THE THIRD AGE OF WIDENING ACCESS: EVALUATING OUTREACH EFFECTIVENESS AND THE ROLE OF THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

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Why is there variable engagement with WP outreach?

• National Evaluation of Aimhigher (2006 report for HEFCE) found variation by type of activities and by level of evaluative activity carried out by different types of HE institution

• Content and discourse analyses of access agreements
  • Variations in the way WP is portrayed, rationalised and discussed by HEI type
  • Emergence of a ‘fair access' variant of WP among research-intensive HEIs

• Emergence of Third Sector Organisations involved in delivery of outreach activities - associated with FA?

**This presentation**: OFFA/OfS research into evaluation of Pre-16 outreach (2017-18)

• Focus on which types of organisation evaluate more effectively

• Generally we found a low level of evaluative practice among HE providers
Confounding factors: logistical

- **Time available** - finding time to collect data, especially from young people

- **Collaboration with schools** - issues with accessing data held by schools, particularly with respect to young people’s attainment or attendance records

- **Data management and ethics** - risk-aversion in context of GDPR

- **Capacity and capability** - insufficient resources
Confounding factors: epistemological

- **Use of self-report data** - how reliable and robust is this? how to avoid biases in data collected

- **Pre- and post assessment** - rarely enough time for sufficient long term impact to be measured

- **Analysis sensitivity** - very difficult to measure gains in learning or attainment

- **Complexity and disentanglement** - isolating the effects

- **Younger and/or vulnerable children** - difficulties in collecting data from primary age
Evaluation practice in third sector organisations
The research

11 organisations – 9 delivery organisations, 2 umbrella/representative bodies

Varied in terms of income, permanent staff and delivery models

All delivered pre-16, all except 1 also delivered post-16 activity

Telephone interviews and workshop
Experiences of evaluation

Opportunities
- Dedicated specialist staff
- Pressure to prove impact quickly
- Established charity sector practices
- Smaller portfolio of activity that needs to ‘sell’
- Close relationships that support sharing data

Challenges
- Access to data and research
- Lack of resource, short-term funding
- Balancing intensity of activity with intensity of evaluation
- Difficulty proving long-term impact
Pragmatics vs Highly-developed

Highly developed (4 orgs):
• Small-steps approach
• Embedded approach to evaluation
• Links between evaluation and delivery/development

Dedicated staff resource, shorter-term but connected activities, leadership interested in evaluation.

Pragmatics (7 orgs):
• Varied evaluation practices, working within constraints
• Tendency to rely on self-reported or assessment data
• High level objectives.

More limited staff resource, less pressure from funders AND/OR longer term relationships with participants.
Highly developed approaches

- Theory of Change or Framework
- Evaluation used in decision making
- Piloted interventions
- Using Practitioner Expertise
- Using established measures
- Understanding their ‘USP’
- Regular review
- Future aspirations
Implications for partnership?

- Evaluation fatigue
- Mixing methods
- Critical friends and competition
- University only/School only/FE Only/TSO Only spaces
- Different priorities, different inputs
- One size does not fit all
In what ways are TSOs influencing WP policy and practice?
What has changed and is changing?
Thanks for listening!

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References/further reading

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