

The epistemology of effectiveness: exploring the challenges of demonstrating impact from higher education outreach activities

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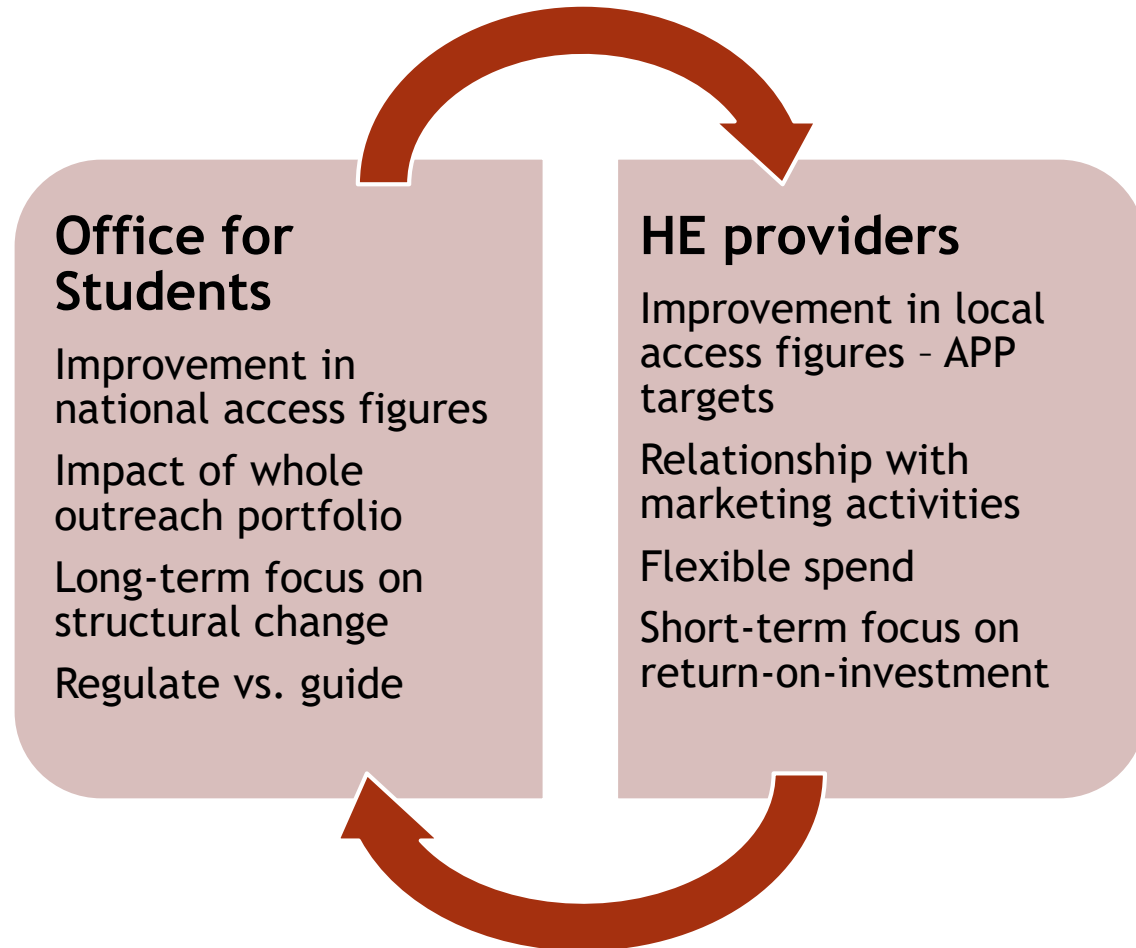
Brief context

- ▶ English providers expected to ‘top-slice’ tuition fees to support access for disadvantaged groups
- ▶ Annual spend around £725 million (OFFA, 2017)
- ▶ Regulated by Office for Students
- ▶ Understandable concern about the effectiveness of expenditure
- ▶ Increased focus on evaluation at the provider level, but concerns about quality and standards
- ▶ Springboard: pre-16 evaluation project (Harrison *et al.*, forthcoming) and AIMS project (Harrison and Waller, 2017, 2018)

A complex social field

- ▶ Inherent complexity of young people's decision-making:
 - ▶ A rational transactional investment (DFE, 2016)?
 - ▶ Or more intuitive and 'bounded' (Harrison, 2017)?
 - ▶ Or insurance against downward social mobility (Harrison, in press)?
- ▶ Complex web of influences from parents, teacher, peers and others - role of expectations
- ▶ 'Horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) shaped by sociocultural context
- ▶ Role of values and personality in individualising decision-making

Measuring outreach impact



- What does impact look like in a complex social field?
- Evaluation practices driven by practicalities
- ‘What get measured gets done’ (Behn, 2003, p.599)

Four epistemological challenges



Aspirations as
a key metric



Ubiquity of
self-report
data



Targeting and
counterfactual
analysis



Partnerships
and
overlapping
programmes

Aspiration as a key metric

- ▶ Extensive focus on ‘aspirations’ as the key metric for measuring impact (Harrison and Waller, 2018)
 - ▶ Varying definitions of what constitutes an aspiration - for HE, for a given university, for graduate career etc?
 - ▶ Weak evidence base for relationship between aspirations, attainment and HE decisions (e.g. Croll and Attwood, 2013; Gorard, See and Davies, 2012; Archer, DeWitt and Wong, 2014)
 - ▶ Outreach might ‘raise aspirations’, but have no impact on future decision-making about HE
 - ▶ Little evidence that disadvantaged young people even have low aspirations - stronger for expectations (Khattab, 2015)

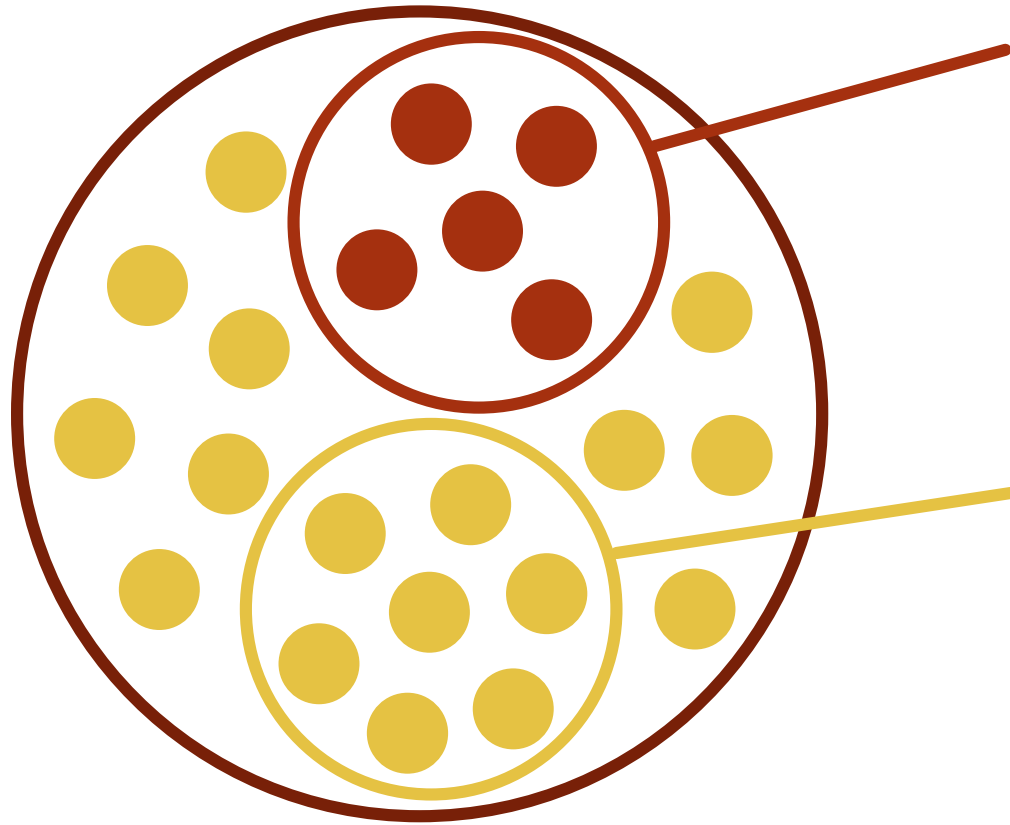
Ubiquity of self-report data

- ▶ Heavy reliance on data collected from young people
- ▶ Focus on future intentions towards a concept about which they have little knowledge (i.e. HE)
- ▶ Susceptibility to common cognitive biases:
 - ▶ Placebo effect
 - ▶ Priming effect
 - ▶ Social desirability bias
 - ▶ Dunning-Kruger effect
- ▶ Likely to over-estimate (long-term) impact

Targeting and counterfactual analysis (1)

- ▶ Counterfactual: what would have happened without the outreach activity?
- ▶ Around 20-25% of disadvantaged young people currently participate in HE
 - ▶ How do practitioners 'know' which young people 'need' the intervention?
 - ▶ Close targeting of those thought to 'have the potential' for HE
 - ▶ Not a random selection of young people - difficulties of building valid comparison groups for counterfactual analysis
 - ▶ Deadweight and self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948)

Targeting and counterfactual analysis (2)



Intervention group (of those with 'potential for HE')

Comparison group (of those without 'potential for HE')

Partnerships and overlaps

- ▶ Rich tapestry of programmes with disadvantaged young people - schools, charities, local authorities, other HE providers etc.
 - ▶ Outreach as one tiny element in a huge picture - a few hours out of 15,000 (Rutter *et al.*, 1982)
 - ▶ Unlikely to be transformative => small effect size
 - ▶ Consensus that close partnerships with schools are vital for effective intervention (Harrison *et al.*, forthcoming)
 - ▶ A paradox: the closer the partnership, the harder to attribute impact to an individual activity (Harrison and Waller, 2017) - what is the value added?

Risks for social policy

- ▶ Danger of HE providers unwittingly making ‘false’ claims for the effectiveness of outreach:
 - ▶ Mainly over-estimating impact - rising aspirations, cognitive biases and invalid comparison groups
 - ▶ Risk of ossifying palette of activities that appear successful, but are not due to epistemological weaknesses
 - ▶ Also under-estimating impact, especially where closely allied to other interventions - horizontal and vertical cumulation
 - ▶ Risk of rejecting effective activities due to difficulties with collecting ‘robust’ data or inability to isolate unique contribution
 - ▶ Particular risk with ‘tracking’ data due to long timescales, missing data, confounding factors and over-simplification

An alternative agenda

- ▶ Avoiding ‘the ludicrous idea that [...] researchers are able to tell policy-makers and practitioners exactly what works in the world of policy interventions’ (Pawson, 2006, p.170)
 - ▶ Reject the idea of universally successful interventions that are effective across all of time and space - the ‘silver bullet’
 - ▶ Develop reflexive outreach practitioners - c.f. classroom teacher
 - ▶ Ensure that evaluators have a strong grounding in epistemology, particularly ‘warrant’ and the construction of knowledge claims
 - ▶ Aim for a continuous improvement approach, not ‘certification’
 - ▶ Collect data from adults, with focus on shifting expectations
 - ▶ Develop (and evaluate) whole-school approaches
 - ▶ Acknowledge evidential value of high-quality qualitative data

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