

# Proving the impact of access to higher education activities

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# Questions....

- Proving the impact of access to higher education activities
  - What is proof?
  - What is impact?
  - What is access?

# Evaluation

- The episodic assessment of the change in targeted results that can be attributed to the programme/project intervention
- Or the analysis of inputs and activities to determine their contribution to results.
- HEFCE 2014: *“in straightforward terms, evaluation seeks to establish how well an activity, project or programme has worked. The key question is: has it achieved its intended outcomes? A further question is: have there been unanticipated outcomes?”*

# Evaluation indicators

- **Process** indicators - dimensions concerned with actions and what needs to be done to achieve outcomes e.g. ways of doing admissions or giving out IAG, experiences offered e.g. Outreach events
- **Outputs** indicators - the tangible and intangible products that result from project activities e.g. Numbers of completed personal statements
- **Outcome** indicators - the observed effects of the output-specific results e.g. increased number of applications to HE; changes in confidence
- **Impact** indicators - attainment of higher level strategic goals; sustained long term changes e.g. changes in the student demographic profile of HE

# Impact evaluation

- Impact evaluation is structured to answer the question: “how would outcomes have changed if the intervention had not been undertaken?”
- Therefore ideally requires a counterfactual analysis, i.e. “a comparison between what actually happened and what would have happened in the absence of the intervention”
- In other words, impact evaluation assesses the changes that can be directly attributed to a particular intervention (both intended and unintended)
- Is consequently different to outcome evaluation, which examines whether targets have been achieved

# Measuring or evaluating impact?

- In its truest sense, impact *measurement* would require using an independent evaluator, establishing control groups, measuring changes over extended periods of time etc. etc.
- However, evaluation of WP activity is not a rigorous social science experiment - involves:
  - Multiple inputs from multiple agencies/individuals/sources
  - Cannot undertake a 'blind' control
- Therefore determining an explicate causal relationship between a particular activity/intervention and a specific outcome is very difficult/impossible
- Bowes et al (2013) so far not been possible to establish a causal link between pre-entry interventions and participation
  - Bowes, L. et al. 2013. *The uses and impact of HEFCE funding for widening participation*. Leicester: Edge Hill University

# Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research Review (ESRC)

- How is the notion of ‘impact’ being interpreted by widening access and reaching wider practitioners
  - What are the methods used to evaluate widening access or reaching wider activities? (happy sheets, tracking)
  - How are practitioners interpreting the notion of ‘impact’? (process and outputs, short term outcomes)
  - What are the challenges to measuring impact? Lack of control group; Separating the influence of widening access activities from the influence of additional factors; Non-linear progression pathways; Data protection; Access to datasets; Paper work

Ceryn Evans; *A review of approaches adopted by HEIs in Wales to evaluating widening access.* [http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/files/7114/0230/5255/Working\\_Paper\\_WAQLCE2014-6.pdf](http://www.wiserd.ac.uk/files/7114/0230/5255/Working_Paper_WAQLCE2014-6.pdf)

# Estimating impact

- Estimating impact can indicate that it is probable/possible/plausible that a particular intervention(s) contributed to a particular outcome
- This raises the question of ‘validity’ of assumptions so we need to set own criteria



# Proving the impact of access to higher education activities

- So what do we do.....?
- What are you doing?