

NEON Impact and Evaluation Group

Wednesday 2nd December

Minutes

Rita Hordosy

- We need to consider 'Why?' before starting research, 'Who?' is the intended audience, and 'What?' is its purpose
- We need to have clear research goals with clearly defined research questions- which should be interlinked and connected to theory.
- When designing your research you should have an idea as to how you will go about the design- will you follow the same people over time (longitudinal); will you take stock of one group at one specific point (cross-sectional or case study)
- When thinking about collecting data you should look at what is already available first- this can help give you an established picture of what is already happening and help you to design more appropriate research
- When choosing research methods most appropriate to the research design and research questions you may need to consider the pros and cons and also use a mixed methods approach to truly be able to answer the questions posed.
- Ethics are important to consider and each institution will have its own procedures to follow.
- Don't confuse population and sample. Acknowledge who your population is and how you sample to get a representation of the overall population. You need to know how you will sample, how you will contact them, what info you need beyond the actual questions you wish to ask (demographic info).
- When sampling you also need to consider missing data too- who is not giving responses? You need to compare those who contribute to those who don't to give an explanation as to the types of people who are missing from the research and draw caveats around the analysis.
- Remember analysis always takes longer than you plan for. Thematic analysis is a good starting point.
- Before you start any project you must consider the audience and the format dissemination will take to ensure that the project will meet the needs of your audience and have an impact. You need a format that is accessible and easy for practitioners to use.

Will Cooling

- Mature students were the big winners from the budget- the loan threshold has been raised and is now also available for distance learning. There is also the availability of a maintenance loan for PT study, and the ELQ has been scrapped for STEM subjects.
- The big losers are nurses who are moving to a system of students loans as opposed to grants.

- PGT Loans- from 2016 students can take a tuition fee and maintenance loan (£10k) which can be used at all HEIs for English domiciled students with repayments set at 6% above the £21k thresholds.
- Post-92 institutions are also affected by the budget in that the HEFCE teaching grant will be cut but high-cost subjects will be protected with most of these being taught in pre-92 unis.
- The S.O. funding will also be cut in half and unis will have less freedom on how to spend it. The S.O funding is biased towards helping post-92 unis to be financially stable which will prevent these unis from thriving and potentially affect WP activities and internal support of WP students.
- Post-92 unis may also come under increased competition from colleges who are more geared towards being able to support part time study.
- The end of the maintenance grant has paved the way for a PGT loans system. The end of the grant will only affect those who would be able to pay off their loans anyway- if you were unable to pay it back as it stands you will still be unable to pay it back under the new system. The message from HEIs therefore needs to be clear on the actual impact this will have so that it doesn't affect individuals' choices about their futures.
- UG Tuition Fees will have the repayment threshold frozen at the current level of £21k which is contrary to initial plans that it would rise in line with inflation. This approach has been taken due to graduate deflation whereby £21k today is effectively worth less (projections suggest around £19k).
- The government have also said they can change the loan T+C's whenever they want and however they see fit to help balance the books. This poses the questions: does this therefore mean we potentially are then making claims to WP students about their debt that in the future may not be true? Students don't have the luxury of being able to shop around for loans as the government monopolises the market- essentially they don't have a choice!
- The Green Paper will see a time of change for HE. The merger between OFFA and HEFCE is actually less meaningful than it sounds as they already work closely together. In the merger however it will be important to protect the role of the director of fair access.
- In the green paper the government have shown genuine ambition for WP but are quite narrow in their focus and have left out certain important WP groups such as disabled students.

Julian Crockford

- OFFA are concerned with activity being worthwhile and effective
- The University of Sheffield do their evaluation through WPRU. There is an evaluation toolkit utilising questionnaires, focus groups and interviews which helps to look at feedback and evaluation of activities and now this is well established they are looking to branch out more into innovative research.
- WPRU have identified various potential challenges to evaluation (and along the way have identified possible solutions):

	Type of Challenge	Description of Challenge	Solution to Challenge
--	-------------------	--------------------------	-----------------------

1	Structural	Whole Lifecycle Process- different teams sat in different areas which separates out the lifecycle and student journey	Formation of a student experience group
2	Structural	Achieving clarity in objectives	Work mapping and clarifying the relationships between the objectives
3	Structural	Supporting the institutional response to evaluation outcomes	Regular feedback cycles at different levels
4	Methodological	Move beyond using happy sheets	Using more qualitative case study approaches; adopt techniques from other disciplines; focus on developmental progress of individuals rather than activities; test skill development
5	Methodological	Current objectives are really 'evaluatable'	Adopt a more 'granular' approach and agree on meaningful and measureable objectives
6	Methodological	The complexity of content	Use more qualitative case studies; define objectives less impacted by external factors; test objectives against success
7	Methodological	Survey Fatigue	Adopt a strategic approach to evaluating intensive sustained interventions; look for alternatives to questionnaires such as tests and observations
8	Methodological	Shifting Goalposts	Use the latest monitoring return guidance when formulating Access Agreements and setting objective and targets
9	Methodological	Randomised Controlled Trials	Have a counterfactual group to measure success (or failure) against
10	Methodological	Ensuring consistency of data	Work closely with data providers to benchmark outcomes.

Date and time of next meetings and provisional topics items:

Wednesday 3 rd February 2016	Leeds Beckett University	Data collection and data protection issues	Emma Church
		The Use of Impact chains	Professor Jacqueline Stevenson
Wednesday 4 th May 2016	Leicester University	Widening Participation to Postgraduate Study; what works?	tbc
		Retention Evaluation	
		Mature students and Care Leavers	Rachel Lad (National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL))
Wednesday 7 th September 2016	London Tbc	NNCO Evaluation	Professor Jacqueline Stevenson Gemma Cadogan (HEFCE)
Wednesday 7 th December 2016	The University of Sheffield	TBC	