

Impact and Effectiveness of Widening Access to HE in Wales

Working Paper Series¹ – WAQLCE2014-6

A review of approaches adopted by HEIs in Wales to evaluating widening access. Ceryn Evans



¹ Working Papers are intended to present initial analysis and findings. Please do not cite them without permission of the author(s).

Foreword

The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) is currently evaluating the impact and effectiveness of Widening Access to higher education (HE) in Wales. This project is funded through the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (ES/K004247/1); and by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). It will be completed by December 2014.

Access to higher education has become an extremely controversial area of policy, as successive UK administrations have sought to balance increasing student fees with ensuring that HE is open to individuals from as wide a range of social backgrounds as possible. Moreover, relatively distinctive approaches have been adopted in the different devolved administrations of the UK. For example, currently, the Welsh Government has undertaken to pay the increased costs to students arising from the abolition of the fees cap. However, the evidence-base for evaluating different approaches to widening access is relatively weak. Accordingly, WISERD, the HEFCW and the Welsh Government (WG) are collaborating on this innovative research study.

The research analyses how individuals who are resident in Wales progress through secondary school, into sixth forms and further education colleges for post-16 education and on to HE. It also explores what are the key factors here in determining whether individuals progress through the education system to HE or not. What are the relative impacts of the social characteristics of individuals, their previous educational attainment and their progression through the education system? What does this imply for the effects of barriers at the point of entry to HE, such as fees levels, entry processes and so forth? Answers to these questions are known for England, but not for other parts of the UK.

The analysis is based on the innovative use of three linked sources of information, the data for each of which are collected initially for administrative purposes. These are: the National Pupil Database (NPD) for Wales; the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR); and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data. By linking these together, it is possible to trace individual trajectories through the education system to entry to HE. It is also possible to compare systematically the trajectories of those who do participate in HE with those who do not. Moreover, using sophisticated statistical techniques, it is possible to determine which are

the most influential factors in shaping patterns of HE participation. Results here will be compared with those that have been produced by similar analyses in England.

A second part of the proposed study (funded by additional resources made available by the HEFCW) investigates the development of distinctive approaches to widening access to HE by successive Welsh administrations since devolution in 1999. Of key significance here is to establish the rationales that underpin the approaches adopted in Wales; and to compare these with those that have informed policy approaches in the other countries of the UK and England, in particular. In addition, the study examines the ways in which national policies have been implemented by the Welsh universities, paying special attention to the assumptions about the determinants of HE participation that are in play here. This part of the study is based on fieldwork, comprising the analysis of official and semi-official documents and interviews with politicians and senior officials responsible for widening access policies; and with the professionals inside the universities responsible for implementing these policies.

The results of the research will be fed directly into the deliberations of the WG and the HEFCW on the future development of policies on widening access to HE, which will be especially intensive over the next few years. Moreover, they will also provide the basis for working with the professionals in the universities with responsibility for implementing widening access policies, to integrate the use of analyses of administrative data more firmly into their day-to-day practices.

Introduction

Widening participation in higher education has been a central pillar of UK Government's higher education policy since the 1990s. In Wales, the centrality of the 'widening access' agenda within its strategy for higher education has resulted in pressure on HEIs to expand access to HE opportunities to those traditionally under-represented in it. With the aim of driving forward its widening access agenda the Welsh Government (WG) also established regional Reaching Wider Partnerships (RWP) in 2002/3 in four regions in Wales tasked to raise aspirations and awareness of HE through partnership work between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Further Education (FE) colleges, schools and local community organisations. Ever since HEIs and RWPs have been required to invest in activities and programmes aimed at widening access to HE they have been required by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to evaluate their impact and effectiveness. This requirement to illustrate 'effectiveness' and 'impact' of widening access activities has been heightened by the 'austere' financial landscape that Wales has experienced following global economic recession so that a case can be made for the continuation of their funding (HEA, 2012)

Yet measuring the 'impact' of publically funded widening access work is challenging; establishing causal relationships, measuring longitudinal 'impacts' and separating out the influences of an intervention from other influences are just some of the difficulties faced by practitioners attempting to evaluate their widening access activities. This has been readily acknowledged by academic researchers, higher education funding councils in England and Wales and widening access practitioners and officers within HEIs for some years now (HEFCW, 2007; University of Leeds 2010; HEA, 2012). These issues are partly responsible for the lack of robust assessment or evaluation of the impact of widening access initiatives on various outcomes carried out by HEIs since widening participation (or widening access as it is more commonly referred to in Wales) became key policy agendas in both England and Wales.

Despite a number of evaluation guidance tool kits produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and other organisations including Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Network (1st and 2nd edition have been published in 2012 and 2013 respectively) a

report produced by Edge Hill University and CFE for HEFCE in 2013 (Bowes et al 2013) highlighted a distinct lack of robust evaluation being carried out by institutions of their widening participation activities and interventions. It stated that the majority of institutions are not systematically evaluating their widening participation work and that there is very little evaluation to establish the long term impact of widening participation activities in terms of what works and why. Indeed, a review of the academic and practitioner literature on the impact of widening access interventions such as Aimhigher² on participation, retention and success in HE carried out Thomas (2011) revealed similar findings. Thomas (2011) found that there is very limited research about the impact of pre-entry interventions on participation in HE and general, nor on retention and success in HE. Wyness (2013) also noted a distinct weakness in terms of research on widening access measures, claiming that there is no research to demonstrate which widening access activities are most effective which means that it is not possible to say whether universities are spending money on effective measures. Bowes et al (2013) similarly found that there has been a distinct lack of national-level evaluation of the impact of pre-entry activity, and there have been challenges of integrating national, regional and institutional data. Bowes et al (2013) argue that so far it has not been possible to establish a causal link between pre-entry interventions and participation. This dearth of robust evaluation has become recognised as highly problematic, promoting calls from funding councils in England and Wales and academics for more effective evaluation of widening participation work, both quantitative and qualitative, to be carried out (HEFCW, 2007).

In Wales, some attempts have been made to assess the extent to which HEIs and RWPs are evaluating and assessing the impact of their work. Welsh Government requested a sector wide review of activities aimed at widening access to higher education in 2007. In response to this request the HEFCW commissioned an evaluation, carried out by Arad Consulting in 2006, of the Welsh Government's widening access policy (HEFCW, 2007). This evaluation investigated the progress and impact of widening access funded activities in HEIs and the reaching wider initiative, revealing differences across the sector in the extent to which the 'impact' of widening access strategies were being measured noting that some HEIs were measuring the 'impact' of their widening access provision more robustly than others. The

² Aimhigher was a national programme in England which aimed to widen participation in HE by raising aspirations and attainment amongst young people from groups under-represented in HE. It was established in 2003 but the programme ended in 2011 following the ending of funding from HEFCE

evaluation found that HEIs presented relatively little data or records of participation rates relating to individual activities aimed at widening access during the course of the evaluation. This consultation acknowledged the challenges faced by HEIs and RWPs in evaluating the effectiveness or impact of activities or interventions, also stating that the lack of target definitions was contributing to this difficulty in demonstrating impact of widening access activity:

The impact, efficiency and value for money from both widening access and Reaching Wider activities proved difficult to evidence, as similar UK-wide research confirms. The reasons for this include: difficulties in unequivocally linking attendance at a funded intervention to higher education progression; the length of time required to progress from aspiration-raising activities (at, for example, age 12) to HE entry at age 18 plus; and as noted above, the limited tracking and monitoring systems currently in place.(HEFCW, 2007)

Moreover, a later review of widening access and reaching wider strategies in Wales carried out by the HEA (2012) recommended that both institutions and RWPs further develop their evidence base (in terms of progress, success and impact of their work) and stated that whilst most RWPs and institutions were providing *some* evidence of the success of their work, there is a need for them to use a greater range of evaluation techniques to evidence ‘impact’. This echoes an earlier review of the widening access and reaching wider strategies produced by HEA (2009) in which it found that HEIs and RWPs were not generally measuring the outcomes of their widening access work in terms of impact on participants, particularly in terms of capturing the medium and long term outcomes of their work. They tended to focus on measuring the outputs (i.e. the events and activities) rather than the outcomes of their work on participants. It also found that many institutions and partnerships lacked baseline data against which to reference their outcomes.

Evaluation guidelines currently available

Despite ongoing dialogue between HEFCW, partnerships and institutions in Wales about the need to demonstrate widening access outcomes (HEA, 2012), the distinct lack of evaluation research and evidence of ‘impact’ found in the widening participation literature calls to question the clarity and usefulness of guidelines currently available for HEIs. A number of

guidelines have been produced, for the HEFCE, to guide HEIs in England in evaluating their work. Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Network have produced a toolkit for widening participation managers entitled '*Higher education Outreach to widen participation. Toolkits for practitioners: Evaluation.*' First and second editions of these have been published in 2012 and 2013 respectively (Dent et al 2013). These toolkits are valuable for emphasising what can be achieved from evaluation, distinguishing between formative and summative evaluation and what understandings can be gained from each. They are perhaps most useful in emphasising the importance of developing a project plan, of making the evaluation an integrated part of the project and of using a research question with SMART objectives, to guide the evaluation. They also set out the importance of attempting to establish an estimate of the counterfactual, that is, what would have happened in the absence of the activity or programme.

The recommendation of using Kirkpatrick's (1992) as cited by (Dent et al, 2013) evaluation model to distinguish different types of evaluation is, however, questionable. While this model outlines the appropriate methods needed for different levels of evaluation, it does not enable practitioners to use evaluation to discern different types of *outcomes* associated with an activity. For example, it does not emphasise differences in types of evaluation; process evaluation, impact evaluation and economic evaluation as described by the 'Magenta book: Guidance for Evaluation' (HM Treasury 2011). Moreover, these toolkits provide very little technical and practical guidance on actually how to measure 'impact' or widening participation activities.

A further set of guidelines produced by HEFCE (2010) for HEIs entitled '*Widening participation strategic assessments: guidance on developing evaluative approaches to widening participation activities and commitments: Annex A: Guidance for institutions*' sets out clear definitions of what the HEFCE mean by evaluation, making it clear that they want HEIs to measure short, medium and long term outcomes, providing examples of how to do this. The emphasis it places on measuring short term outcomes is really important when assessing impact given that impacts of widening access activities are very often longitudinal. Moreover, in emphasising the importance of qualitative and quantitative approaches to gathering evidence this acknowledges that different methods provide different kinds of insight about a programme or activity. However, these guidelines do not provide practical advice on how to carry out evaluation to measure the outcomes, nor do they provide enough

information on how HEIs can access and use appropriate data sets to enable them to evaluate long-term outcomes.

While there have been some guidelines produced for HEIs in England by HEFCE, there has been very little evaluation guidance produced by the Welsh Government or HEFCW for HEIs and RWPs in Wales. The HEA's (2012) review of widening access and reaching wider strategies stated that the HEFCW should support institutions to capture medium and long term outcomes. Indeed, a circular published by the HEFCW in May 2011, aimed at HEIs, stated:

Effective outcomes should demonstrate the impact of the activities. While not every outcome can, or should, be quantitative, we need to understand how the achievement of qualitative outcomes will be measured and success demonstrated. Outcomes must be appropriately ambitious, while remaining realistic and achievable (***'Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies 2011/12 to 2013/14: Supplementary Guidance', HEFCW 2011***)

Yet there is little guidance for HEIs and RWPs on how to measure impact, what is meant by impact and how to carry out evaluation in order to demonstrate short, medium and long term outcomes. Given the limited research evidence in England and Wales that demonstrates the 'impact' of widening access interventions, particularly within Wales, there is an urgent need to review the approaches adopted by HEIs and RWPs to evaluating their programmes and measuring impact. There is also a need to explore the challenges and obstacles to evaluation faced by widening access practitioners. This requires exploring how widening access and reaching wider practitioners are interpreting the notion of 'impact' and how they are implementing methods of evaluation in the face of very limited guidelines from HEFCW. Based on data from interviews with institutional widening access managers and RWP managers across Wales, this paper reviews the methods adopted by widening access and reaching wider practitioners to evaluating their programmes, interventions and activities. In doing so it revealed the (perceived) challenges faced by RWP and widening access practitioners to measuring 'impact'. This paper does not attempt to evaluate the impact of programmes activities or initiatives delivered by HEIs and RWPs, rather, it reviews the evaluation process itself. By deepening our understanding of how the notion of 'impact' is interpreted by widening access and reaching wider practitioners, the methods used in

evaluation and the challenges faced by practitioners in measuring or assessing ‘impact’, this should inform the guidelines issued to HEIs and RWPs to support them in conducting robust and reliable evaluation.

Research questions

To what extent are RWPs and HEIs evaluating their widening access initiatives, activities or programmes?

Empirical questions:

What are the methods used to evaluate widening access or reaching wider activities?

How are practitioners interpreting the notion of ‘impact’?

What are the challenges to measuring impact?

Methods

The data on which the below discussion is derived is based on interviews conducted with widening access managers across HEIs in Wales as well as RWP managers. Interviews aimed to explore the extent to which HEIs and RWPs were putting in place measures to evaluate their widening access work, how they interpret the notion of ‘impact’. In exploring these interests, these interviews revealed that practitioners faced substantial challenges which limited their capacity to evaluate their work. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded using a Dictaphone.

What methods were being adopted by HEIs and RWPs to evaluate their widening access activities and programmes?

Participant feedback forms.

When asked how they ‘evaluated’ their activities or programmes it was clear that widening access and reaching wider practitioners were interpreting the notion of ‘impact’ and ‘evaluation’ in varied ways. Practitioners were only occasionally interpreting ‘impact’ to

mean the extent to which the programme or activity encouraged progression on to HE. The notion of ‘impact’ was more regularly conceived of in terms of a programmes’ ‘impact’ on participants’ attitudes, awareness, and aspirations towards HE or the extent to which extra skills, knowledge and information about HE had been gained, as described by this interviewee:

I mean one of the requirements of the funding is that we are looking at outcomes of interventions, not just putting on an activity, which is great, it's absolutely the right way because you want to find out if what we're doing is appropriate, whether it adds value, whether it creates any impact. So for some activities we have impact measurement, so we will, for example with mentoring we ask the young people a series of questions on their understanding, their motivations, confidence levels, whether they think that they can go on to university or not, or higher education. And then we ask them the same questions again at the end and quite often you'll find that their confidence may or may not have changed but they will be more informed or they'll think 'do you know what, I do feel more comfortable with this', they might say 'I don't know if I can go to university' but by the end of it they 'yes I can'. (Widening Access Practitioner)

The use of participant feedback forms, as described by this interviewee, was one of the most common methods of collecting information, particularly regarding gathering information about participants views, attitudes towards HE. Commonly, participants are asked to provide feedback on the content of a programme following their participation on it, providing feedback on what they felt they have gained from the activity, their enjoyment of it and what they liked and disliked about it. These sorts of feedback evaluation were often used to inform future delivery of the programme and provide insight into how the programme is working, what happens within the programme and how its delivery can be improved. This sort of qualitative feedback was also used to gather information on participants’ self-assessed skills or knowledge acquired or their changes in awareness, aspirations, confidence or understanding of HE as a result of their engagement in an activity or event. Practitioners largely spoke enthusiastically about what they perceived to be a substantial ‘impact’ of their programmes in terms of participants’ attitudes to HE or raising people’s confidence towards it. This method provides a measure of the ‘short-term’ ‘impact’ of an activity but provides

limited insight into the ‘impact’ of an activity on behavioural change for example, propensity to participate in HE.

Longitudinal tracking.

While it was clear that practitioners were regularly interpreting the notion of ‘impact’ in terms of a programme, event or activity’s propensity to change participants’ attitudes, awareness or perceptions of HE, some attempts were being made to track longitudinal progression on to HE. Approximately half of all interviewees I spoke with put in place measures to track participants’ progression from widening access or reaching wider activities on to higher education. This was most commonly done where a ‘Summer University’ scheme was delivered where young people, typically aged 16-18, come on to a university campus for between two and six weeks over the summer to gain ‘experience’ of university life whilst participating in study skills workshops, academic lectures and information, advice and guidance sessions. Where these sorts of events were delivered some admirable attempts were made to track participants’ progression from the ‘Summer University’ on to HE. Practitioners commonly did this by taking the details of all participants and maintaining contact with them through social network sites such as Facebook and used these informal contacts to document their progression on from their current level of education from school or college to HE.

*So I mean we, for, we normally get, I'd say about 95 to 100 per cent response rate in terms of where they are, with a mixture of asking the colleges and the schools, Facebook massively involved, you know hi guys remember us from last year, what are you doing, oh yeah I'm at uni in Bristol ...***(Widening access practitioner)**

For summer university we try and track a year on and then 3 years on, best we can and it is getting easier with social media to do that actually. About who has gone where and what they are doing, did they pass their first year, are they progressing. Obviously that is easier if they've come here, a little bit more difficult if they have gone elsewhere but we've just done a 2010 exercise follow up. **(Widening participation centre manager)**

Whilst there were other examples of attempts to track Summer University participants’ progression on to HE through the use of social media sites, in most cases tracking was only

possible where participants progressed on to the HEI in which the Summer University was based and where informal contacts had been maintained between participants and practitioners. There was no evidence of using statistical data to track individuals or to evidence the numbers making the progression to university, other than to document the numbers of people who had progressed through FE courses or who had progressed on to HE. Whilst social media is valuable for keeping in contact with ‘Summer University’ participants and gathering self-disclosed information (which enabled practitioners to say where individuals were in their educational careers), this is (as acknowledged by practitioners themselves) not a robust way of measuring ‘impact’ because not all participants stay in contact through this medium and this method produces only small quantitative evidence of rates of progression.

Tracking participants’ involvement in widening access activities.

Some attempts were made by practitioners to track participants’ longitudinal involvement in widening access or reaching wider activities. Approximately half of the HEIs and two of RWPs took the personal details of all participants involved in widening access or reaching wider activities or programmes and stored this data as a way of tracking their involvement on widening access or reaching wider activities over time. Whilst this enables practitioners to record the number of programmes each individual participant had engaged in over a number of years, there were no examples of using this information to explore the impact of involvement in these interventions on progression on to HE.

Assessment of attainment change

A small number of widening access and reaching wider practitioners delivered revision sessions with young people with the aim of boosting GCSE results. Some attempts were made by practitioners to collect GCSE data from schools to see if there are changes between the predicted and actual grades of participants who were involved in GCSE revision sessions. However, as was readily acknowledged by practitioners, this is a limited measure of ‘impact’ of a revision session on attainment since it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between involvement in a revision session and exam grades because of the influence of external factors. Moreover, the data collected was often incomplete because schools were reluctant to disclose exam results of individual pupils. Often practitioners were only able to make a judgment on the likely ‘impact’ of their revision programmes by asking teachers if

they felt revision sessions had improved pupils' attainment and gathering anecdotal stories from them.

Case studies.

Case studies documenting the 'success stories' of participants on widening access or reaching wider activities were commonly used to illustrate the success of individuals following their participation in widening access or Reaching Wider activities. These provide qualitative documentation of the learner 'journeys' of individual participants, backed up by anecdotal stories told by practitioners who spoke emphatically about what they perceived as the success of their widening access programmes. These case studies frequently document participants' enjoyment of widening access or reaching wider activities, yet they do not provide robust evidence of impact, and outcomes cannot be attributed to the programme.

What are the challenges to measuring impact?

The descriptions provided above indicate that Reaching Wider and Widening Access practitioners and managers are interpreting the notion of 'impact' and evaluation in varied ways. They most frequently attempted to illustrate the impact of their initiatives and programmes through gathering participant feedback forms which would reveal participants' short term reactions to an event or activity. The scarcity of the type of evaluation which assesses the impact of a programme or activity on individuals' propensity to participate in HE perhaps reflect the challenges faced by practitioners in carrying out this sort of evaluation. These challenges are discussed below:

Lack of control group.

A lack of control group was commonly recognised by practitioners as a barrier to measuring 'impact'. Practitioners recognised that without a comparable group of individuals they were not able to discern the impact of their work. Given that the RWPs have to target their activities and programmes at those living in Communities First areas this makes a comparison group inappropriate because if the programme is well targeted then non-participants are not comparable with participants (by nature of where they live). Practitioners commonly felt that a lack of control group was a major barrier to them demonstrating 'impact', as many felt that they were not able to conclude that participants would not have progressed on to HE had they not participated in a particular activity:

This is the whole, this is what our barrier is, is the control group aspect. (Widening access practitioner)

It's so hard to say, the biggest thing about all this is that we don't have a control group, so it's not like there's this sort of group who meet all of our targets but haven't had a reaching wider intervention, so measuring that is very difficult but the anecdotal stuff, you know people say there's no way I would have gone to uni without it and you know we've had some students who have been pregnant and then gone back to uni afterwards, just sort of, that's determination, I don't think that's come from nowhere, ... (Widening access practitioner)

While this practitioner recognised the difficulty in demonstrating 'impact' due to a lack of control group, she expressed a strong sense that the programmes they deliver do have 'impact' on people's lives. Indeed, almost all practitioners I spoke with were emphatic that their programmes had positive impacts on changing people's lives through altering their attitudes, perceptions or awareness of HE and readily recalled anecdotal success stories but were aware that these stories would not constitute evidence of 'impact' in the eyes of funding bodies.

Separating the influence of widening access activities from the influence of additional factors.

Whilst practitioners commonly recalled anecdotal 'success stories' they recognised that impact is difficult to prove (either qualitatively or quantitatively) because of the difficulty in separating out the influence of their activities and programmes from other factors. They recognised that the individuals they work with, and their decisions about participation in HE, are informed by multiple influences including parents, schools, peers and other interventions which come to bear upon decisions and propensity to participate. Many practitioners I spoke to were all too aware of the difficulty in discerning the relative impact of their programmes, activities and events from the influence of other factors:

I think it's that feedback and evaluation is the key thing, I think Winding Access has often in the past not been as good at proving that... some of it is difficult isn't

it, I mean who is to say what intervention has changed someone's mind (Centre for widening participation manager).

I think it's, as I said with schools, it's a much tougher thing because you just never know the intervention that made the difference and often people themselves can very often will say 'oh it was that, that changed it' but it's much more than usually one intervention or a series of interventions. (Widening access practitioner)

I think for the summer university we are very clear, because it is a very big breadth, depth, intense programme I don't think we are under any doubt that it has a huge impact. For other interventions you don't, I don't think you could be as, if you are going into a school, and meeting a year 9 group and then even if you meet them again at year 11 and maybe again if they've stayed on you still don't know how much is your affect, the school's affect, their parents, their peer group, their best mate that they just... Or some fantastic film they saw or something that sparks them. There's a lot more. I guess you can only put the information out there as feeding into general... you know you can make some very specific interventions at certain times but they certainly factor (Centre for widening participation, manager).

Delayed in indirect 'impact'

Some practitioners alluded to the challenge of attempting to track individuals' progression through educational pathways when individuals might not follow a linear progression pathway from the widening access or Reaching Wider activity on to HE. This is especially the case when working with young children or adult learners; the former group may have engaged in a widening access activity at early stages of their educational careers and so the 'effect' of interventions might not become apparent for years to come, the latter group may engage in a number of pre-entry activities or non-accredited courses which are designed to prepare people for HE study through bite-size study. These adults might not progress on to an accredited HE course for a number of years if they are following a pathway from pre-entry courses on to HE. In both of these cases practitioners recognised the difficulty in tracking

individuals longitudinally to measure the ‘impact’ of widening access on their participation in HE.

Other practitioners recognised that a widening access or reaching wider programme or activity might have indirect ‘impacts’ in the sense that individuals associated with participants will benefit from widening access interventions as much as, or if not more than the individuals themselves. Some practitioners alluded to the way in which an event or programme may have a ‘cascading’ influence on people’s lives. For example, participation in an adult education programme might positively impact on children or the wider community in which case the impact is indirect and longitudinal and not immediately observed:

So for me it, I see that the impact of Widening Access on a child of course has an impact on that child’s life but the impact of Widening Access in adults and community has a radiant effect and impacts on all aspects of the community
(Widening access practitioner, HEI)

Data protection

A small number of practitioners raised the issue of data protection and this was especially where work is carried out with young people under the age of 16. Where consent forms are not returned from parents, individual level data is not collected, making tracking difficult. Moreover, where consent forms are collected, appropriate information stating the use of information for research purposes is needed to enable longitudinal tracking of individuals.

Access to datasets

Commonly, practitioners were unable to access the appropriate data sets which would enable them to track participants. This was especially the case when attempting to track participants from larger programmes like a ‘Summer University’. Commonly, practitioners are not able to access the appropriate data (such as data which would link individual participants to the HEIs to which they subsequently enter following their participation in a programme) which would enable them to track individuals who participate in Summer University on to higher education (including institutions besides their own). This was perceived as a very significant barrier to tracking.

Paper work

A small number of practitioners talked about the burden of having too much paper work and not wanting to get participants to fill in evaluation forms after engaging in just one small course delivered in the community. Indeed, some practitioners alluded to the inappropriateness of asking people to evaluate a session after a singly:

*Every project I run I do an evaluation sheet...and I thought there's too much paperwork going on here, and you know we talked to them about the project and we took pictures and it was kind of like anecdotal rather than giving yet another form, but usually there's evaluation forms for every single activity that you then read ... essentially it's those really that develop the next course. (**Widening access practitioner, HEI**)*

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the methods used by 'widening access' and RWP practitioners to evaluate the programmes, activities and initiatives they deliver. In doing so, this has not only revealed that practitioners are interpreting the notion of 'evaluation' and 'impact' in varied ways but has also revealed the perceived challenges faced by practitioners in evaluating the effectiveness of their widening access or Reaching Wider activities. 'Evaluation' of widening access was not always and only conceived of in terms of measuring the impact of widening access activities on behavioural change such as participants' propensity to participate in HE. Rather, it encompassed a range of interpretations including changes in participants' attitudes, awareness and understanding of HE, skills and knowledge acquired, levels of attainment, as well as participation in HE. Given the variety of interpretations of 'evaluation' and 'impact' this suggests that the guidance currently offered to institutions by the HEFCW does not provide practitioners with enough clarity regarding how to measure 'impact' and what exactly is to be measured through evaluation. Evidently, institutions and partnerships need greater guidance with respect to *how* to evaluate their work and on what type of impact should be measured. Clearly, different types of activities and programmes will require different types of evaluation, for example, it may be more appropriate to measure short and medium term outcomes rather than the long-term impact of programmes aimed at raising aspirations in primary aged children. Nonetheless, practitioners need clear guidance on how to evaluate these programmes so that short term outcomes can be robustly measured. Both

qualitative and quantitative methods should be used, where appropriate, to yield different kinds of information about a programme.

This research has revealed that HEIs and RWPs are perhaps not interpreting the notion of ‘impact’ in the way the HEFCW has intended. While practitioners were assessing the immediate ‘impact’ of a programme or activity on skills, knowledge or changes in attitude or aspirations with respect to HE, providing very useful formative information to improve future delivery of a programme, it does not provide a measure of ‘impact’ on participants’ propensity to participate in HE following their participation on a project. The dearth of this kind of ‘impact’ evaluation reflects the challenges faced by practitioners which limit their capacity to do this. Given the extent of these challenges the responsibility for evaluating the ‘impact’ of widening access at an institutional level should not lie with institutions alone but with a range of stake holders including schools, colleges, HEIs, FEIs and UCAS who use and share appropriate data in order to make ‘tracking’ individual participants possible. Only when progression data is linked to other sources of data (such as NPD and HESA data) are we able to reliably measure the ‘impact’ of these programmes on participation behaviour.

Yet even when such data is available and key stake holders share and disclose appropriate data questions remain regarding measuring ‘impact’. Demonstrating ‘impact’ in terms of which widening access activities are most effective in bringing about behavioural or attitudinal change regarding participation in HE is challenging when control groups are difficult to obtain and when separating out the effects of one activity from other influences is challenging. Moreover, when attitudes and expectations regarding HE are likely to be informed by a myriad of influences it remains difficult to conclude that a widening access activity had a direct impact on participants’ attitudes, awareness and aspiration for HE, and ultimately their propensity to participate.

Moreover, it must be noted that a widening access programme or intervention delivered by one institution may well lead to access to another and therefore be instrumental in meeting another institutions’ ‘widening access’ targets. It is important to recognise these interdependencies when assessing the ‘impact’ of widening access interventions. Moreover, as discussed in paper X (*approaches paper*) this also has implications in terms of student mobility and cross-border flows. Different kinds of widening access interventions have different aims in terms of student groups targeted, i.e. whether it is Welsh Domiciled students

at UK institutions or Welsh domiciled students at Welsh HEIs. In answering the question of how to evaluate widening access, it is crucial that these considerations are taken into account, and as yet a great deal of work is yet to be done which requires sector wide changes in collecting and sharing data.

References:

Bowes, L. et al. 2013. *The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation*. Leicester: Edge Hill University

Dent, P. et al. 2013. *Higher Education Outreach to Widen Participation. Toolkits for practitioners: Evaluation* [Online]. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/WP_outreach_toolkits/evaluation [Accessed: 27:3:2014].

HEA. 2009. *A review of Welsh institutional widening access strategies 2006/7 to 2008/0 and Reaching Wider Funded Proposals 2008/10*.

HEA. 2012. *Review of the Widening Access and Reaching Wider Strategy in Wales*.

HEFCE. 2010. Widening participation strategic assessments: Guidance on developing evaluative approaches to widening participation activities and commitments. In: HEFCE ed.

HEFCW. 2007. *Evaluation of the widening access activities and the Reaching Wider initiative in Welsh higher education institutions* Cardiff

HEFCW. 2011. *Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies 2011/12 to 2013/14: Supplementary Guidance*.

Thomas, L. 2011. Do pre-entry interventions such as 'Aimhigher' impact on student retention and success? A Review of the Literature. *Higher Education Quarterly* 65(3), pp. 230-250.

Treasury, H. 2011. *The magenta book: Guidance for evaluation*.

University of Leeds. 2008. *Changing Futures: Widening participation strategy. Estimating the impact of the widening participation agenda* [Online]. University of Leeds: Available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ace/access/oldwidening.htm> [Accessed: 28/02/14].