delivery and allow for causal inference without needing full randomisation. Integrating student data and outcomes across systems in order to track student outcomes holistically requires additional resources and expertise to be put in place.

Evaluation example: Targeted Transition Programme

Intervention description	The transition programme for recipients of the University of Hertfordshire Bursary (low income) and other widening participation groups including Free School Meal (FSM) eligible students, will be a co-designed and co-delivered non-accredited programme. The aim of the programme will be to support students to successfully transition through their first year of undergraduate study. Content may include guidance on how to navigate support services,

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	understanding and seeking feedback, life skills for independent living and managing issues such as social anxiety and isolation. Key to the curriculum development will be the co-production element, so content and delivery format will be dependent on the contributions from student partners. Both FSM and IMD quintile 1 are measures of socio-economic status with moderate correlations to low income. Both require a social capital aspect to their intervention as well as an economic one. Because of these commonalities the interventions for the two at risk groups have been combined into a single intervention strategy. However, there are distinct objectives and targets to allow monitoring of risk-specific outcomes. Objectives for this intervention include outcome targets for reducing gaps in continuation, awards and graduate outcomes.	
Evaluation type, aims	The evaluation approach aims to show the positive benefits of attending the transition programme by comparing two matched cohorts of participating and non-participating students.	
Organisation	The activity lead will undertake a preliminary literature review to inform the project and then work in partnership with widening participation student ambassadors to co-create the programme. The development will be underpinned by a theory of change which encompasses transitional support for Level 4 students.	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will University of Hertfordshire measure?)	How will University of Hertfordshire collect it?
	Four parameters will be considered:	
	Confidence levels	Self-reported pre and post
	Self-efficacy	Self-reported pre and post
	Access to academic skills support services	Analysis of service records
	Year 1 retention rates	Student outcomes data.
Choice of evaluation design	Adopting a quasi-experimental approach will allow take into account uncontrollable variables of running the programme across different subject areas with multiple personnel involved, all of whom may employ different approaches to learning and teaching and support. The evaluation will analyse matched cohorts. A robust matching process will be needed to ensure validity'. There will be a need to account for confounding factors such as prior academic performance and engagement levels.	
Conditions which underpin the approach	The evaluation will be supported by the Data and Evaluation Manager who will detail the evaluation design on the APP Evaluation Design Template. Progress on APP-related evaluation will be tracked via an Evaluation Tracker and reported into the University's Access and Participation Delivery Group as part of a standing item on the meeting agenda. Ethics Approval will be applied for using the University's standard process. The University's Student Information and Planning team supports with data analysis through the provision of accessible dashboards and bespoke reporting on request.	
Strengths	Grounding the intervention in a theory of change provides a structured rationale for how and why the programme is expected to work, which strengthens the evaluation design. The evaluation includes both subjective measures (confidence, self-efficacy) and behavioural measures (retention, service usage), offering a holistic view of impact. Comparing matched cohorts (participants vs. non-participants) is a practical and ethical way to assess impact in an educational setting where randomisation may not be feasible whilst dealing with the problem of variability across departments. The use of dashboards and reporting tools offer a systematic approach and will help to ensure emerging findings from the evaluation can be used to refine or improve the programme over time. Involving student partners in the design and delivery can increase the programme's effectiveness and credibility. The co-designed nature and delivery across multiple subject areas means there could be potential for comparing	

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	across different variables which could affect comparability and outcomes in order to home in on what works in what context.
Limitations (and potential mitigation)	Confidence and self-efficacy are measured through self-reporting, so the evaluation will need to be alert to biases or inconsistencies (although the results will be triangulated with behavioural data).

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Evaluation example 5: London Schools of Economics and Political Science

Institutional Context

London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) is a small specialist social science institution, founded in 1895 'for the betterment of society'. It is a leading high-tariff institution which has a strong international profile. The undergraduate profile is relatively small: UK undergraduates represent only around 20% of LSE students.

APP Priorities

The latest APP identifies seven intervention strategies which encompass: A pre-16 attainment programme (IS1) (which includes outreach work in partnership with Imperial College London); Focused activities with students from low participation areas (TUNDRA) (IS2) (which includes springboard projects and contextual admissions policies); Activities targeted on low income households (IS3) (which includes tailored support for contextual offer holders); Activities towards an enabling environment for inclusive education (IS4); Activities to address the degree awarding gap (IS5); Activities to improve completion rates for students with a declared disability (IS6); and Support for care-experienced students (IS7).

Key evaluation challenges

Capacity in data analysis and monitoring have been identified as an area for development, specifically in relation to the APP - recent developments includes appointing a Senior Data Analyst and implementing a more robust APP monitoring process including an annual review of targets. The ambition is for data analysis and monitoring approaches to ensure that relevant data on APP targets and commitments is accessible to and understood by stakeholders and actively used by them. Tailoring analysis and monitoring to the needs of all stakeholders is being improved, so that insights will be consistently considered and acted upon. LSE has produced examples of evaluative practice in relation to specific activities, and the challenge now is to embed evaluation consistently across APP-related activities. LSE aims to increase investment into evaluation and analysis functions to improve capacity, and develop an ongoing programme of training on data, monitoring and evaluation for non-specialist staff. The relatively small UK undergraduate cohort limits the feasibility of many quantitative and experimental designs[13]. Evaluation work at LSE has emphasised developmental and utilisation-focused evaluation for improvement rather than large scale experimental evaluations.

Evaluation example: Contextualised Admissions and Offers

Intervention description	LSE has adopted a contextual admissions approach which involves applying additional admissions consideration to applicants who meet specific criteria, which may lead to a contextual offer being made.
Activities	Contextual admissions, which is the use of data and information in the assessment of applicants' attainment in the context in which it was achieved, has been in place since 2014. From 2020 onward contextual admissions target groups could receive a differential offer, which depending on the course, could be 1-2 grades below the standard conditional offer. The policy is supported by updates to admissions policies, dissemination of information via websites and advertising to outreach participants, and changes to the admissions platform.
Evaluation approach and aims	The evaluation looks at the patterns of awareness and the implications for admissions of contextualisation and differential offer to support the understanding of the theory of change for contextual admissions and assesses the impact. The evaluation builds on a previously conducted contribution analysis which is designed to assess and challenge the contribution to the outcomes, recognising the myriad of factors which impact on admissions decisions[14].
Organisation	The evaluation involves partnership working between the admissions selectors, the WP evaluation manager, and the APP evaluation lead.

[13] This was highlighted by an impact evaluation undertaken in collaboration with the University of Cambridge. TASO (2023) Efficacy Pilot Evaluation Report: London School of Economics' Disabled Students Career Appointments, https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023-10_TASO_LSE_Disabled-students-career-appointments-Efficacy_Pilot_Report_2023.pdf

[14] Contribution analysis seeks to test the reasonableness of concluding that the programme contributed to intended results. Based on Mayne, J. (2008) Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect, ILAC Brief No.16. https://nonprofitbuilder.org/storage/377/Contribution-analysis-An-approach-to-exploring-cause-and-effect-ILAC.pdf

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	Ultimate responsibility for monitoring the delivery and implementation of activities sits with APP Steering Group (APPSG) alongside monitoring of overall progress towards objectives and targets, while the APP Evaluation and Monitoring Group (APPEMG) coordinates and monitors the delivery of evaluation commitments.	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will LSE measure?)	How will LSE collect it?
	Increased awareness of LSE's contextual admissions and offers approach	Descriptive statistical analysis comparing self-reported awareness in offer holder and decliner surveys
	Increase in applications from target groups Increase in offer and conversion rates for applicants from target groups	Mixed methods contribution analysis project analysing impact on admissions stages/enrolment patterns (one-off) Descriptive statistical analysis of offer and conversion rates, and student experience/outcomes once at LSE (ongoing monitoring)
Choice of evaluation design	The approach builds on an evaluation of contextual offer making reported in 2025[15] which sought to capture the institutional impact of contextualised admissions and the mechanisms by which the policies operate (using a mixture of administrative, survey and interviews with admissions staff). This work developed the contribution narrative underpinning the use of contextual admissions that can be refined and tested in future evaluations. As it operated in 2022/23 the policy appears to have widening participation of targeted students by increasing the chances of applicants making LSE their first choice; by allowing students to enrol despite missing standard offer criteria; and by attracting some additional applications (although it did not widen the pool of applicants who received an offer). The ongoing evaluation will focus on statistical analysis of the offers and conversion rates and will supplement the information with analysis of data on awareness of the policies (to test external communication aspects) and evidence on the student experiences and outcomes once at LSE to test the evidence used for contextual offers (either data analysis comparing contextual offer holders to relevant peers, or longitudinal research).	
Conditions which underpin the approach	LSE is a small institution and highly selective: decisions on applicants and offers are based on individualised review of applications. The evaluation was underpinned by significant resourcing by admissions selectors to assess the decisions in terms of whether or not individual contextualised applicants needed a contextual offer to secure their place. The APP Evaluation and Monitoring Group acts as a community of practice to discuss the work and the group has worked with the School's Research Ethics Committee to agree the process for ethics review.	
Strengths	Given the complex and heterogeneous nature of admissions decisions by selectors and applicants, a mixed methods contribution analysis provides a systematic way of understanding the contribution of practices by developing a reasoned, plausible causal theory of how intended changes in the pool of admissions is understood to come about. The evaluation identifies the evidence on whether the policy contributes to widening access to the institution in line with objectives and takes account of the underpinning mechanisms (including students' awareness of the policy).	
Limitations (and potential mitigation)	Use of administrative data allows for analysis of patterns and associations but samples were small. Response and sample bias needs to be	

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[15] Schulte, J. and Benson-Egglenton, J. (2025) Evaluating the impact of contextual offers in highly selective institution: results from a mixed-methods contribution analysis. Higher Education Quarterly, 79(1). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hequ.12580

acknowledged in the use of data from surveys, which is mitigated through triangulation across data sources. There is also the issue of the extent to which contextualised applicants actually represented the target groups which the policy is seeking to attract given a degree of unreliability in the use of proxy data on which to contextualised (i.e. the use of postcode/area based measures to contextualise and the risk of the 'ecological fallacy' which is especially problematic for London areas).

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Evaluation example 6: University of Sussex

Institutional Context

University of Sussex is a public research university and is considered the first of the 'plate glass' university generation (established 1961). Teaching is research-led and designed to encourage critical thinking and a strong sense of purpose to broaden students' perspectives. The University offers over 500 undergraduate and postgraduate courses and has a global reputation and outlook, with 18,000 students from around 150 countries. Around 90% of students are under 21, significantly above the sector average (72%).

APP Priorities

The latest Access and Participation Plan identified six intervention strategies which are: Access (IS1) encompassing KS2 and KS3-4 programmes, attainment support (Year10/11), Maths and English GCSE resit support, a KS5 IAG programme supporting university knowledge and applications, and an access buddy scheme; Success-Continuation (IS2) which delivers transition support programmes including targeted support to facilitate sense of belonging; Success-Completion (IS3) which offers targeted support to mature students; Success-Attainment (FSM) (IS4) which is academic skills provision; Success-Attainment (Ethnicity) (IS5) which is a race equality advocacy project and a curriculum change connector project; and Progression (IS6) which encompasses different internship programmes, student consultancy, research and ideas funding, insight visits and entrepreneurship mentoring.

Key evaluation challenges

An assessment of APP evaluation practices at SU in 2022 showed that there was a lack of systematic attention to programme and evaluation design, and the structures for deciding on and learning from APP evaluations were not in place. Practitioner teams had tended to favour qualitative information, and there was a lack of evaluation culture, especially in relation to student success and progression activities. Since then, SU have been working to put in place strategic architecture to enable high quality, robust evaluation across the APP. This includes establishing a new specialist Research and Evaluation department that is operationally independent from intervention delivery teams. Clear governance mechanisms have been agreed for the department to ensure evaluation designs, implementation, and reporting is rigorous (with support from a new Academic Advisory Group, comprised of academics with a range of qualitative and quantitative methodological expertise and research interests in educational inequalities, to provide quality assurance). University of Sussex have committed to embedding Type 2 Correlational Evidence across all long-term, intensive, or multi-activity programmes (supplement by causal designs where possible), and to get greater surety on the plans each evaluation is being risk-assessed. Putting in place a centralised approach and enhancing the evaluation culture across teams and services takes time and as with all large complex organisations has challenges in terms of establishing effective working relationships between delivery staff and practitioners. This is especially the case as it involves the Research and Evaluation department working with professional service staff, and sometimes colleagues in Faculties and Schools, to support the monitoring of student experiences and outcomes as part of a Whole Provider Approach (WPA), as well as facilitating evaluations of specific interventions within subject areas. Ongoing developments in the context for APP work and evaluation are creating a further complication from an evaluation perspective: changes in personal and the funding model mean the context for implementation is somewhat unstable. A RACI Framework for evaluation is being used to make sure roles and expectations for evaluation are clearly specified and there is accountability for design, implementation, and strategic learning. University of Sussex has committed to undertaking an APP evaluation self-assessment annually and have set targets across different dimensions (strategic context, programme and evaluation design, evaluation implementation and learning from evaluations).

Evaluation example: BrightMed Access to Medicine Scheme

Intervention description	BrightMed is an award-winning longitudinal programme for year 9-12 students who live or study in Sussex to address equality of opportunity in access to medicine. BrightMed is part of Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) – a partnership established in 2002 between the Universities of Brighton and Sussex. It sits alongside a range of outreach initiatives (such as BrightIdeas, Hub Schools, virtual work experience, and monthly lectures) and is part of the UK Widening Participation in Medicine (WPMED) scheme and recognised by six other institutions offering medicine.

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Activities	The programme runs from Year 9 though to Year 12 with the same cohort of students. Each year incudes subject specific workshops which aim to increase student knowledge of medicine, and the events end with a four-day residential summer school, which includes admissions support and taster lectures. Students who successfully complete the programme and submit an evidence portfolio are guaranteed an interview at one of eight higher education medical schools, including BSMS and BrightMed students who meet the academic requirements get a reduced offer.
Evaluation approach and aims	Evaluation is being pursued jointly with the University of Brighton's evaluation team. The design includes a detailed theory of change and an empirical evaluation strategy that includes pre and post surveys as well as some qualitative interviews with prospective and current students who utilised the programme, plus process evaluation, and analysis of progression to medicine courses.
Organisation	The evaluation is a collaboration between University of Sussex, University of Brighton and BSMS. The two universities take on a notional case load of participants (split 50/50) and have responsibility for recording participation and outcomes in each case. Surveys and interviews are undertaken centrally.
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will SU measure?) / How will SU collect it?
	Short Term Increased capacity to make informed decisions about HE, particularly medical school Increased knowledge of course choice available at HE, particularly medical school Increased knowledge of academic life at HE, particularly medical school Increased knowledge of attainment needed to enter HE, particularly medical school — Pre and post surveys — Qualitative interviews with participants
	Long term Increased application to HE, particularly medicine and BSMS Increased enrolment in HE, particularly medicine and BSMS — Tracking applications and enrolments to SU by the SU participant cohort
Choice of evaluation design	The mixed methods approach is achievable across the BrightMed partnership and fits with University of Sussex's approach of seeking at least Type 2 correlational evidence of the benefits of outreach in terms of the change made to participant outcomes.
Conditions which underpin the approach	The evaluation is underpinned by a detailed theory of change and process evaluation. Implementation of the evaluation requires coordination of the research with students and there is a need for access to student outcomes data.
Strengths	The evaluation focuses on the outcomes and impact agreed in the theory of change and draws on different types of data (quantitative and qualitative). It collects pre- and post- evidence to assess what might have happened in the absence of the intervention. As far as possible the evaluation tracks outcomes for participants over time - although there are limitations with this because two HEIs are involved and student apply to other providers, for which outcomes data is currently less accessible. University of Sussex will be using the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) for tracking of the Sussex cohort, and intend to use this to provide internal Monitoring Reports to inform the evidence base and support decision making on the programme.
Limitations (and potential mitigation)	Reliance on surveys and interviews mean that there are potential issues to do with response bias and subjectivity. The impact evaluation is not the strongest design in terms of causality as outcomes are not currently reported against a

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control/comparison group. However, if systems for data sharing and the collection of student outcome data become better established, the partners could potentially consider a comparative design in future.

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Evaluation Example 7: University of East London

Institutional Context

University of East London (UEL) serves the community, focussing on connecting communities and industries and addressing skills needs locally and globally, fostering collaborations with businesses and local organisations to address workforce needs. UEL works with 2,500+ employers to develop career pathways, for example, in health sciences, technology, business and the arts. Provision includes for instance Apprenticeship Programme contributing to healthcare workforce development (such as leading physiotherapy apprenticeships nationwide).

APP Priorities

The latest Access and Participation Plan identified three intervention strategies: Targeted outreach and access (IS1), ensuring student success (through targeted mental health, belonging, inclusive academic practice, mentoring/buddying and financial support) (IS2) and Careers First, a whole university lifecycle approach to careers which includes a range of extra-curricular, co-curricular and embedded activities to support student career development, management and skill acquisition, including professional mentoring, work experience opportunities and other careers progression and development activities (IS3).

Key evaluation challenges

UEL has long-standing commitment to expanding higher education access and success amongst underrepresented groups. This means that equity resources and approaches have become highly embedded in the day to day work of academic delivery and student support. Diversity, inclusion, and social justice represent cross-cutting priorities and all faculties and staff share responsibility for student success and career progression. Whilst this institutional alignment enhances inclusivity, separating out student participation in and effects of specific APP activities can be a challenge, both for monitoring and evaluation. This is because many of the initiatives at UEL are intentionally embedded into business as usual delivery. Moreover, the demographic breakdown of UEL means that a high proportion of the student body falls within one or more of the targeted underrepresented groups. These factors make it challenging to attribute specific outcomes to individual APP initiatives. To address this UEL is creating a culture of evaluation, ensuring activities have a related theory of change, and clear goals to identify meaningful outcomes. A 'What Works' team has been appointed and going forward enhanced progress tracking against objectives and targets will be enabled through the development of school level APP data dashboards (see below). The What Works Team have significantly increased the evaluation capability for the new APP round, although, as elsewhere, most evaluation is collaborative and embedded.

Evaluation example A: Coaching for Success

Intervention description	Coaching for Success trains MSc students to act as coaches to BSc students within the Department of Psychology. Participating students will: feel more confident to continue their education via the degree programmes offered at UEL; be equipped to continue their education and aspire towards subject-specific postgraduate studies and/or employment (i.e. have the necessary academic and psychological skills for the degree programmes offered).	
Activities	Staff and students are engaged through the School of Psychology and programme leaders. Key activities include engagement of coaches on the MSc in Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) during induction and receive specific training and supervision. Coaching Sessions are delivered to students over at least six coaching sessions, plus a positive psychology-related workshop.	
Evaluation approach and aims	An underpinning theory of change provides a coherent narrative of aims. The evaluation draws on pre/post measures including using validated measures, supported by student feedback. UEL data systems monitor the coach – client partnership progress, visualised on a PowerBI dashboard (see example at Figure A.1).	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will UEL measure?)	How will UEL collect it?

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	Demonstrated improvement in participants' psychological wellbeing	Measured by pre and post flourishing scale implemented during intake and final session
	Growth in academic confidence	Measured in pre and post surveys using an Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) scale
	Overall coaching experience feedback	Feedback questionnaire collected during the final session
Choice of evaluation design	The evaluation approach fits with developments in UEL to put in place a data driven strategy supported by centralised evaluation planning and reporting supported by the What Works team to achieve a systematic and consistent approach across the APP.	

Evaluation example B: Careers and Student Enterprise (CaSE)

Intervention description	CaSE is taking forward UEL's vision to be a Careers First institution: A Whole Lifecycle Approach. It is a large programme containing several workstreams (initiatives) which are designed to support students to progress and to complete tertiary education, as well as develop students with soft skills that will prepare them for the jobs of the future.	
Activities	Activities are classified according to four types: Coaching; Inclusivity; Mentoring; Outreach.	
Evaluation approach and aims	An underpinning theory of change provides a coherent narrative of aims. The management and evaluation of the programme is supported by monitoring data, visualised on PowerBI dashboards. The dynamic reports summarise the arms of the programme's initiative and the engagement along the various stages of the student lifecycle (access, success and progression) (see example at Figure A.2).	
Indicators and data	Indicator (what will UEL measure?)	How will UEL collect it?
	Process and Implementation	Tracking participants' engagement through usage dashboards
	Participation	Segmented participants' engagement – comparison of uptake over time (Type 2)
	Intermediate outcomes	Tools and surveys (pre/post) according to aims (for example, skills-based outcome measures on skills development platform and students' career confidence and readiness)
		Case studies
Choice of evaluation design	The evaluation approach fits with developments in UEL to put in place a data driven strategy supported by centralised evaluation planning and reporting supported by the What Works team to achieve a systematic and consistent approach across the APP.	

Organisation

The project co-ordinators lead on engagement and quality assurance. The What Works team helps plan evaluations, process and analyse data collected. The APP dashboard is used for 'health checks' and annual reports are shared within the teams (and published online). Dashboards are made available at the project and APP programme level. Operational oversight is provided by the institutional APP Steering group (APPSG) which is chaired by the PVC E&E.

Conditions which underpin the UEL approach

A core monitoring framework has been agreed to make sure project leads are collecting and monitoring data

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from projects in a consistent way. The core framework includes standardised characteristics against which engagement is measured and agreed dates in the academic cycle when data is shared and reported.

Strengths

The approach integrates mixed methods and monitoring to make judgements about what is being delivered. The student outcomes are in terms of intermediate indicators of success, relating to engagement and psychosocial outcomes rather than academic or progression outcomes. However, the work is framed by a theory of change model which aligns the APP with student outcomes which mediate long-term educational outcomes (such as attainment and progression). Investment has been made in safe and ethical data systems, to allow for data sharing and recognising the interface between different projects and activities). Project health check reviews and service-level monitoring are designed to indicate where services may not be meeting the specific needs of some students. The focus on monitoring also sets a strong foundation for future type 2 and 3 evaluation which relies on high quality engagement data.

Limitations (and potential mitigation)

The data systems are in development (and therefore could be subject to delays in what can be reported). A range of data is being collected but it could be that not all data can be shared very well (e.g. challenges in integrating quantitative data with qualitative feedback). Because many 'business as usual' academic support provisions and professional services are included in the APP as part of an inclusive approach, there are many touchpoints with students. Consequently the generation of comparison groups is challenging because services are not typically limited to specific target groups.

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Figure A.1: Example Programme Dashboard

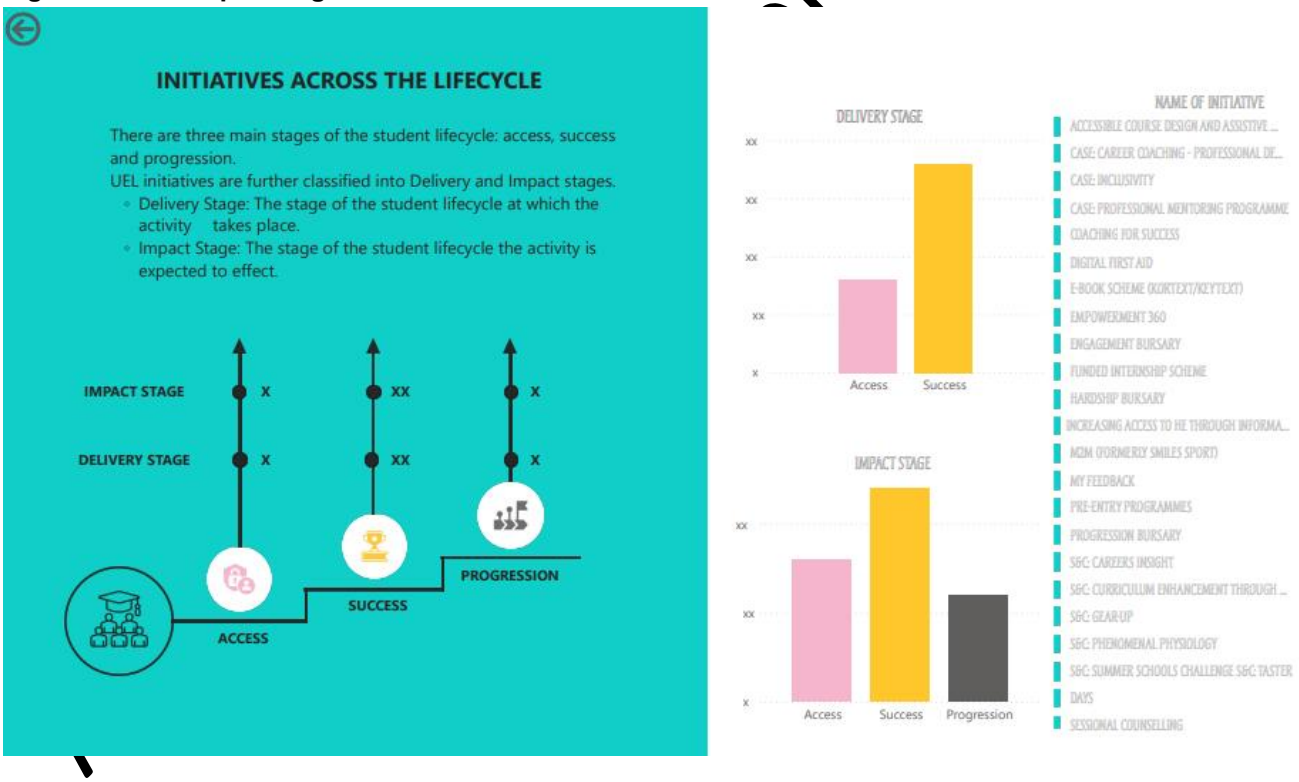
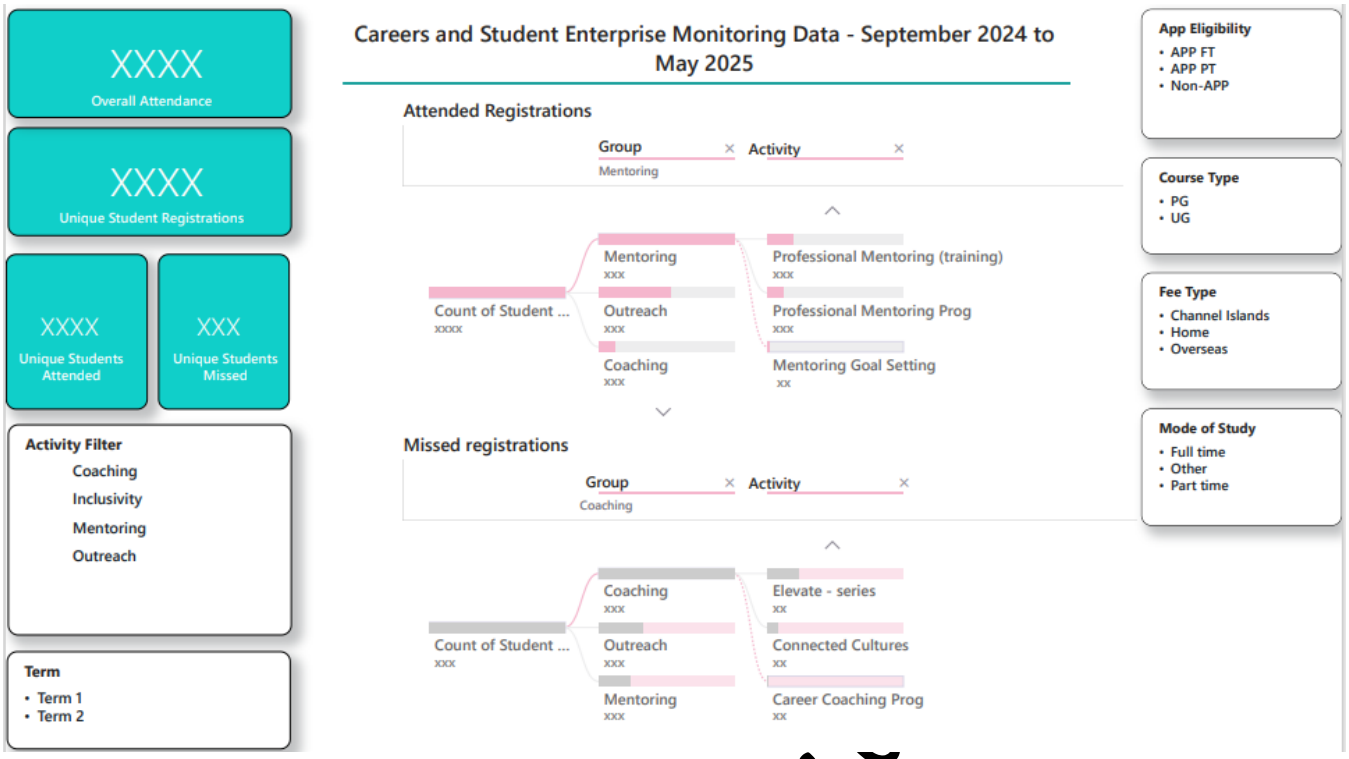


Figure A.2: Example Project (CaSE) Dashboard



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