IMPROVING THE EVALUATION OF OUTREACH

Interview Report

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report describes key features of current outreach activity and its evaluation, as conducted by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England. The report analyses and summarises key points from interviews with widening participation staff in eight institutions, to understand current practice and challenges related to outreach evaluation. The report will be of interest to anyone wanting to gain a clearer understanding of current outreach evaluation practice across the sector, and an idea of areas where more support is needed.

This project is commissioned and contracted by OFFA, with additional funding from the Department for Education and the Sutton Trust. The Principal Investigator is Dr Claire Crawford (Department of Economics, University of Warwick), working closely with Dr Siobhan Dytham (Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick). The first phase of this research has involved a scoping exercise to understand current practice and challenges. This has led to the development of Standards of Evidence and Recommendations. These will be developed further and tested in the second phase of the project.

Key Points and Conclusions

A key learning point from this research is that there is a very wide variety of contexts in which outreach work is taking place. Institutions have hugely varied levels of resources, staff time, skills, experience and support from their wider institution. Additionally, the location of institutions (for example rural or city) and the demographics of the local population also vary, and these have a huge impact on outreach. As a result, staff felt that general advice and guidance for the sector often did not apply to them or could not be made to work in their particular context.

Key challenges and areas where more guidance is needed relate to a lack of time and resources, data (both collecting and analysing), getting people 'on board' with evaluation, and a lack of benchmarking and consistency across the sector. Two key aspects which were identified as supporting evaluation work were the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and empowering staff.

Challenges in Evaluation Work

In the interviews staff highlighted a number of challenges in carrying out evaluation work. These broadly fall into two categories, the first of which is 'challenges within institutions', which relates to the time, resources and skills of people involved in outreach evaluation work. The second category is 'wider sector challenges', which relates to shared data issues and experiences across the sector, lack of consistency, and lack of clarity around benchmarking and standards.

Data challenges: This was one of the broadest areas of concern for staff. In general, people talked about using similar data from key sources such as the National Pupils Database and HESA. Therefore, they expressed many of the same difficulties. These mainly revolved around getting access to data, having all off the data that is needed, having data in the form that you need it, getting data at the time that you need it, and the high level of staff time and resources needed to deal with these challenges.

Lack of time and resources: In general, many of the staff felt that their teams were small and that they had a small amount of resources given the large task they are charged to deliver. Due to these time constraints and the feeling that evaluation methods became repetitive, and therefore less useful, in some cases data was being collected but not analysed or used. There were also resource constraints relating to money, accesses to academic staff, and access to relevant software and tools.

Getting people 'on board' with evaluation: Another challenge is balancing outreach delivery and outreach evaluation. These were talked about as competing priorities and, given the time and resource constraints, making time for evaluation can be a challenge. A number of challenges were also identified in relation to 'managers' or 'senior leaders'. People in these positions were sometimes felt to be less invested in outreach, meaning that they were not fully invested in evaluation and improvement.

Resistance or Challenges relating to Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs): A number of staff were very positive about RCTs and expressed a desire for further guidance on how to carry out RCTs. However, they noted that when discussing this with others they had experienced some resistance. Similarly, in the interviews some staff expressed concerns about the practicality and ethics of RCTs themselves.

Lack of consistency: Staff alluded to there being a lack of consistency, both within institutions and sector wide. Altering processes to meet changing demands was felt to be a drain on resources and made It difficult to embed long term plans and process which could deliver longer term evaluations. Staff talked about this change coming from a number of key areas: change in staff, a lack of consistency across the sector, and changing targets and directives from external bodies and organisations.

Benchmarking and setting clear standards: Staff expressed a desire for some sort of 'benchmarking' or an ability to check 'how they were doing', both compared to other institutions and compared to sector expectations, since at present they felt as though they were not able to do this and were not sure how to rate their performance or ensure that they were exceeding minimum requirements. Staff also talked about difficulties in selecting a best practice example for monitoring returns as they are not clear on what basis evaluation will be considered 'best practice'.

Areas that Support Evaluation

Things that were considered to support evaluation were institutional support for evaluation, having the team 'on board', working with academics and other specialists, strong personal relationships with schools, and HEAT.

The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT): This service offers a number of benefits including: enabling universities to get information about student that do not attend their institution, providing some stability in a sector where 'continual change and instability' is highlighted as a key challenge, enabling staff to track student across multiple interventions.

However, there were still a number of challenges or limitations of HEAT that were highlighted. The first of these relates to the issue of students who are not recorded on HEAT. This could be due to issues around consent, staff not having the time or resources to record all students, or nearby institutions not being a member of HEAT. There were also concerns about too much focus on tracking as the dominant form of evaluation. It was felt that what HEAT, and other similar services, offered is important but is only part of the story. Also, tracking involves waiting until students reach certain attainment levels or the age where they access university, meaning that staff can have to wait a very long time before they are able to evaluate a programme. From a practical perspective, this can be a problem if this is the only form of evaluation as there is then no information to inform programme planning in the interim. Therefore, other types of evaluation were felt to be important complements.

Qualitative Evaluation

Staff with higher levels of qualitative experience expressed the feeling that qualitative methods are often overlooked and not supported within the sector. However, there was a perception that qualitative methods are mostly providing formative information. Qualitative methods also seem to sometimes be used to support marketing and programme promotion rather than robust evaluation.

This is potentially linked to issues with the type of qualitative analysis being carried out. There was very little mention or knowledge of more advanced qualitative analysis techniques. This suggests that there is a need for more training and guidance on advanced qualitative data collection and analysis. However, this must come with the acknowledgement that staff do not necessarily have access to certain software or have time to carry out qualitative evaluation.

Guidance Content

People did not want guidance to be too basic/simple, too long, too academic/research focused, or too prescriptive/unrealistic

People want guidance to be accessible for practitioners, differentiated, and empowering.

People want guidance on:

Common standards and benchmarking: There was a common concern that people did not know how good the evaluation practice at their institution was in comparison to the sector as a whole. There was a lack of clarity about what the minimum standards or requirements are, and how evaluation work would be perceived by OFFA and others.

Data: People expressed frustration about using data from sources such as the National Pupil Database (NPD), as it was a long and complex process. Therefore, advice on better ways to access this data would be valued. Additionally, more discussion of the data sources available and more complex discussion about appropriate/inappropriate ways to draw conclusions from this data were requested.

Showing Impact more robustly: There seems to be a reasonable level of awareness of methods such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs). In terms of RCTs, people faced challenges such as resistance from schools, questions about ethical issues, difficulties with keeping the same schools and students involved throughout the process, and collecting the relevant data. Therefore, people wanted guidance on how use these more robust methods and tackle these challenges.

Embedding evaluation: A challenge is how to develop and embed evaluation into pre-existing programmes. Ideally evaluation is considered in the planning stage, but this has not always been the case historically. Therefore, staff may have programmes and activities which are already running but do not have a clear evaluation framework in place. There was a call for guidance on this.

Further Reading: People wanted to be able to access different levels of information and read more if it was relevant to them. One way of achieving this is by guiding people to further advice and toolkits.

Conclusion: Points to Take Forward

- The higher education outreach sector is very broad and varied.
- Two key aspects which can support evaluation work are tracking services, such as HEAT, and empowering staff.
- The points above about guidance should be considered and taken forward.
- Feedback for OFFA
    - There was a lack of clarity about what the minimum standards or requirements are, and how evaluation work would be perceived by OFFA and others.
    - Targets and directives from external bodies and organisations change too frequently and are expected to be implemented too quickly.
    - People wanted more feedback on the evaluation that they submit in monitoring returns.
    - There seemed to be some confusion about what OFFA's stance is in regard to evaluation and what would constitute a 'good approach' to evaluation.

Project Background

This report describes key features of current outreach activity and its evaluation, as conducted by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England. The report analyses and summarises key points from interviews with widening participation staff in eight institutions, to understand current practice and challenges related to outreach evaluation. The outreach with which the report is concerned is aimed at young people from groups that are currently under-represented in higher education in England with the objective of raising their aspirations and attainment, so that they may apply to higher education with the grades to be admitted.

Universities and colleges in England invest substantial sums of money in outreach schemes (a total of £136.1 million in 2016-17 access agreements). All institutions, agencies and individuals involved have incentives to ensure that resources allocated to outreach activities are being spent strategically and as effectively as possible.

OFFA has challenged universities and colleges to improve their evaluation. The research project which this report presents is intended to support HEIs in meeting that challenge by helping HEIs to understand more about effective evaluation and thereby to enhance evaluation practice across the sector, in ways which take account of each HEI's specific context and aims.

This project is commissioned and contracted by OFFA, with additional funding from the Department for Education and the Sutton Trust. The Principal Investigator is Dr Claire Crawford (Department of Economics, University of Warwick), working closely with Dr Siobhan Dytham (University of Warwick). The full team of researchers are listed under the project management section of this report, along with the names of the members of the project Steering Group.

Objectives

Specifically, the research project underlying this report has attempted to meet three main aims:

- To improve the understanding of the impact of outreach on access to higher education for students from disadvantaged groups
- To improve evaluation practice across the higher education sector in England
- To help OFFA make robust, evidence-led policy that supports and challenges institutions to identify and use the most effective approaches to improving access

Guidance

This report details findings of phase 1 of a two-phase project. The initial research and scoping in phase 1 has produced preliminary guidance which will be developed and tested in phase 2. Many guidelines and resources relating to outreach evaluation already exist (see Appendix 1 for a list of resources). Therefore, to ensure that guidance is useful, usable, and not simply repeating existing work, this initial scoping phase has been important. This report details the findings of scoping interviews with staff from eight institutions to give some context to resulting guidance.

Why Evaluate?

Section Summary

This section summarises responses to the question '**why evaluate?**'. In interviews staff were asked why their institutions offered outreach projects and why this work is evaluated. These conversations highlighted **six key motivations for evaluation** (see page 6).

This section begins with a summary of **key concerns and gaps highlighted in evaluation and widening participation research literature** relating to the evaluation of outreach work.

In their Briefing Document, Dytham and Hughes (2017) identified a number of key concerns and gaps in knowledge in widening participation and outreach research and evaluation. These include:

- Research has focused more on barriers to progression than 'bridges' i.e. the benefits and advantages that allow some groups to progress further or more easily than others.

- Research is predominantly focused on social class and socio-economic status, potentially creating a lack of focus on other aspects or intersectional approaches (Shaw, 2009).

- There is a lack of longitudinal research, meaning that it is difficult to know the long-term impact of outreach initiatives, or to fully appreciate widening participation as a broader, longer term problem. In general, it is acknowledged in the literature that longer term tracking of students has been ineffectual or absent, meaning that the outcomes for students are unknown and the actual impact of initiatives cannot be accurately assessed.

- Often the research lacks comparator groups or comparative approaches. Kettley (2007) argues that many of the studies which make claims about certain groups in relation to widening participation, do so without considering or comparing them to alternative groups. Without comparison groups it is impossible to know which experiences and barriers are specific to certain groups, and which may be broader issues which affect multiple groups of students (Gorard and Smith, 2006).

- An important issue highlighted in the literature is the difficulty in assessing whether certain initiatives have been effective. As there are a very large number of factors involved in any student participating or not participating, it is difficult and potentially impossible to attribute cause and effect to specific interventions (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). An additional problem is that much of the data collected in relation to these types of initiatives and programmes are local and fairly context specific, so it is not clear how robust, reliable or generalisable this research is. This means that knowledge about the success or impact of initiatives is often partial, and it is unclear whether findings from these studies can offer insights for future initiatives in different areas or contexts.

- The field has been under theorised, meaning that there is a lack of clarity and consistency about terminology, approaches, and desired outcomes (Reay et al., 2005; Kettley, 2007). Indeed, 'the whole area needs to be understood more fully, defined more clearly and for policy and interventions to be more effective they need to be informed by a range of high quality research involving an inclusive methodological vision and a rich theoretical tapestry'

(Doyle and Griffin, 2012: 86). In terms of evaluation, there is usually more focus on methods than theory (Smith, 2012). Programme evaluation is dominated by a pragmatic perspective meaning that programme evaluation theory currently lags behind programme evaluation practice (Stufflebeam and Coryn, 2014). See the briefing paper (Dytham and Hughes, 2007) for a brief overview of key theoretical approaches.

- Targeting students is also identified as a challenge. Harrison and Hatt (2010) highlight the problems in using area-based approaches for targeting, arguing that these approaches often include many students who were not intended for targeting, and miss many very disadvantaged students who live in other areas.

Six Key Motivations for Evaluating Outreach

In the interviews conducted for this study, staff alluded to some of the drivers behind their evaluation work and some of the reasons that they evaluate their outreach work. Also, towards the beginning of the interview, participants were explicitly asked 'Why do you evaluate?' From this, six key motivations for evaluating outreach work can be distilled:

a) To see if programmes/projects 'work'
b) To inform future practice and continue to develop programmes/activities
c) To justify the money spent
d) To demonstrate success
e) To develop and contribute to the sector's knowledge
f) Because they are required to

a) To see if programmes/projects 'work'

A strong motivator was wanting to test whether outreach programmes/activities 'work' i.e. did they meet the aims and objectives and do they have an impact on students.

> "We need to know whether things that we do are working, meeting the aims and the objectives that we've set out from the beginning."

> "We evaluate because we want to know whether the intervention that we're putting together has had any impact on a range of different levels"

> "Essentially, whenever we have set up an activity there will be particular learning outcomes that we want to test. There will be outcomes for the project that we want to test and it's checking whether we're actually meeting those."

b) To inform future practice and continue to develop programmes/activities

As well as using evaluation to look back over a project to see whether the aims and objectives were met, evaluations are opportunities to learn more about programmes/activities and use this to make changes for the future.

> "Most importantly, we want it to inform our provision, so what we do is we like to evaluate our interventions and the results of evaluations can and should actually inform everything that we do effectively."

> "I guess also from the point of view, from the formative point of view, we want to use the evaluation in the broadest sense to ensure that we are improving intervention and we are kind of regularly reflecting on what we do as an institution, as a set of practitioners, as a team… because I think obviously no one wants to stand still. "

c) To justify the money spent

Another key focus of evaluation was money and spending. Staff talked about money and the need to justify the amount of money spent both explicitly and more implicitly. This was partly to ensure that money was spent effectively, but also to ensure future funding.

> "We need to know whether the amount of money that we're spending on something is justified"

> "There's the institutional perspective, which is, you know, quite often where should we be our spending money and putting our resources?"

> "I recognise we're spending quite a lot of money on these activities, so it's important to know that they, you know, if it is, you know, it's difficult, is it value for money? "

> "I guess we also want… I find it difficult to talk about in terms of value for money because I think that is always quite difficult to quantify. We spend millions of pounds in this area"

> "I used to work for [REMOVED] before as well, so in my head I've very much got that, well you know, you need to prove value for money and you need to prove that things are working because actually, a lot of funding does come from HEFCE or from other sources and we need to prove that"

d) To demonstrate success

A key driver for evaluation was a feeling that it was important to demonstrate success in this area. This related to the reputation of institutions, building relationships with schools, demonstrating 'best practice' to contribute to the sector, and supporting and empowering staff by enabling them to demonstrate the value of their work.

> "as a university we're reasonably well advanced in that area and we want to continue to demonstrate sort of leadership and success"

> "with a view to ensuring that staff feel empowered that the work they do is valued by the institution, by the participants and obviously by the schools and other people as well."

> "Really it's about proving the value of what we do and trying to find out what is the value of what we do"

e) To develop and contribute to the sector's knowledge

Staff expressed a desire to not only learn from evaluation for their own project development, but also to contribute to the sector by adding knowledge of what works in terms of outreach.

> "And then there's the broader sector evaluation, which is okay can we learn stuff from this that might help other people?"

> "I think OFFA's very much pushing, and we agree really, that any evaluation you do should also be about contributing to the sector, so if we can say, well we know this is working, or this type of activity is working in this way for us, then that's something valuable and we should be able to share that. I think a lot of our evaluation historically has been very much about looking at the nitty-gritty of what we think works for us and what works in our context, but actually we have to be looking at it a bit wider and I'd say that's kind of where we are now, is how do we actually transfer this? Is this something we can also say to the sector?"

f) Because they are required to

Finally, quite simply, staff explained that they evaluate because they are required to

> "we're required to tell OFFA how we evaluate each year"

> "demonstrating accountability so that we can fulfil our OFFA and various internal reporting requirements"

> "obviously, we are obliged to"

Types of Evaluation

Section Summary

This section discusses the many types of evaluation methods and approaches currently being used to evaluate outreach work. This begins with a simple **list of all the methods** discussed in the interviews with staff.

This is then followed by a section focusing specifically on **qualitative evaluation** methods (see page 10). This again begins with a short **list of methods**, before reflecting on the **strengths and limitations** of using qualitative methods in the evaluation of outreach.

During the interviews staff mentioned a number of methods of evaluation. To give a sense of the breadth of methods used in outreach evaluation these are listed below.

- Before-after questionnaire/survey
- Qualitative questions on surveys
- Informal feedback from teachers, parents, or student ambassadors
- Formal feedback from teachers, parents, or student ambassadors
- Learning logs
- Online/Interactive voting systems (e.g. Turning Point)
- Value for money calculations
- Video or voice recorded feedback from students
- Case studies
- Photo diary (asking students to take photographs for a certain period of time).
- Tracking student progress and outcomes (e.g. using HEAT)
- Focus groups with students.
- Individual interviews with students.
- Annual conference with teachers to elicit feedback
- External evaluation
- Video (students create a video before, during and after the project).
- Retrospective qualitative research
- Social return on investment study
- Standardised tests (for example, a standardised reading test)

Qualitative Evaluation

In discussions about collecting and analysing qualitative data, staff mentioned a number of qualitative data collection methods, including:

- Focus groups
- Survey/Questionnaire
- Interviews
- 'Feedback'/'follow-ups'
- Video

The strength of qualitative approaches was that they were considered to add more depth and context to quantitative findings, to find "*the story behind it*". However, staff with higher levels of qualitative experience expressed the feeling that qualitative methods are often overlooked and not supported within the sector.

> "There is so much now about RCTs and it's very popular, obviously Sutton Trust have kind of got a lot of voice in that and have done some very good things, so I think there is that expectation that that's the standard in terms of evaluation, but that isn't what is working for us, so how do we kind of, how do we bridge that gap? What I think it is frustrating, you know, coming from, being very much a qual kind of person and seeing the value of those kinds of methods to not see that reflected, and that can be very frustrating."

However, there was also a common perception that qualitative methods are mostly providing formative information, and that once student opinions of a programme have been gathered there is little use in using qualitative methods further. Qualitative methods also seem to sometimes be used to support marketing and programme promotion rather than robust evaluation.

> "sometimes you can use those as quotes in kind of literature and things like that, but again, that's telling you the story that you want to know, It doesn't necessarily tell you the story about what their challenges are in terms of their progressions into higher education."

> "we share that with the schools. If it's any good we would use it to inform future publicity. If we would use it we might incorporate it in an annual report as part of wider portfolio of activities."

> "I mean it is used for the purpose as I say i.e. helping us on work, doing quotes for things, but it also helps when we're discussing the programme and with the teachers."

This is potentially linked to issues with the type of qualitative analysis being carried out. There was very little mention or knowledge of more advanced qualitative analysis techniques, and some of the analysis taking place involved simply picking out key quotes. Staff were asked about qualitative analysis software packages such as Nvivo, MAXQDA or Atlas.ti, but most people did not have access to these programmes or knowledge of what they are or how to use them for analysis.

> "But I don't use…I don't understand what some of those things are on there. I've not heard of them. So I don't use them. Nvivo and Atlas and… yes, I don't know what they are."

> I1: Do you know if, is any analysis done with the qualitative data, or is it mostly using quotes as kind of demonstrating things, or is any kind of coding or qualitative analysis done with?
> R: No, there will be no coding. We don't have that level of expertise and resources in the department.

I1: Do you use any like analysis packages like NVivo or MAXQDA or anything?
R: No, I don't have access to anything

Despite this there was a common expression of the idea of qualitative methods being easy, or at least easier than quantitative methods.

> "There's more qualitative than quantitative because it's just easier to collect, it's more accessible."

> "I think we tend to go for qual research methodology because it's easier."

This could largely be due to people not having knowledge of additional or more complex qualitative techniques, whereas knowledge of the existence of more complex quantitative techniques, even if there is not knowledge of how to actually carry them out, is more common. For example, discussion of RCTs was fairly common.

Staff who had a high level of experience in qualitative methods did talk about wanting to use more qualitative methods but that there are not the skills or knowledge available to be able to do this. There were also issues of resource constraints identified, as qualitative research can be very time consuming.

> "We try and do an in-depth qualitative case study wherever we can to try and get a greater feel for things. Again, that would be, and they need to do that. You know, I tried to encourage people to use a good example, but people don't understand that properly."

> "So, I mean when I looked at it I would kind of go, 'Oh I'd analyse that in a particular way and there's definitely something about language there', but it's not the kind of skill set we've got in the team to do that."

> "We tend to do focus groups with participants and interviews with other stakeholders such as teaching professionals for example because they can sometimes gauge any impact on the individuals and then we'd get them all transcribed and put them into a qualitative analysis package. I've used… MAXQDA, I've always used in the past, but because I've got… we haven't really got a department for evaluation. My role is basically overseeing all the data requirements for our department, but typically that's more student success than outreach and we just don't really have a massive amount of resource to do lots and lots of qualitative research, which is why what we tend to do is try and build them in on new programmes, but not necessarily on existing programmes. I think in an ideal world we would do a lot more qualitative research, but that's just the state of play at the moment."

This suggests that there is a need for more training and guidance on qualitative methods, and more advanced data collection and analysis techniques, which could be used for effective evaluation in teams where these skills are available. However, this must come with the acknowledgement that staff do not necessarily have access to certain software or have large amounts of time to carry out qualitative evaluation.

Challenges in Evaluation Work

Section Summary

This section **summarises the key challenges in doing evaluation work**. Despite staff working in very different contexts, with diverse student groups and various levels of resources and support, some key challenges seem to transcend these differences and are faced by many across the sector.

This section firstly focuses on '**challenges within institutions**' (see page 12) including lack of time/resources, lack of skills, getting people 'on board', working with schools, working with other institutions, and some context specific challenges. This section then discusses '**wider sector challenges**' (see page 23) including data issues, and lack of clarity around benchmarking and standards.

Challenges within institutions

Although these challenges are described as 'within institutions', these challenges were experienced by staff in different types of institutions and contexts and seemed to be relatively common challenges across institutions. However, local context could of course exacerbate or reduce the difficulty of these challenges.

Lack of time/resources

In general many of the staff felt that their teams were small and that they had a small amount of resources given the large task they are charged to deliver.

> "It's very, we're a very lean university. We don't have a WP unit. We have very limited numbers of outreach team."

> "I think we've got the skills and experience, but it's just time and resource"

> "I don't tend to have enough time to actually do evaluation as well as we can."

Staff felt that the main focus of their work was on delivery. Some talked about this as a challenge in that it meant that it restricted their ability to do the evaluation work that they wanted to do to the level that they wanted to do it. Others talked about delivery being a key priority which should be kept in mind when planning ambitious evaluation. In both cases the key message is that a focus on delivery puts pressure on evaluation capacity.

> "It's a very lean team and they're too busy delivering to do anything else"

> "There's so much emphasis on delivery and so little time and capacity, we've got, you know, finite limits."

> "Some of what we might, in an ideal world like to do, we just can't do, or we'll never do the activity with the schools."

In highlighting the key challenge of a lack of time, staff highlighted two key areas where there is often not sufficient time available. These were time for reflection and time for planning. It was felt that practitioners did not have time to reflect on the findings of evaluations and the strengths and limitations of these findings. In terms of planning, time was felt to be limited for planning outreach work itself and so was extremely limited in terms of planning evaluation.

> "people aren't given that kind of planning time."

> "I think there's not much space to change things to accommodate evaluation and I think the pressures on the teams are such that they have to put things together and probably in short notice and there's kind of almost like an off the shelf thing."

> "So, I think that that, there is very little reflective space for practitioners here. They're under so much pressure to deliver activities and the kind of constant churn of new work coming in and I think that that is the biggest challenge here, and from speaking to other evaluators and practitioners that are in places other institutions as well, in that they don't have, a more nuanced evaluation might not be useful to them, because they may not have time to think about the implications, or the scope to change their practice."

These challenges had a direct impact on evaluation in that it meant that staff had to make different choices about the type and level of evaluation they would do. A number of staff said that if they had more time or resources they would make different choices about their evaluation work.

> "We just don't really have a massive amount of resource to do lots and lots of qualitative research, which is why what we tend to do is try and build them in on new programmes, but not necessarily on existing programmes. I think in an ideal world we would do a lot more qualitative research, but that's just the state of play at the moment."

> "we don't do as much of that now because that's quite expensive work"

Data collected but not analysed

Due to these time constraints and the feeling that evaluation methods became repetitive, and therefore less useful, in some cases data was being collected but not analysed or used.

> "We were just getting reams of this data and when I joined [UNIVERSITY] back in [YEAR], there were hundreds of these questionnaire forms that had never been touched, so they'd never been put into SPSS or Excel or anything and I thought well what's the point in collecting them in the first place?"

> "I think one of the biggest problems I think I've found working in this kind of area of the sector is, people have done things like questionnaires to participants for years and years and years and people input them, and they either gather dust on shelves or they just sit in an Excel. People try and put them into Excel spreadsheets and stuff like that and nothing is really done with them."

Access to Academic and Specialist Support

As well as time, resources were also highlighted as a challenge. This often referred to the resource of staff time but does also refer to a number of other resources which were felt to be limited. Specifically, these were money, accesses to academic staff, and access to relevant programmes and tools which research staff at the university may have access to, such as qualitative and statistical analysis packages.

> "No, I don't have access to anything. I don't even have access to SPSS."

Therefore, when considering more complex evaluations and the types of analysis required, a challenge in some contexts is that staff do not have access to programmes to support this work. Additionally, a common challenge across institutions was having access to academics and experts who can provide support and guidance with this more complex analysis and with making evaluation practices and processes more robust. The main reasons for this were that academics themselves are often too busy to offer this support on a goodwill basis, and that paying for academics, or external experts, is too costly.

> "Trying to get access to a statistician is absolutely impossible."

> "there are other people in the institution that can help, but they're not very accessible and that's not because they're unwilling, It's just because the pressures are enormous."

Lack of skills

The second key challenge was around skills. This could be related to general knowledge of evaluation methods and frameworks, data collection methods, or analysis techniques.

> "I also support a lot with actually helping them to think what they could do out of the evaluation. There is a massive… it really is a struggle. People just don't know how to do it."

> "I think there's a limited amount of skill and experience around this in our frontline delivery team, so that requires quite, you know, we have to be very clear with them about what we're doing and why we're doing it."

This challenge is then compounded by relatively frequent staff turnover, which means that people with skills and expertise leave and new staff have to be trained. Also, more senior staff turnover can mean that new approaches introduced, which means that the team are required to learn new skills.

> "I think we've seen this kind of continual churn and there's a kind almost like a restage type back to the beginning, so in terms of evaluation there's a process of taking people through the steps we've been through and then getting them to a point at which they can start thinking more innovatively, or in a different way about evaluation, by which point, you know, they go"

> "by the time someone's built up a body of knowledge and experience about what they're doing they leave"

Recruiting staff with particular skills was also a difficulty that a number of staff commented on in the interviews due to challenges relating to pay and a lack of relevant skills in the recruitment pool.

> "it's really hard to recruit people that have quant knowledge and abilities."

> "at the Grade level it's on they're not going to get someone with more expertise and others at this university are on really low grades, so you know, you're a Grade 4 or a Grade 5, so the outreach officers are actually higher graded than us, so it's going to be difficult for them to get someone with really good impact experience in the HE sector"

> "Sometimes it's quite difficult to have someone from a real kind of, a real strong data analytics kind of, and being… and having developed the information advice and guidance schemes and stuff like that. Sometimes the two just don't marry together."

Training

For staff already in roles, there seemed to be a lack of training since, when asked, participants said that their teams had had little specific training in evaluation specifically.

> I2: So are any of the people, would you say any of the people who are kind of writing the first drafts of these evaluation reports, would any of them have training in evaluation methods do you think?
> R: No.
> I2: Right.
> R: Nothing, apart from what I've given them, which is the absolute basics.

Some participants even referred to themselves as 'self-taught' and said that they had not had formal training in data collection and analysis methods. However, this is an area which varies widely across institutions as some outreach team do have highly trained and experienced staff, some with a research background, who have high level and specialist knowledge. But, this is far from the case in all institutions and where this was not the case it was felt to be a key challenge for staff.

Randomised Controlled Trials, Causality and Control Groups

Even in cases where staff were more experienced and had a high level of skills, an area where they felt that they would benefit from more support was in terms of creating robust control or comparison groups, conducting Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs), and proving causality as well as impact of their outreach programmes. As these are highly skilled staff they demonstrate a high level of knowledge of these methods and can reflect on the limitations of methods that they are currently using, but they identified this as a particular area of challenge and something which they would like to see more guidance on.

> "at the moment I'm not confident that we've got any way of actually identifying a causal link between intervention and the kind of high level outcomes that we typically measure them."

> "It's a lot harder to do anything meaningful like that for progression to HE because there's not really a natural comparative group and I think that is one of the big challenges to be honest, so what we can literally do is we can look at progression rates of our participants from quintile one for example and compare that against the participation rates of the underlying population from quintile one and you'll see, hey ours is 40% and the quintile one was 18% or whatever it is, but again, that doesn't tell us that much because of course, you know, there might be underlying reasons why the young people take part in these activities in the first place, so they maybe already have an existing predisposition towards Higher Education. So, I do think that's our number one challenge is a true proper control group."

> "I guess the bit that is missing is that real robust evaluation to understand causality. That's the bit that no one can do, I don't think. No one has the resources to do that and even regardless of this study, I would be surprised if a lot of institutions go down that route, even though that's probably the route that they need to do because there's the limited expertise available to be able to do that."

Resistance or Challenges relating to Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs)

A number of staff were very positive about RCTs and expressed a desire for further guidance on how to carry out an RCT. However, they noted that when discussing this with others they had experienced some resistance to the idea of RCTs in outreach evaluation.

> "It's very hard to prove any cause and effect without more sophisticated methods, but there does seem to be quite a lot of resistance to it, both at schools and within the sector itself"

> I2: So [NAME] you said there's resistance to a proper control group, who is the resistance coming from?
> R: Schools have been known to, when mentioned they would say it's just, you know, it's unethical because they feel what you're saying is that some students will take part in a potentially life-changing intervention at the expense of others based on pure chance and I do understand that philosophy, but they do get other people that argue and [NAME] is one example, is he would say that it is unethical not to do a randomised controlled trial because you don't know if you're actually doing any harm to students when they're actually doing a proper randomised test. There's an awful lot of opposition to it within the sector as well because they're just, fundamentally people seem to think that it's unworkable in a practical way that, you know, just by the toss of a coin effectively you're going to be with one group rather than another group and that group is then going to take part.

Similarly, some staff expressed concerns about the practicality and ethics of RCTs themselves.

> "I think there is a little bit of a tension around between, there can be, between academic researchers. You know, at the moment there's been calls from academic researchers to do randomised control tests. Well, if you're working on the ground, you know, we have to actually deliver programmes to young people and work with schools and I think, you know, we have to be pragmatic about evaluation. You know, we've got to run it alongside making events and activity happen. It can never be pure research because we just cannot put people in a cupboard and not do anything with them. It's just not possible, so I think, you know, I am comfortable with the way we are approaching things. It's fair with schools and students. We will never get schools, we cannot get schools to engage with giving us data on students who haven't been part of activities with us themselves."

<u>Confidence</u>

Low confidence amongst staff tasked with evaluation work was explicitly identified as a challenge, particularly amongst staff who's primary job is outreach delivery, rather than primarily evaluation. But, in conversation some staff also referred to their own lack of confidence or feelings of uncertainty or unease about aspects of their work.

> "I'm completely self-taught. These ideas about [removed to provide anonymity] they're completely my ideas. I don't know if they could be rubbish evaluation methods. They're just the only ways I can think of doing things right now. I haven't had any training myself, certainly not at HE level about evaluating and how to do it, so I would feel very unconfident saying that we're doing it right or we're doing it well and there's bound to be other methods of doing it that I haven't thought of."

> "that kind of final report, that kind of looking at that evidence or information is probably the last thing, or the most thing that "I'll do that next," or "I'll do that…" partly because sometimes, and it does depend on the individual, but sometimes there's a bit of an anxiety about, "Oh my God, I've got to write a report and I'm not that way inclined" and some people do get quite scared by looking at different data and actually, how to interpret that kind of stuff, and I know there are people that have been in my team and are currently in my team that are in that category."

Challenge of getting people 'on board'

Staff found it difficult to win some people over and get everyone 'on board' with evaluation.

> "But there are still some that don't engage. I would say [OUTREACH PROGRAMME], they're late for everything, they ask me for advice and then they ignore it because it's a bit difficult and it would take up too much time. They're changing their programme all the time."

> "to be honest with you, I don't think people feel particularly enthused about doing the evaluation parts of their job."

> "I don't see that there's such an investment from the practitioners any more in evaluation in the same way, so yes that probably does make it harder."

Delivery versus Evaluation

A particular challenge is balancing outreach delivery and outreach evaluation. These were often talked about as competing priorities and, given the time and resource constraints staff are experiencing, making time for evaluation can be a challenge. This was something that both staff involved in delivery and staff not directly involved in delivery expressed. Those not directly involved in outreach delivery noted that this was challenge for staff, but expressed a desire for more time to be available for evaluation and reflection.

> "We would want to do something that was much more specific to the intervention activities themselves, or the overarching aims, but to do that we would need to almost get into mechanics of how the activities were constructed and the kind of micro-level objectives of them, so that we could design something that might allow us to get a more nuanced picture of what was actually happening to participants and unfortunately, I think the view of the outreach team was that that would be a distraction from the core business in delivering activities, so we haven't been able to implement that level of kind of much more nuanced and detailed evaluation."

Similarly, staff more involved in outreach work and evaluation talked about these competing priorities, but noted that outreach delivery should be the priority.

> "I think, you know, I'm doing as much as I can with the resource I've got and I think it comes down to what [Unclear: 00:58:51] always says about how much time you spend measuring the pig and how much time you spend feeding it. You know, and at the end of the day we're an outreach team that wants to do activity with young people."

Management and Senior Staff

A number of challenges were also identified in relation to 'managers' or 'senior leaders'. People in these positions were sometimes felt to be less invested in outreach work than the staff interviewed, and saw this as more of a tick box exercise to be completed, meaning that they were not fully invested in the outreach work and particularly not invested in evaluation and improving outreach work.

> "we've got the difficulty of, you know, the university senior leaders team, which don't feel that they are really behind widening participation and not really interested in it, it's something we have to do to achieve the higher income and considering we're a medium university because we've only got to spend, what is it – 23% of the income on it? They kind of like just carry on and do the returns and get us through it and then if you get some good outcomes great, but otherwise we're not going to particularly support you."

> "I guess this is the risk, it might actually impact on the outreach practice, because I think what we're seeing is a tendency for the people removed from it, so if we talk about kind of senior management level, will see a framework as another set of things that we have to tick and for me, you know, I'm kind of half joking, but half not and I worry that if the university felt that it could meet its evaluation obligation, I don't think it would, but I think it's a risk that if the university felt it could meet its evaluation objectives by using a regular available framework that would be acceptable by OFFA, then they might feel, well why do we need your work? So yes, that's my personal kind of thing."

> "there isn't really an appetite to know more about what works and what doesn't. You know, there is a desire to tick the boxes, and that's as far as it goes."

Institutional 'Politics'

During interviews some staff eluded to the 'politics' in their institution, saying that this could be a challenge in their work. However, given the potentially sensitive nature of this subject they did not elaborate on this, therefore it is not entirely clear exactly what this refers to. But, in general this seems to stem from different groups of staff having different opinions and plans for outreach work.

> I1: So, as well as your team do you ever work with academics or external people, so consultants or organisations to do evaluation work, or is it all done by your team?
> R: Yes, we don't, and the reasons we don't is probably politics to be honest.

> "What they're doing now is probably replicating what we've probably done in the past, but it's in a different way and, but that's a communication issue, or they're not reading our brief. But again, I think it boils down to the expertise that they're able to offer may not be akin to what we're looking for. Yes, it's difficult to, sometimes there are… no, I won't go into that. I don't want to go into politics. But I think the ideal optimum is that for various different things we have some academic, at the very least academic advisors that come from various different kinds of, have different types of approaches on methodology."

Working with schools

Working with schools was a key challenge and staff highlighted a number of challenges involved, such as:

School Time

Schools are experiencing the same time and resources shortages as outreach teams and therefore schools do not have much time to work with universities on outreach projects.

> "It's getting more and more difficult just because of the changes in the national curriculum or all the requirements on them. Teachers are more and more stressed and have less and less time and even getting them to take time out of…you know, in school time to come onto campus, or do things that they really want you to do. They squeeze the lesson's timing, so if you're going in to deliver something you might have 30 minutes less than they already told you they were going to do."

> "the pressure on schools to hit their own benchmarks stopped them from sending some of their students who would have benefitted from it to the activities"

Staff Change

Outreach staff explained that often they may have one key contact in a school and if that person moved on they could be unable to work with the school on future projects.

> "Head Teachers change, coordinators change and there's an ongoing raft of work. You know, I have just sent a letter out yesterday on behalf of my staff who have been trying every which way to contact a particular school who has always been very well engaged. Their Team Coordinator left last year. There's a new Head. There's all sorts of stuff going on in that school and we can't make contact with them."

Accessing Data Through Schools

Getting access to relevant data in a simple and timely fashion was highlighted as a key challenge. Staff noted that the same language is not always spoken by universities and schools, for example university use POLAR3 whereas this is not used in schools, and therefore communicating what data is needed for both targeting and tracking purposes can be difficult.

> "Some of the concern I have is that the language we use and what we're sort of evaluating and talking about doesn't always align with schools and so the latest HESA data is now just asking us for state schools and POLAR. Schools don't know what POLAR is. Schools talk about pupil premium."

Another challenge is that schools may not have the data that universities need, such as destinations of school leavers.

> "So in terms of schools securing and getting the data from schools is quite problematic. That's why we try every, you know, at the point at which you want to get the data because you need to get it in a timely manner, we go to both the students and the schools, particularly where there are 11 to 16 schools, they don't always have a very good handle on

with where their students have progressed to and it's never there, you know, even though we're trying to say to them, 'if you give us the data we're going to give you more evidence back', it's definitely a challenge because they don't have the resource in school to be able to engage and do that easily with you, so definitely securing that sort of, even though they've signed up to say that's what they'll do, at the end of the day that's not easy."

"So that was the idea, but unfortunately we did struggle with the, in fact, we didn't get any of the counterfactual data that we were hoping for because of the kind of flux in the school system and the change of the Head and people kind of getting cold feet about the data and stuff, but we did get some quite, I mean that process in itself was interesting from the evaluation perspective."

Outreach Fatigue

Schools are contacted by a number of institutions, organisation, charities etc. about working with students on various projects, meaning that schools can become fatigued with requests for students or data.

"It's also true that more universities are targeting perhaps the schools that we've been targeting for a few years and so the, you know, they want to, I think they sometimes can get fed up with too many people asking the same questions"

"It's just schools having time and valuing, is becoming more and more challenging and obviously they are more fickle now, so they will pursue you for a particular, you know, primary intervention and then the day before they'll say "actually we're not going to come now" and that's a massive amount of work that's set up and that makes it difficult on both sides."

Targeting

Form the interviews it is clear that schools play an important role in helping institutions to target appropriate students to participate in outreach work. This can either involve the school selecting students based on criteria provided by the university, or the school providing institutions with relevant information about students so that they can select appropriate participants. A key challenge in this area is the communication between universities and schools about which students should be targeted, as staff indicated that sometimes they felt that schools did no always send their most disadvantaged pupils, or that the schools understanding of 'disadvantaged' may be different to the institutions.

"I mean it's part of the kind of outcomes of evaluation early on that schools would interpret criteria with other things in mind. Sometimes they might not want to send us the kind of most challenging students, you know, or they might be handpicked, so we've moved away from that now to kind of the school being a conduit with which to communicate with the students."

"And that's a conversation we had with teachers when we first started, you know, this is very much about meeting those students that you think may struggle to get placements elsewhere, but they did send us, you know, in some cases, probably their brightest and best, which is absolutely lovely, but I think there's definitely a further conversation we want to have about making sure that we are actually reaching the ones that kind of, there's a bit of a challenge in there."

Working with other institutions

Some staff eluded to a sense of competition between institutions, which could create barriers to working as collaboratively as they may wish to. Others had talked about 'poaching students' being a potential concern, although most did say that this was not a particular problem in their area. However, this was an issue that people alluded to as being a potential problem, and in some cases this did limit the way that institutions were able to work with each other.

> R: It gets somewhat more complicated when you get into other activities because you start to get into this very vague commercially sensitive area and both my team and [NAME'S] team at [UNIVERSITY] are technically with the institute for recruitment, and people get a bit sensitive about what you share.
> I2: Okay.
> R: So, is it alright that [UNIVERSITY] can also see that that person has been to a recruitment activity, or that they may have been on ten things with us, but it looks like they're a high achiever, so they probably want to poach them.
> I2: Yes. Right, I see.
> R: So, it comes down to then do you make decisions about your programmes on that basis as well, because obviously [UNIVERSITY] do have a lot of long-term programmes. Would they accept somebody who's then been on ten things with us?
> I2: Right, I see.
> R: So until we've ironed that stuff out we're not on the whole still sharing, but we'd like to.

> "You know, local competition and how schools perceive our particular institution versus other institutions, the national kind of reach of other institutions, how we operate in a competitive environment, those things are quite difficult."

This can also mean that in some institutions there can be a focus on getting 'good results' rather than carrying out robust evaluations, which is a pressure that was eluded to.

> "Basically it is very difficult to remain 100% objective when your boss, the vice chancellor, all they're interested in is just giving them really good news stories, so you do tend to report by exception. You do tend to extenuate the positives and kind of leave stuff that's not so, that's not so good news. Leave that as a footnote or even leave it out altogether. That's not objective research. That's not proper research. That's not proper evaluation. I'm fully aware of that, but when you're asking stakeholders to do their own evaluation, I think it's really problematic."

Context specific challenges

A key learning point from this research is that there is a very wide variety of contexts in which outreach work is taking place. Institutions have hugely varied levels of resources, staff time, skills, experience and support from their wider institution. Additionally the location of institutions (for example rural or city) and the demographics of the local population also vary and these have a huge impact on the type of outreach work that is done. Staff made reference to feeling as though general advice and guidance for the sector often did not apply to them or could not be made to work in their particular context.

> "I think one of the things I've very much noticed coming from a Russell Group institution is that a lot of the guidance worked really well, so they do certain things like the Higher Education Academy Frameworks and other things. They do work really well in their Russell Group context. The kind of context I've got here has been very different."

> "For us 'low participation neighbourhoods' is a complete red herring because we've got hardly any of them because they're so small."

> "We don't have a specific outreach team here. There isn't, you know, a team whose remit is to deliver outreach"

Changing embedded practice

Staff raised the point that a lot of guidance or discussions about evaluation planning focus on building in evaluation from the beginning of programmes. This was acknowledged to be important, and was something that is done for new programmes. However, there are many programmes and activities which are already embedded and may have been running for a number of years. In these cases it is not possible to build in evaluation from the beginning. Therefore staff wanted guidance on how to embed evaluation in these situations.

> "for example one of our more intensive programmes is our [PROGRAMME] where we didn't build in specific impact assessment because it was something that had grown organically from something that our [DEPARTMENT] had done, so we're retrospectively looking at how we can demonstrate impact, so we're probably making more progress on the new stuff. It's a bit slower with the kind of more embedded types of activities that we do."

> "And it's been about applying evaluation at the point of programme planning and if you're coming in like I did when, you know, half of your programmes are established, if not more, how do you apply it to something that already exists?"

Staff also talked about those carrying out evaluation being reluctant to change their practice, whether this is adopting new practices, or even simply stopping current practice. Therefore introducing new evaluation practice in an institution can be a long and difficult road

> "Because a lot of the small level, you know, the kind of usual smiley faces, you have a good time and stuff, tells us absolutely nothing. People are reluctant to stop doing it though."

> "You know, I get quite a lot of resistance when I say, you know, don't collect information if you're not going to do anything with it."

> "We're learning, you know, where things are being embedded and working, but one of the challenges we know we'll have to face at some point is where the impact comes back and tells us something we love doing isn't actually having any impact."

> "What we're seeing I think in the outreach team is a much more instrumental and mechanistic approach to evaluation, so we're actually, from my view and it's obviously completely bias, because from where I sit, we're backsliding into a position where the outreach teams are evaluating their own activities using fairly crude questionnaire measures"

Wider Sector Challenges

As mentioned earlier, the challenges identified by staff fall into two categories – 'challenges within institutions' and 'wider sector challenges'. These wider challenges focus on sector issues and institutions such as OFFA and government. Unlike the institutional challenges which are highly context dependent, these challenges are broadly experienced across the sector. Of course, certain institutions could use their higher resources or highly skilled staff to lesson some of these challenges, but the existence of the challenge is the same for all institutions.

Data issues

This was one of the broadest areas of concern for staff. In general people talked about using very similar data from key sources such as the National Pupils Database and HESA. They therefore expressed many of the same difficulties in terms of using and access this data. These mainly revolved around getting access to data, having all off the data that is needed, having data in the form that you need it, getting data at the time that you need it, and the high level of staff time and resources needed to deal with these challenges.

Difficulties getting access to data

Staff identified that navigating the processes involved in getting access to datasets were long and complicated. Due to legal concerns one institution was no longer permitted to use UCAS services.

> "Getting through getting access to DfE datasets, it's a real, real challenge getting data sharing agreements etc."

> "We've had numerous conversations with UCAS and the services that they have at the moment in particular…they're exact service and so on that they're trying to promote. Our legal team have issues around their sort of data protection contracts. And we're not happy that they're robust enough in terms of what they will do with the data when they get it, so we're not allowed to actually engage with that at the moment."

An alternative approach was to try to collect data directly from the students or the school, but this was also difficult and often unsuccessful.

> "Even though we're trying to say to them, 'if you give us the data we're going to give you more evidence back', it's definitely a challenge because they don't have the resource in school to be able to engage and do that easily with you, so definitely securing that sort of…even though they've signed up to say that's what they'll do, at the end of the day that's not easy."

Not having all of the data needed

Due to data access difficulties and challenges around getting consent from students and parents, staff often felt that they did not have all of the data that ideally they would need for a robust evaluation.

> "So we do…we then do progression to Level 3. That becomes more challenging because we find…at each stage we find we can't ever get 100% of the data."

> "It's when you've schools that are 11 to 16, they lose track of their young people and it's harder to get that data, so we are experiencing all the issues around data and tracking that are widely talked about in the sector"

> "If you haven't got the data then you can't do anything I don't think, and that's what I'm kind of, and that's what I'm probably referring to the UCAS data there."

Not having data in the form that you want it

Another problem was that when staff could get access to data is was not always in the form that would be most useful to them. Specifically, staff could often only get aggregated or grouped data, whereas for evaluation purposes they want access to individual student level data.

> "The results that we get is aggregated, so it's not identified, so it's not brilliant."

> "The whole issue around access to data, access to UCAS data at learner level so that we can actually answer the more nitty-gritty questions around, you know, individuals and the activities they did and where they've progressed, at the moment UCAS only want to give, you know, cohort level data of '50 students attended this and five did the other'. That's not what we're being asked to do by the sector and by OFFA and everybody else."

> "We would get just a chunk of data that says, you know, 600 students participated, 80 of them participated in one or more activity. That's the kind of data we get. We don't get personalised data so that we can actually understand the impact on the learner. We can see, we can't demonstrate any causality, we haven't got any availability of more anecdotal or more qualitative data for that cohort. It's quite dry."

Not having the data at the right time

A key challenge was getting data in a timely manner. Staff expressed frustration at how long it could take to get relevant data, meaning that they could not always use their evaluation to inform future projects.

> "NPD requests and that sort of thing take a very long time"

> "that's the biggest challenge that we find is that we might get that data from HEAT in 18 months with a two-year lag because of the HESA data because we don't get in cycle UCAS data for these students that apply that don't apply to [UNIVERSITY] and that's no good. That's no good for a university if we're senior managers and saying, "Well what's the student…?" "Well, I'll tell you in a couple of years' time." That's not good enough and that's what we're trying to impress on various different policy makers and people that have influence, that UCAS have not, and will not I don't think, change their stance on this providing individualised data, which I think effectively is what we need and that's the missing part"

Time and resources involved

Given all these challenges around data, staff talked about the drain on resources and staff time that navigating these challenges cost.

> "You know, maintaining databases, maintaining that data, you know, adding new cohorts all the time. You know, that's got administrative work associated with it too"

> "It's just this is our biggest challenge, which is actually getting access to the data. I've spent a lot more, all the tracker analysis I've done, I've spent a lot more time actually trying to acquire the data than I did actually, you know, manipulating the data. It's a fulltime job just trying to get it and it, and I think that's one of the, you know, the biggest hindrances."

> "Going through different agencies and going through all the paperwork, it's an absolute nightmare."

Consent issues

A related data issue was around gaining consent from students and parents to track students. Staff highlighted that understanding the legal and institutional requirements in terms of data protection could be difficult, particularly since this changes as new regulations come into existence. Another key challenge was getting forms back from parents. This could mean that consent levels could be low for some types of activity, meaning that evaluation can only be partial.

> "We have difficulties around that because we've got quite a stringent data protection policy, so that says that any pupil under the age of 14, you have to have parental consent, which is incredibly difficult to achieve."

> "Data protection consent about whether we can track them is patchy and that tends to be a bit of a challenge for us, so sometimes we might get… so 80% of the students say for Unitracks , Year 12, they might have consented that we can track them for research purposes, etc., etc. But for those at that 20% we're still not getting a rounded understanding, so you can, you can sort of report on kind of different levels of engagement, but you can't necessarily track them all the way through."

> "We'd put that down as probably the one, the highest numbers of learners that we engage with, but historically we haven't put them down as tracking, because I mean for various different reasons, partly to do with the kind of getting the level of data from the school, but also having that kind of parental consent as well for such a high volume of numbers of students."

The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT)

As will be discussed later, HEAT was seen to offer many positives for evaluation staff and could be used to counteract some of the difficulties discussed earlier. However, there were still a number of challenges or limitations of HEAT that were highlighted. The first of these relates to the issues of students who are not recorded on HEAT. This could be due to issues around consent, staff not having the time or resources to record all students, or nearby institutions not being a member of HEAT. Staff were concerned about the fact that many students that they work with will not be tracked in HEAT and the implications that this could have for their evaluation.

> "To be able to have any kind of confidence in that data you have to know that your intervention group is represented on HEAT, whereas, you know, you can see that two thirds of the people that we've given interventions to aren't ever going to be listed. They're going to be listed...you know, they're going to show up in the non-intervention group if you see what I mean?"

> "I also have the problem that academics sometimes go out and do what we would call outreach activities. I find out about them after the event, if I find out about them at all, but they're not evaluated and they're certainly not on the HEAT database or collecting data, so there's always a lot of muddying going around around specific things that we use."

There were also concerns about too much focus on tracking as the dominant form of evaluation. It was felt that what HEAT offered is important but is only part of the story. Also, tracking involves waiting until students reach certain attainment levels or the age where they access university, meaning that staff can have to wait a very long time before they are able to evaluate a programme. From a practical perspective, this can be a problem if this is the only form of evaluation as there is then no information to inform programme planning in the interim. Therefore other types of evaluation were felt to be important complements to HEAT to provide more depth through other types of data and to provide feedback in the interim.

> "It doesn't really give you a kind of, the human aspect of what you're doing."

Lack of consistency

Staff alluded to there being a lack of consistency, both from within their own institutions and sector wide. Altering processes to meet changing demands was felt to be a drain on resources and made It difficult to embed long term plans and process which could deliver longer term evaluations.

> "So that's the biggest challenge for us is how we continue on the course we're going on to see whether or not by doing it differently we're having a bigger impact while all of this stuff is coming at us from outside, and making it quite difficult."

> "I think there's very little stability in that and as a result not that much opportunity to build up a comprehensive and sustained approach to things."

Staff talked about this change coming from a number of key areas: change in staff, a lack of consistency across the sector, and changing targets and directives from external bodies and organisations.

Continual change of staff

There seems to be a relatively high rate of staff turnover in outreach and evaluation work. This creates a number of challenges in that it puts resource strains on teams as they are frequently training new staff. This also creates continuity issues in that the member of staff who plans a project and an evaluation approach may then leave before that process is complete. Equally, if senior staff leave this can mean that a whole team is then faced with different expectations when a new member of staff is appointed.

> "so there's quite a high staff turnover in terms of outreach practitioners because they're currently move up the ladder and then they go onto other things."

> "where we've employed people with relevant research experience, they've seen the evaluating role as a stepping stone to academic careers, so we haven't actually had many long-term evaluators in the unit because they'd all kind of planned to get up to speed and getting that experience and then going off somewhere else."

"there also has been a change of, you know, some of the people leading on the programmes and when, I guess sometimes when new people come in they feel, you know, their ideas are absolutely the right ones and so things tend to change a bit because we don't, perhaps we should be firmer about things like what should be happening, but you know, I try and stay with people's strengths, but perhaps we ought to be firmer around that."

Lack of consistency across the sector

Finally, as well as a lack of consistency within institutions, there was felt to be a lack of consistency across the sector. Staff felt that there were no clear standards set and that therefore each institution is doing different evaluation in different ways, making it very difficult for institutions to learn from each other or share good practice.

"Because there's no standardisation and because different institutions and different teams within institutions have very different methods of interpretations of what evidence is, and evaluation is, then it's always going to be problematic and it's always going to be a bit of a minefield I think."

"Where there's no clarity or there's no consistency around those expectations because things are delivered differently in different organisations that's when it can become quite difficult to implement or work within a framework."

Changing targets and directives from external bodies and organisations

Related to the idea of there being a lack of consistency across the sector, was the feeling that targets and directives from external bodies and organisations change too frequently and are expected to be implemented too quickly.

"We have we've had with HESA as well, they've changed the goalposts on so many occasions"

"the targets are changing, which makes it very hard for the fair access agreement to be a realistic document and to really stick to and deliver what you say you're going to because you've got two eyes on the future and one in the past because you're trying to monitor the year behind and you're trying to predict 18 months in advance and plan two years ahead and fit in your recruitment cycles, so it's very difficult to do."

"I think it's great that the government are taking an interest more in social mobility and in WP and making targets and challenges around it, but at the same time it is destabilising and it, you know, you're constantly responding to changes rather than being proactive and firefighting to some extent, rather than having a sustained planned programme."

"I suppose the requirements and, you know, loathed as I am to say that the kind of quite often what we see with the OFFA monitoring return is like the way that the Kirkpatrick model was dropped in last year, or the year before, and that was kind of almost like a retrospective measure that had to be applied to things we'd been doing without knowing that that was kind of how we were going to be asked to respond."

Benchmarking and setting clear standards

A number of staff expressed a desire for some sort of 'benchmarking' or an ability to check 'how they were doing' both compared to other institutions and compared to sector expectations, since at present they felt as though they were not able to do this and were not sure how to rate their performance or ensure that they were exceeding minimum requirements. Staff also talked about difficulty in selecting a best practice example for monitoring returns as they are not clear on what basis evaluation will be considered 'best practice'.

> "this is probably where my benchmarking comments are coming from but I don't know whether what we're doing is good enough. There's never any feedback from OFFA on the monitor returns, about what you put in your evaluation sections. There's no kind of OFFA Outreach evaluation officer that can come in and say, "Do you know what? You could tweak this, or you could do that."
>
> "Well, we've been doing that for years. We've effectively been doing that for years, so we tend not to tell them things that are kind of well established, but they need to then showcase things that everybody, that we'll sit in a room the week after the report comes out and go, "Oh, we should have said this, this and this," but we didn't think that was particularly innovative. Or we think that's just the bread and butter of what we do, so I think that confuses people even more".

Confusion

On a related point, there seemed to be some confusion about what OFFA's stance is regarding evaluation and what would constitute a good approach to evaluation. For example, one member of staff talked about there being an expectation from OFFA that they should be evaluating all of their outreach work, whereas another member of staff said that OFFA do not expect that everything will be evaluated. There is therefore confusion and a lack of clarity about exactly what OFFAs expectations are.

> "Actually OFFA focused on having to kind of evaluate everything is going to backfire for us because there's going to be lots of things that are going to be too difficult to evaluate."
>
> "I'm mindful that I'm asking my team to do a lot more than perhaps I did three years ago and maybe that workload is too much and that probably comes back to well do we really need to evaluate everything? No, I don't think we do. We're not, certainly, if you asked OFFA, I mean they certainly wouldn't turn around and say, "Right you've got evaluate everything" and they want to see output of that. I mean there's nothing of that. In our, you will have seen from the monitoring forms that we get back from OFFA I think we're encouraged to incorporate one example of things that we evaluate and the outcomes, and that's fine"

Areas that Support Evaluation

Section Summary

It is possible to identify a number of positives, or things which help and support evaluation work. This section **summarises key areas of support** identified by staff. These include: The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) (you can read summaries of tracking resources in Appendix 2, page 49), having institutional support for evaluation, having the team 'on board', working with academics and specialists, and having strong personal relationships with schools.

HEAT

The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) was discussed on numerous occasions. Whilst there were challenges and limitations with HEAT, this system was seen to provide a number of positives and support staff in their evaluation work. Positive reflections centred around:

Enabling universities to get information about student that do not attend their institution. It was felt that this would be very difficult or impossible without the HEAT service. The ability to track attainment data was seen as particularly beneficial as a number of institutions noted that there is an important focus on 'attainment raising', but getting this data is a key challenge and frustration.

> "HEAT's an easy answer isn't it? They do the hard work for you. They find them in the UCAS application or the HESA data and then they tell you, 'Oh yes, they went to HE', whereas if they don't come to [INSTITUTION] we can't find them."

HEAT provides stability in a sector where 'continual change and instability' is highlighted as a key challenge. This particularly related to complications or changes in how data can be accessed. Using HEAT meant that institutions did not have to navigate and keep up to date with this as HEAT would do this on their behalf and then provide them with the information that they need.

> "that is why you really need, in my opinion, a… a team behind you, or a partnership behind you that's got real influence and that is why we've joined HEAT because they aren't going anywhere. They're well established and they've got some nouse they're… they ensure that all the data sharing procedures are in place and you get your reporting in a timely manner."

Another important area of (in)stability was in relation to data protection and the implications of this for getting consent to track students and link their data. Again, being involved in HEAT was felt to provide reassurance in this area.

> "My understanding of the Data Protection Laws are going to be…this work is going to have a significant impact in the next couple of years in terms of what we can… how we kind of word things and what we can't word things, and HEAT are on the top market, so they're on top of it and they recognise that challenge and I think it's going to be a big thing for universities to try and, not get around it because it's not something you should be getting round you should be as transparent and as open as possible, but if you don't get data then it's quite difficult to make any kind of, I mean you can't really do proper, what I would say proper evaluation."

HEAT is useful for tracking students across multiple interventions, both within one institution but also potentially across institutions. This was felt to be too resource intensive for institutions to do alone, but through HEAT institutions can access this information more easily and use this to not only evaluate their interventions but also to understand the student journey and how students engage with an institution over many years.

Institutional support for evaluation

A key challenge discussed above was where there is little institutional support for evaluation. Conversely, having support for evaluation is felt to enable evaluation work. This support could be in the form of regular meetings to hold people to account and drive work forward, requirements put on staff in terms of reports or meetings to act as "a kind of stick motivation as well as the carrot", funding to release academic staff or pay for experts, positive interest and encouragement from management, and actively encouraging collaboration and sharing across projects, departments, and between practitioners and academics.

Having the team 'on board'

Often it is project delivery staff who are responsible for some or all of the evaluation work related to their project. This could range from collecting data which is passed to someone else to analyse to the practitioner planning the evaluation, collection all the data, doing the evaluation and producing a report. Therefore, having these members of staff 'on board' with evaluation is important. Some institutions have been able to achieve this and highlight a number of factors that made this possible:

Stability

Having a stable staff team with low staff turnover allowed staff the time to develop the skills and knowledge they needed to carry out evaluations and to see the value of this work.

> "the advantage I have is quite a stable team, which means that similar staff have been involved in this programme since almost its inception, so they're quite experienced in the delivery and therefore, the refinement of it."

Specificity/Contextualising Evaluation

Evaluation could be felt to serve sector or managerial purposes and be removed from the practice of actually delivering outreach projects or achieving outcomes for young people. In cases where practitioners were more 'on board' with evaluation, the benefits of the evaluation process and outcomes were made clearer for practitioners and linked closely to their specific project and goals, meaning that they were able to use evaluation to inform their practice as well as ensure that projects were having an impact for young people.

> "I tried to do things on mass and that's what the manager wanted me to do because of all the other facets of my role, but that just wasn't going to work, so then I started meeting individually people where methods were used specific to their outreach programme and that's when they started seeking me out and certain people, you know, consult me on a lot of things and we've made a lot of changes"

Linking evaluation to Aims/Objectives

Ensuring that evaluation methods were closely linked to the specific aims and objects of particular projects was felt to be important in getting staff 'on board' and involved in evaluation.

> "Actually getting them to spell out into SMART language what they hope their outcomes are going to be, that's a real struggle, but that's probably been the one most valuable things and then that gives them a clear kind of framework to hang everything out on because once they've said, okay it's about raising aspiration you can drill down. You can keep kind of SMART language drilling down into that more until you kind of find the thing and then you say, "There you go. That's the one that you want to measure."

Empowering people

Through contextualising the evaluation and supporting staff in being able to link their evaluation to the specific aims and objectives of their project, staff could become empowered to be more involved in evaluation and seek out information and support to enhance evaluation. In order to do this it was felt that evaluation should be pitched as a tool for practitioners to demonstrate the impact of their work, rather than as an external measure which is unhelpful.

> "I think actually we're doing a good job, but you're not able to show people what a good job you're doing because you're not…you haven't got your evaluation data and your evidence to show that, so I kind of approached it from the perspective of, I'm going to help you get the evidence to show that you're doing a good job and that's been like quite successful."

This also involved thinking about wider dissemination beyond internal reports so that outreach teams could demonstrate their impact to teachers, school governors, and parents which can develop stronger relationships with these groups.

> "I try and make sure that we have a give-back for each school every year and that that just doesn't go to the contact, but that it also goes to the Head and to the Governors and we find that kind of lever with the Governors is quite useful because we're trying to promote those positive relationships, so that's one of the ways that I found that we can do that and get it to all schools' newsletters and then that raises awareness for the parents so then that's a kind of key influence so hopefully that we're reaching slightly more and so on."

Working with academics/specialists

There was a strong case made for the value of working with academics and others with specialist knowledge to support with the development of frameworks, evaluation strategies, or to support with specific methods. Where institutions have been able to have an academic work with them on a longer term basis as part of a specific project, or have a research student work within the team, this was felt to be very useful for the team in terms of upskilling the staff and providing in-depth insight and information on specific areas of evaluation, data collection, and analysis.

> "we've also used colleagues within the university, so for example, obviously the [DEPARTMENT] to help us set up, I mean we've kind of developed an evaluation strategy and then planned for each of the programmes so that there's an annual evaluation plan for them and that was, you know, done in conjunction with others who are much more, are more knowledgeable than me or the officers, but then that's in place."

A key challenge in this regard is that academic staff often do not have time to do this work and releasing them for a short period of time costs money which many institutions were unable to resource.

Strong/Personal relationships with schools

Having good relationships with schools was felt to be extremely important as they are relied on for recruiting students, getting or confirming relevant information about students for targeting purposes, supporting with getting parental consent to track students, and providing follow-up data such as student attainment or destination after school.

In order to build these types of relationship staff have:

- Developed programmes with schools and teaching staff and used their feedback to inform future programme development.
- Where possible, worked with local schools where staff and students may be more familiar with the institution, teachers may have trained there, and parents or siblings may have attended the institution.
- Developed relationships with more than one contact at a school to ensure relationships can continue even if particular staff move on.

Gaining consent for tracking was felt to be a particular challenge, and having good relationships with schools could support this work. Staff talked about a number of strategies which they have found make collecting parental consent simpler or more effective. These include:

- Where possible using an 'opt-out' system, meaning that parents/students have to opt-out if they do not wish to give permission. Although, new regulations about data use and protection may mean that this approach is not possible in the future.
- Using paper consent forms rather than online systems.
- Using the HEAT declaration as a basis for consent statements to ensure that you have full consent to track through HEAT.
- Ask parents/students for consent when they apply to participate in a programme/activity.
- If a good relationship is built with a school, it can be possible to get a school to agree to collect consent from all parents at the beginning of the year as part of their own process, meaning that this is already in place when students participate in projects later in the year.

Guidance Content

Section Summary

This section will consider **what support and guidance is needed for the sector to develop the evaluation of outreach**. The section summarises what staff would and would not like to see in future guidance, and the **key areas where staff would like more guidance**.

This report details findings of phase 1 of a two-phase project. The initial research and scoping in phase 1 has produced preliminary guidance which will be developed and tested in phase 2. Many guidelines and resources relating to outreach evaluation already exist (see Appendix 1, page 46). Therefore, to ensure that guidance is useful, usable, and not simply repeating existing work, phase 1 of this project sought to gather information about what aspects of outreach evaluation the sector would like guidance on and what format(s) guidance may be presented in.

People did not want guidance to be…

Too basic/simple

People did not was guidance to be too simple. It was felt that there are already materials available which provide an introduction or give basic information for new staff, and that what is lacking is guidance which discuss more complex issues and gives guidance for more experienced staff.

> "[There was] some kind of WP toolkit and I looked at it and thought that's all obvious, so for me, quite a lot of toolkits are too obvious, there's not enough detail."

> "It would be nice to kind of I guess have that, just a little bit above some of the stuff that's out there already."

> "I would want to see much more expert practical guidance that we could then use and work with the teams to implement."

Too long

It was felt that many of the resources that are already available are too long for people to read and use in a practical way. This also made it difficult to find relevant information amongst the large quantity of content.

> "I think the last evaluation toolkit we were given from HEFCE ran into seven, eight, lever arch files… That's impossible for anybody to actually digest and implement. So not that. Say, something perhaps that takes people a couple of minutes to get their head round and then the option to delve in more deeply for specific things if that's relevant to them at that time."

Too academic/research focused
Whilst it was felt that academics had an important part to play in outreach and outreach evaluation, some academic research was felt to be inaccessible, too specific, and not generalisable to the more complex situation that practitioners are working in.

> "To be honest, the stuff that is coming from academics, I look at it and say, 'You can't say that,' you know, what about that rival hypothesis, or you know? It, or it's too specific to be generalisable or useful for policy."

> "What's missing really is something in the middle that allows the translation of the academic work into practical outcomes because often I guess a lot of the research is quite critical of the way that WP is structured…. And where you do get recommendations coming out of academic stuff, it tends to be fairly high level and philosophical, and it's really hard… to see both sides to work out, you know, okay we kind of, we buy into what [NAME] is saying, but what would that mean for practice in the teams?"

A distinction was made between practice focused work and academic work. The academic work was felt to be important, but that some work would need to be done to make this more directly applicable to a practice context.

Too prescriptive/unrealistic
Whilst people were clear that they did want guidance, they did not want something too prescriptive which set exactly how they should carry out evaluation as there was a concern that this approach would not take sufficient account of different circumstances, resource levels, area demographics, skill levels, and the different types of outreach programmes/activities offered at different institutions.

> "what I'd like to avoid is a situation whereby it speaks very much to a particular type of outreach and doesn't take account of that multiple interventions kind of approach when it's not about a single programme."

> "I would be quite reluctant to think that I was going to move to, if you suddenly brought out guidance that said 'we think you should be collecting learner level data on everybody that attends a school visit', I certainly wouldn't, I wouldn't do it. I can't do it. I wouldn't consider that to be appropriate at the moment, you know, but generally we're looking or wish to move forward and move our practice forward."

People have also invested a lot of time and effort into developing the evaluation frameworks and strategies that they already have in place. They would therefore be reluctant to abandon these completely, unless there was a very strong case for doing so. People wanted guidance which would support the ongoing development of their work rather than introduce something completely new.

> "I think we would not, it would be destabilising to suddenly get something that set us up, you know, moved us off course and stopped our long-term progress."

> "I hope if anything were to be suggested it would fit into the kind of evaluation plans that we have set in place at the moment. I mean, as I mentioned to you, what we're trying to do for example with [PROJECT] is actually ask the same questions each year to see how they've kind of moved, you know, where they've sort of travelled. So if that were to kind be thrown away, I'm not quite sure. I think that would be a bit of a job to persuade me and others that that's what we should do at the moment."

People want guidance to be…

Accessible for practitioners
There was a distinction made between more experienced staff who may want higher level content about evaluation frameworks and more complex methods, and delivery staff who are primarily focused on delivering projects, but who may also have a large part to play in evaluation. For these staff it was felt that guidance would have to be accessible and make clear links with the practical aspects of outreach delivery and evaluation.

> "Some of them would be able to work with something that asked them various questions, but others wouldn't be able to relate how that...what that means in practice for their particular outreach intervention, so if it doesn't ask specific questions they kind of get lost and then that's where you're getting woolly data at the end. There needs to be a balance."

> "There has been in the past, from various different people, a set of toolkits which have gone down like a lead balloon, not because they're not any good. They're just, they're not accessible."

Differentiated
Related to the distinction above between staff that are highly knowledgeable and experienced in evaluation and staff that may be newer to this work, there was a strong feeling that guidance would need to be differentiated if it was going to offer something useful for each of these groups. It was felt that a lot of other guidance either only provided guidance at the more introductory level, meaning there was little there for more experienced staff, or guidance would try to strike a balance between the two and then would actually be inaccessible for less experienced staff and still too basic for more experienced staff. Therefore, the advice from staff was that guidance should be differentiated in a way which may it easy for staff to find the sections that were relevant for them.

> "A lot of them are geared at let's assume you're completely new to evaluation and at that point I think, I tend to find that quite frustrating because, you know, at what point do I dip in? You know, what bit do I need to read if I've never done this before and what bit do I need to read if actually I do know what I'm doing to some extent?."

> "It might be useful to have sort of two formats, one for practitioners and one for researchers as well."

> "I don't know whether you would have an advanced and beginners and I think that would need a bit of thinking about because, you know, you're going to have people that perhaps who are absolutely brand new to this agenda and don't know a great, you know, if they're new into it, but if it's people that have been doing it for years I think that might be a bit of a challenge, whereas perhaps a document can more easily, you can just go straight to, 'Oh well that's all…yes, we know all that, but there's the bit that's of interest to me.'"

> "So whether that's having some form of guidance or support for people in evaluation research officer roles, as well as I guess people that are leading departments or teams."

The distinction here was in the amount of time spent explaining key concepts, the data available, or how to think about what data you could collect compared to guidance on more advanced data

collection and analysis methods or a more detailed discussion of the data and data sets available to help people to be more nuanced in the way that they think about and use this data.

Empowering
Although people wanted guidance and were very positive about this, there were also some concerns about guidance being too prescriptive and imposing a framework on people in an overly simple and inflexible way which would stifle their ability to develop evaluation for their own context. In contrast, people wanted to see guidance that could empower staff and encourage newcomers to see evaluation in a more positive light. It was felt that evaluation could either be a top-down monitoring of outreach work, or staff could be empowered to consider evaluation to be an important tool for them to demonstrate the breath, depth and impact that their work is having, not only internally but externally to schools, the HE sector, and government.

> "I would like to see a set of resources that would allow the sector to make the case to government that the money was being well spent."

> "something that empowers people."

> "Providing people with confidence so they can feel equipped to go and do that work and I think I would probably assess my team in a way that the majority could do that, but there are a couple, two or three that for instance don't have that confidence because they never had that opportunity to or they don't feel that confident in terms of their data experience."

People want guidance on…

Common standards and benchmarking
There was a common concern that people did not know how good the evaluation practice at their institution was in comparison to the sector as a whole. There was a lack of clarity about what the minimum standards or requirements are, and how evaluation work would be perceived by OFFA and others.

> "It's about knowing what the OFFA expectation is, what the sector expectation is, knowing where you are."

> "If OFFA were to be able to provide some clarity about exactly what it is they're trying to find out, what is it they want to know from us? Because when we're putting these monitoring returns together it's a finger in the air. And definitely some clarity around what exactly a) do they want the information for, you know, what are they going to use it for."

> "it would be great to get some guidance and to get some kind of concepts of where we are and what we can do better"

> "I suppose I'm interested now in benchmarking and thinking, well in my mind I think we're reasonably well advanced. I mean, am I deluding myself or…? You know, I'm interested in getting a sense of that, you know."

Data

People expressed frustration about using data from sources such as the National Pupil Database, as it was a long and complex process. Therefore, advice on better ways to access this data would be valued. Additionally, more discussion of the data sources available and more complex discussion about appropriate and inappropriate ways to draw conclusions from this data were requested.

> "Anything that can help us with that sort of dataset, looking at dataset stuff, NPD stuff, or anything else that helps in that, or helps encourage other agencies to engage with us on that, that would certainly be sort of welcomed."

> "To create a culture where there was a baseline set of knowledge about issues around sampling, data and… kind of a more sophisticated use of datasets, introductions to datasets would be useful and how to interpret them because I think that's a kind of lacking area."

> "I did run some… data… what did I call them? I can't remember what I called them. It was some sort of data training sessions for all of our staff last year where I gave them all an overview of what, you know, what data means and what evaluation is and blah, blah, blah, so just a couple of hour's sessions. We made them quite fun and interactive and for the feedback I've got was that it was really helpful because they often see terms and don't know what they meant, so what I tried to do was try, in a really informal way, show how what all these things mean and that was really useful."

Showing Impact more robustly

There seems to be a reasonable level of awareness of methods such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs). However, people wanted more information about how to do this in practice, rather than just the theory or ideas underpinning these approaches. In terms of RCTs people faced challenges such as resistance from schools, questions about ethical issues, difficulties with keeping the same schools and students involved throughout the process, and collecting the relevant data. Therefore, people wanted guidance on how to carry out an RCT, or at least some more robust methods involving comparison groups, and how to tackle these challenges.

> "How we could practically do randomised controlled trials for example, how we're going to overcome the resistance, because it's not something that people seem very keen on."

> "I personally would love guidance on how practical it is to run randomised controlled trials and I would also, because I've never done one before, I'd also love some help on actually undertaking them and doing the analysis etc. … I think it's important that we do look at that sort of thing, but you know, I've never actually well, I've read about them obviously, but I've never actually taken, you know, taken part in one, so that would be, something like that would be really, really useful to me."

> "You know, I get into an argument with one of the researchers at [UNIVERSITY] because they were talking about using control groups and I would have a difference of opinion about what that was, whether that was a control group or not, so you know, having some clarity around what we mean I think is helpful."

Embedding evaluation
It was felt that having an evaluation framework was extremely important for producing high quality evaluations.

> "You can give all the guidance, expertise, support to members of staff that are delivering, but If you haven't got an overarching effective framework, which really puts a rationale and context to why you're evaluating that particular thing, or if you don't have that particular expertise in certain methodologies then it's kind of wasted."

But, a challenge in this regard is how to develop and embed evaluation into pre-existing programmes and practices. Ideally evaluation is considered in the planning stage and built into a programme, but for many in the sector this has not been the case historically, therefore they have programmes and activities which are already running but may not have a clear evaluation framework in place. There was a call for guidance which could address this situation as well as the more ideal situation of planning the programme and evaluation simultaneously.

> "It's been about applying evaluation at the point of programme planning and if you're coming in like I did when, you know, half of your programmes are established, if not more, how do you apply it to something that already exists? Can you do it? Is it allowed? So maybe a little bit more around not doing it as, I think it's useful to have the project planning bit, but if you're not doing the project planning how do you still manage to embed evaluation?"

Further Reading
As mentioned earlier, people wanted some form of differentiation in the guidance so the people could access different levels of information and read more if it was relevant to them. One way of achieving this is by guiding people to further advice, reading and toolkits which offer basic introductions to concepts for those who need it, or more complex and advanced discussion for others.

> "A further reading element to it I think would be helpful if there's something that, you know, actually that is really interesting, it really seems to work for us. How do I find out more about it?"
>
> This would also be an opportunity to bring in advice and resources from other sectors.
>
> "Some of the things that I found most helpful when I was looking at it in the evaluation was actually, a lot of the stuff from the charity sector, because it recognises that you're using evaluation also to tell a story about the work that you do."

In this scoping research we spoke to a number of Third Sector organisation and much of their practice is highly relevant to the higher education sector. This guidance could be an opportunity to make this work more widely available within the sector.

Conclusion: Points to Take Forward

A key learning point from this research is that there is a very wide variety of contexts in which outreach work is taking place. Institutions have hugely varied levels of resources, staff time, skills, experience, and support from their institution. Additionally, the location of institutions (for example rural or city) and the demographics of the local population also vary and these have a huge impact on the type of outreach work that is done. Staff made reference to feeling as though general advice and guidance for the sector often did not apply to them, or could not be made to work in their particular context. This means that any guidance needs to be broad and flexible to ensure that all institutions are able to apply it to their specific context, with the staff and resources that they have available to them.

Key things that support evaluation work…

HEAT: Although a number of challenges and limitations of HEAT were identified, HEAT was felt to be a valuable resource by those involved in it. Appendix 2 gives an overview of similar services.

Empowering people: There was the potential for evaluation to be considered an external add-on to outreach work which was not inspiring for delivery staff who are expected to participate in this evaluation work. In departments where staff had been empowered and encouraged to see evaluation as a tool for them to demonstrate the impacts of their hard work, staff were more positive about evaluation and more willing to seek further help and guidance to improve their evaluation skills.

Guidance

People want guidance to be accessible for practitioners (if this is the intended audience), differentiated for different levels of experience and knowledge, and empowering.

People do not want guidance to be obvious or simple, too long, too prescriptive, and impractical (given the challenges discussed).

People want guidance on benchmarking (knowing how to assess how well their institution is doing compared to the sector), minimum standards or requirements, data (both collecting and analysing), how to carry out RCTs, how to set up robust groups for comparison using data, and places to find further resources and more information.

Overall there seemed to be a lower level of knowledge and awareness of qualitative methods and analysis, and there is a feeling from practitioners with qualitative expertise that this area is often overlooked. There is therefore space for guidance which covers some of the more complex and robust qualitative processes and provides links to further reading and resources.

Feedback for OFFA

In discussions with staff, a number of points relating to OFFA were highlighted. These can be summarised as follows:

- There was a lack of clarity about what the minimum standards or requirements are, and how evaluation work would be perceived by OFFA and others.

- Targets and directives from external bodies and organisations change too frequently and are expected to be implemented too quickly.

- People wanted more feedback on the evaluation that they submit in monitoring returns, partly as a form of benchmarking and to ensure that they are meeting standards.

- There seemed to be some confusion about what OFFAs stance is in regards to evaluation and what would constitute a good approach to evaluation. For example, one member of staff talked about there being an expectation from OFFA that they should be evaluating all of their outreach work, whereas another member of staff said that OFFA do not expect that everything will be evaluated. Therefore, clarification of expectations would be beneficial.

Feedback for Institutions

In addition to feedback for OFFA, the interviews also highlighted a number of key points relevant to institutions.

- Despite the highly varied contexts in which people are working, and the diverse demographics of students that different institutions work with, this report has highlighted that a number of key concerns and challenges are shared by many across the sector. Specifically, key challenges relating to time and resources, difficulty in accessing data, limited skills and resources for more detailed or complex analysis of data, and a lack of consistency and clarity in terms of standards and requirements across the sector. As these challenges seem to be shared, there is scope for working towards solutions to these issues as a sector. This report has collated and highlighted these concerns so that they can be considered in further work on the evaluation of outreach.

- There is quite varied practice across institutions, and many institutions have developed strategies and methods which ease some of the challenges in their context. Therefore, there is the potential for others to learn from these and adapt them for their own context.

- When discussing areas which help and support outreach evaluation work, tracking services were seen to be helpful. Appendix 2 gives an overview of HEAT, UCAS STROBE and NCOP so that institutions can consider whether these services may be able to support them in their work.

- The work that has taken place in the first phase of the 'Improving the Evaluation of Outreach' project has led to the development of a number of recommendations to be considered further in the second phase of the project. These are listed in the following section of this report.

Resulting Recommendations

The first phase of the 'Improving the Evaluation of Outreach' project has involved a scoping exercise to gain a better understanding of current practice and challenges relating to the evaluation of outreach work in Higher Education Institutions. This report has given detailed information about the outcomes of interviews with staff as part of this process.

As a result of the work carried out in the first phase of this project, a number of recommendations are being been put forward to guide the work in phase two of the project. The Recommendations are:

Recommendation 1: "HEIs will benefit from a clear and concise statement setting out the case for HEIs to adopt evaluation strategies which are flexible, institutionally-relevant and consistent within an overall evaluation framework for the sector."

Recommendation 2: "HEIs will benefit from a set of 'Standards of Evaluation Practice' for assessing the quality of the evaluation of the impact of outreach across the sector."

Recommendation 3: "HEIs will benefit from clear guidance on what constitutes criteria for meeting each standard, supporting HEIs in their journey through the Levels, including provision of toolkits and training appropriate to each Level."

Recommendation 4: "That OFFA considers adopting a sector-wide 'off-the-shelf' baseline evaluation methodology." This would enable the adoption or development of a resource to support the implementation of baseline evaluations in HEIs across the sector in such a way as to generate consistency in baseline protocols for the purposes of comparison, the generation of a sector-wide evidence base, and the conduct of meta-analyses.

Recommendation 5: "The development of a sector-wide Outreach Evaluation resource hub." A central resource hub would provide information, advice, guidance and training in outreach and evaluation design. Such a hub could also house the baseline evaluation resource proposed in Recommendation 4.

Project Management

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Steering Group

The Steering Group Terms of Reference are:

1. To provide independent oversight throughout the project
2. To advise and guide the PI and research team in the delivery of the project
3. To ensure the project will provide meaningful and tangible outcomes for the sector
4. To operate transparent, open and unbiased advice, acting in the best interests of the work

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Appendix 1: Existing Toolkits and Guidance on Outreach Evaluation

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  https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjYtbD2xoPUAhUqBMAKHSgqBbEQFggqMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.srhe.ac.uk%2Fdownloads%2Fevents%2F165_HaytonBengryHowellAWP090215.pptx&usg=AFQjCNHyhG4I5e15SSPPVzNLj5yBSzMH-w

- Higher Education Academy (HEA) HE outreach to widen participation: toolkits for practitioners. Evaluation https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/resource2322

- HEA - A brief guide to data sources
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- OFFA: Evaluating your access activities and expenditure https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/evaluating-your-access-activities/

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- Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU) (at University of Sheffield) https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/schools/outreach-programmes/wpreu
    - Guidance available here: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/wp/wpevaluation
    - Good Practice When Designing Evaluation Questionnaires: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/wp/wpevaluation/goodpractice
    - Evaluation Focus Groups and Interviews: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/wp/wpevaluation/interviews

Appendix 2: Summaries of Tracking Resources

This appendix provides a brief summary of selected resources and services available in the HE sector for tracking participants of outreach activities as part of the evaluation of the impact of outreach.

Appendix 2A: HEAT

Background

The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) Service is a monitoring and evaluation service for member institutions. Originally a self-sustaining HEI subscription service, it has received three years funding from HEFCE to expand HEI membership across England and will return to a self-sustaining service from December 2018. The HEAT service is developed by members for members, collaborating on the sharing of data, analysis and research evidence.

Tracking and monitoring

Recording of activities and of participants

The HEAT service enables member institutions[1] to register their outreach activities, recording securely and confidentially the nature of those activities and the characteristics of individual participants, using common protocols and coding fields. Sharing across members can also be put in place through the system, to facilitate partnership recording and reporting (e.g. for NCOP consortium).

Tracking of participants

Outreach participants can be tracked in a variety of ways.

1. Surveys (within and outside HEAT)

> *Within HEAT*: There is a survey tool within the HEAT service which enables HEIs to build up longitudinal information on participants of both a qualitative and a quantitative nature
>
> *Outside HEAT*: The HEAT evaluation is being designed to enable HEIs to upload externally-generated survey information so that this sits alongside data and reports generated within the HEAT database

2. HE outcomes within HEAT institutions

> The sharing of data among HEAT subscribers enables participants in outreach activities in one institution to be tracked across any other HEAT subscribing institution to which they might apply.

[1] NCOP evaluators can also access HEAT services.

3. Attainment and HE outcomes through 'fuzzy' matching to NPD-HESA datasets[2]

HEIs can 'locate' outreach participants within NPD-HESA data through fuzzy matching and hence track their attainment at Key Stages and into HE.

Consent

HEIs subscribing to HEAT are asked to present a privacy notice to participants which tells them that their data will be shared with HEAT and other agencies such as HESA. HEAT has developed an animation which HEIs can show to students, explaining why their data are of benefit for research and evaluation. Partly in view of the GDPR coming into force next year, HEAT are developing an electronic registration tool that can be used in schools via iPads and phones, with a built-in privacy notice and opt-in mechanism. These tools can be accessed by any member institution

Comparator groups

Data on aggregate outcomes of comparator groups can be obtained within NPD-HESA data by matching against participant characteristics: enhancement of ease and quality of matching is under review between HEAT management and the Department for Education. HEAT is also negotiating access to Department for Education NPD/Attainment data for a counterfactual analysis based on control group data.

Implementation

The developing HEAT evaluation planning tool supports HEIs in building their evaluation into an overall outreach strategy. HEIs have the option to record an extensive range of descriptors into the HEAT evaluation planning tool. The aim is to have this tool "live" by Autumn 2017. This includes:

- The objectives of the activity (eg detailed target group(s), student and school-level factors, nature of identified need)
- The anticipated outcome measures (eg learning/behavioural outcomes, attainment results, KS4/5 Report, UCAS Report, HESA Track Report)
- Delivery context
- Descriptors of Activity (resources, inputs, outputs)
- Measures of extent of engagement by participants
- The type of evaluation (eg impact or process evaluation; post/pre-post/control group, type of data)

[2] Note that HEAT data can also be linked to UCAS data through fuzzy matching, but this generates aggregate data on outcomes of participants, not individual-level data.

Evaluation

The HEAT service enables and enhances impact evaluation at various levels of standard of evaluation practice. Level 1 narrative discussion can be enhanced through reference to reports based on the HEAT tracking service.

Before-and-after evaluation (at a basic Level 2 standard) is enabled through, for example, the capacity to monitor the HE applications/outcomes of participants within the HEAT tracking service or through fuzzy-matching to HESA data and compare outcomes to pre-intervention assessments/expectations of participants/teachers. Similarly, before-and-after evaluation based on post-intervention attainment relative to pre-intervention assessment is possible through fuzzy-matching to NPD data. Difference-in-difference (Level 3) evaluations can be achieved through comparison of outcomes of participants with those of a comparator group.

Impact Evaluation within HEAT is being enhanced through ongoing developments, increasing the sector's understanding of the complexity of outreach participants from diverse backgrounds, differing levels of attainment at KS2 and KS4 and differing levels of outreach engagement. Within the developing HEAT evaluation planning tool, subscribing HEIs will be able to obtain an Evaluation Report built around data entered regarding the characteristics of the outreach activity and specified outcomes. The data entry is within a rich set of pre-specified fields and protocols, common across HEAT users, thereby potentially, enabling comparisons over time and across activities and institutions.

The HEAT tracking service has demonstrated scalability through its capacity to grow significantly the number of subscribing institutions.[3] Being based on the principle of the sharing of data across institutions, its capacity to enable tracking of outreach participants is enhanced as membership grows. Were it to cover all institutions, then tracking would be potentially comprehensive across the sector – and evaluation would be meaningfully comparable through a common protocol-based data entry system. Importantly, by sharing data across members, HEAT can enable a student-led analysis, exploring the relationship between their outreach engagement (across more than one HEI) and attainment and progression outcomes. Extending membership to third sector organisations may also increase the completeness of a participant's outreach experience. By working with a combined dataset across the membership, HEAT analysis allows for a cross-institution interrogation of data for impact evidence and more opportunity for intersectional analysis. This would not be possible for many members independently, due to smaller populations, or to the fact that they work with a specific WP population, or attainment group.

[3] Membership is 69 at the time of writing.

Appendix 2B: UCAS (STROBE)

Background

From the UCAS website:

"STROBE is a UCAS service that can track individuals into the UCAS applications system, and report anonymously on their outcomes or characteristics at aggregate levels.

STROBE is currently operated by the UCAS charity as a sustainable service, priced to cover its operational and development costs. The basic pricing for STROBE is on a per record submitted basis, at a base of £5 per record submitted. This charge is reduced if only a low proportion of records are linked into the UCAS data. STROBE users who are organisational customers of the UCAS Undergraduate scheme (higher education providers and apply centres) have a separate pricing arrangement. The minimum charge for an initial STROBE execution will be £400. For potential users who have many data records but require only summary information, or a link into the EXACT data service, a simplified version of STROBE (with less configurability) is available at a fixed cost of £2,000.

For analysis of recognised widening participation and fair access activities where the pricing of STROBE is preventing access, we have a public benefit programme. Please contact us for a discussion of how this works."

Tracking and monitoring

HEIs wishing to access data on HE applications of their outreach participants can request various aggregated output measures. The STROBE service takes individual-level data on an HEI's outreach participants (such as name, date of birth, home postcode) and links these to individuals in the UCAS records to calculate anonymous aggregate statistics on the group of participants.

A STROBE Report can provide statistics on a range of application outcomes, covering the entire application process from application through to offer-making and replies, and finally to acceptance into HE. It can also give breakdowns by characteristics such as high/medium/low tariff of universities applied to.

Consent

From the UCAS website:

"To use STROBE, you will need to have named personal data, for which you have the correct authority and permission to submit into the service for processing and receive anonymous statistical reports back. No personal information is ever disclosed through the STROBE service. Personal data transferred into STROBE for processing is destroyed at the end of the process, or after a specified period of time if the user has requested that it be retained for an updated analysis at a later point."
As tables provided in STROBE Reports are at an aggregate level of information with built-in disclosure control, users can share the results without restriction or risk of disclosing personal information.

Comparator groups and benchmarking

As all the STROBE-generated outputs and definitions are to the same standards and definitions as national UCAS reporting, they can be directly compared to them for reference. Various 'comparator groups' can therefore be used as benchmarks for comparison in STROBE Reports: for example, either the full UCAS database of applications in the cohort or a 'potential applicant database cohort' similar to the UCAS-linked outreach participants in terms of age, socio-demographics and nearest-school FSM eligibility.

Implementation

A STROBE output report to an HEI on anonymous aggregate statistics of fuzzy-matched outreach participants consists of: core tracking information, summary charts giving an overview of key statistics, and four standard tables, each focusing on a specific part of the application journey.

- **Applications** – the number of applicants and applications, including overall application rate, and the route through which applications were made.

- **Offers** – the number of offers received and the proportion of the cohort receiving an offer, split by whether the offers are conditional or unconditional.

- **Replies** – the number of offers replied to and whether they were firm or insurance.

- **Acceptances** – the number of people accepted, the acceptance rate, and the route through which acceptance was gained.

In addition, the STROBE user can:

- Specify a set of higher education providers for which outcomes are reported (for example, mission groups or individual providers)

- Request separate reports for different groups of individuals (for example, by gender and by outreach activity)

Evaluation

A STROBE Report can be the basis for impact evaluation of outreach activities. The aggregate statistics on the (fuzzy) matched participants presented in the report tables can be used in a before-and-after evaluation (at a basic Level 2 standard) by comparing the post-intervention STROBE-generated aggregate statistics for the treatment group with pre-intervention assessments or expectations of participants/teachers.

Difference-in-difference evaluation (up to a Level 3 standard) can be achieved through comparison of the aggregate outcomes of participants with those of a comparator group, such as the UCAS applications database cohort or the potential applicant database cohort. In the STROBE Report, the cohort of 'treated' students submitted by the HEI to UCAS is compared to many cohorts of similar size and composition and the relative outcomes of the treated cohort are presented as a percentile of the overall sample. The percentile recorded is presented with an indication of its statistical significance.

Appendix 2C: NCOP

Background

From the NCOP website:

"The national collaborative outreach programme aims to support the most disadvantaged young people in England to progress into higher education (HE). It will run from 2016-17 to 2019-20. The programme consists of 29 consortia undertaking outreach activity in geographical areas where the HE participation of young people is both low and much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment.

HEFCE will provide £30 million in 2016-17 to establish the consortia and start outreach activity. From 2017-18, funding for the programme will be set at £60 million per annum. Funding will be provided for two years in the first instance, from January 2017 to December 2018. Funding for a further two years to December 2020 will be subject to consortia making satisfactory progress towards meeting the Government's goals."

Tracking and monitoring

Recording of activities and of participants

Consortia maintain records of participant engagement in outreach activities across the collaborating institutions.

Tracking of participants

Consortia are required to track their individual target learners through the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) or a similar mechanism.

Evaluation

Evaluation will take place at both local (consortium) level and nationally. At the national level, a four-year impact evaluation will be conducted by CFE in partnership with The Behavioural Insights Team and economists from the University of Sheffield and LSE in order to understand 'what works, in what context and why.'

The evaluation strategy will have many aspects ad will be based on a mixed method approach involving primary research, surveys, interviews, case studies, and analysis of HEFCE monitoring data. An outline of the key characteristics of the evaluation strategy for NCOP can be found at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Student,access,and,success/NCOP/Evaluation_table.pdf