Institution: University of Exeter
Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 Education
Title of case study: Improving Social Mobility through Evidence-informed Practice and Policy in Higher Education
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016 - ongoing
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Anna Mountford-Zimdars	Professor	2017 to date
Pallavi Banerjee	Senior Lecturer	2016 to date
Joanne Moore	Research Fellow	2017 to date

Period when the claimed impact occurred: March 2017 to date
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact

Inequality and low social mobility continue to be major national challenges in the UK, entrenched from birth to work, due to failures in education and employment policies. The University of Exeter's Centre for Social Mobility is the UK's first centre dedicated to improving social mobility through evidence-informed practice and policy, collaboratively developed with professionals, practitioners and other stakeholders. Its goal is to help disadvantaged young people to access higher education and succeed at university and in adult life. The centre has demonstrated impact, through research co-created with key stakeholders, across a number of important areas, to improve social mobility. It has:

1) Informed professional guidelines and best practice in how university evaluation of outreach is undertaken;
2) Changed institutional widening participation policies and practices in Higher Education to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students;
3) Informed guidance and advice on the use of contextualised admissions to support access to Higher Education.

2. Underpinning research

The Centre for Social Mobility was formally established by the University of Exeter to consolidate and support a burgeoning programme of collaborative research. It is innovative in its leadership, being co-directed by a leading academic in social mobility and the university's Head of Widening Participation, with a 50-50 membership of academics and practitioners. This strong collaboration ensures research is priority-driven with practical application and that practice is built on a solid evidence base. The three research studies underpinning the impact described here are:

Evaluation of Guidance on Outreach Interventions (2017-19): funded by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), this study set out to investigate evaluation practices in determining the efficacy of outreach activities intended to increase access of disadvantaged students to university. The project involved the co-creation of research with nine partner organisations, including universities and major national charities, such as the Sutton Trust and Brightside Trust [**3.1; 3.2; 3.3**]. This work has highlighted the barriers to robust evaluation of access work which are multifaceted and concern strategy, planning, implementation and review. Understanding these barriers enabled the research team to develop guidance on standards of evidence for evaluation and a Self-Assessment Tool that would encourage robust, scholarly and rigorous evaluation work to thrive. The Self-Assessment Tool was piloted through a series of three workshops with a nationally representative sample of 12 HEIs selected by the Office for Students (OfS) to represent newer, experienced, large and small providers. The final Self-Assessment Tool and the accompanying guidance on standards of evidence was adopted by the regulator (OfS) as a mechanism to improve the success of widening participation interventions in increasing social mobility.

Transforming Transitions (2017-2019): funded by HEFCE/OFS, this study was part of a national programme, 'Addressing Barriers to Student Progress'. The study evolved from a commissioned and co-created research project with Pearson, the national provider of the BTEC qualification, investigating the progress of BTEC students through University, and resulting in an internal report for Pearson (*Understanding the University Learning Experience of BTEC*

Learners: 2016). Given the findings from this report, and earlier research which had shown that BTEC students a) progressed less well through university than those with A level qualifications, and b) were significantly more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, the *Transforming Transitions* study investigated the transition experience of BTEC students in moving from HE to FE. Interviews with staff and students across eight institutions found that many disadvantaged students, including both BTEC and A level students, find it difficult to adapt to the educational and social cultures and norms prevalent within universities [**3.4**]. In turn this impacts on successful progression and graduation.

The Use of Contextual Data in Admissions (2018): commissioned by the Fair Education Alliance. This study investigated current practice in the use of contextual data in admissions in English universities; whether the use of contextual data in university admissions is effective in promoting both widening participation (WP) and fair access; and the performance once at university of students admitted on a contextual basis. The study found that although there was widespread use of contextualised admissions, ideological and practical barriers generated inconsistency in the use of this approach, and recommended working towards greater national consistency. The Fair Education Alliance produced their own report, based on the Exeter research [**5.11**].

3. References to the research

3.1 Mountford-Zimdars, A., Moore, J., and Shiner, R. (2020) Enhancing Widening Participation Evaluation through the development of a self-assessment tool for practitioners: Learning from the Standards of Evaluation Practice (Phase 2) project 2017-2019, *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.* 22 (2): 44-66. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.22.2.44

3.2 Mountford-Zimdars, A; Moore, J, Banerjee, P. A. and Myhill, D.A (2019) Understanding effective evaluation of the impact of outreach interventions on access to higher education: phase two, *Office for Students* (Internal Report) http://shura.shu.ac.uk/23719/

3.3 Mountford-Zimdars, A. Moore, J. Cockford, J. Brown, G. and McCaig, C. (2020) Supporting Capacity Building among NCOP evaluators, *Office for Students* . (OfS Internal Report) *Available on request*

3.4 Banerjee, P. A. and Myhill, D. (2019). *Transitions from Vocational Qualifications to Higher Education: Examining Inequalities.* UK, Emerald Publishing Limited. *Available on request*

3.5 Mountford-Zimdars A, Moore J (2020). Identifying merit and potential beyond grades: Opportunities and challenges in using contextual data in undergraduate admissions at nine highly selective English universities. *Oxford Review of Education* https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1785413

4. Details of the impact
The Centre for Social Mobility has generated impact through building collaborative partnerships bridging research, policy and practice, leading to co-created research. This has improved strategies and policies to increase social mobility through access to opportunities for higher education.

4.1 Informed professional guidelines and best practice in how university evaluation of outreach is undertaken
A Self-Assessment Tool and Guidance on Standards of Evidence on outreach evaluation have been adopted by the OfS and published on their website as guidelines for providers [**5.1**]. Around £800 million is spent annually by universities on outreach and improving access. But to date there has been a lack of evaluation of the effectiveness of these outreach activities in widening access to university. The co-created research, *Evaluation of Guidance on Outreach Interventions*, generated three guidance resources: 1) Access and Participation Standards of Evidence; 2) Using Standards of Evidence to evaluate Impact of outreach; and 3) a Self-Assessment Tool. These resources '*give advice on improving evaluation practice and strengthening evidence to support providers to make informed decisions about investment in access and participation activities*' [**5.1**]. The Self-Assessment Tool supports providers in

determining the strengths and weakness of their evaluation of outreach and in identifying areas for improvement. In 2019, the OfS included, in Regulatory Notice 1, a requirement for providers to include *an evaluation strategy, informed by a provider's self-assessment of their approach to evaluation'* (p32) and recommended the use of the Self-Assessment Tool (p33) [**5.1**]. The Head of Access and Participation Evaluation at the OfS, noted that: *'Previous to the development of the self-assessment tool, the OfS did not have a mechanism in place to understand how developed evaluation strategies were or a method to identify ways to improve… we had not previously provided clear and practical guidance on what "good and robust" looked like. The self-assessment tool, and the accompanying Standards of Evidence and evaluation guidance produced by the University have provided a significant step forward'* [**5.2**]. He also comments on the clear guidance on different types of evidence and its applicability to all providers, rather than just large providers [**5.2**].

This self-assessment tool and guidance on standards of evidence has also changed professional practice in evaluation of outreach. The convenor of the *Network of Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions* (NERUPI) working with over 60 UK higher education providers, notes that the research has '*had a significant impact on NERUPI, directly contributing to our events, and having a wider impact across the sector'* [**5.3**]. In particular, she outlines that *The guide and self-assessment tool provide invaluable support for those completing evaluations, improving the standard of monitoring submissions to the OfS and also supporting the process of institutional change'*. In terms of her work with UK higher education providers, she concludes that the research '*continues to have a significant impact on the higher education sector, providing the basis for national policy and regulatory standards as well guidance for those charged with the task of developing and evaluating interventions. As a result institutional and national capacity to undertake rigorous and meaningful assessments of the impact of their widening participation activities has greatly improved'* [**5.3**].

Drawing on this research, in 2019, the Centre for Social Mobility has supported universities and other providers to develop the robustness of their outreach evaluations. They provided feedback on the evaluation plans of the 29 'Uni Connect' partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners and ensured their ambitions mapped onto agreed standards. A bespoke website, 'The Outreach Evaluation Hub' provides resources and supports the professional development of those responsible for evaluating outreach work, including a space for evaluation practitioners to enhance each other's practices. The Centre for Social Mobility has also hosted webinars, a blog, and workshops for evaluation practitioners enhancing their capacity to undertake valid and reliable research. This work has also led to more rigorous evaluations by Uni Connect partnerships delivering outreach across the country. The Research and Evaluation lead at one of the Uni Connect partnerships, outlines how this support '*enabled the Research and Evaluation team to critically reflect on our work and ensure our practice was aligned with the strategic objectives OfS expected'* [**5.4**].

4.2 Changed institutional widening participation policies and practices in HE to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students:
The research by Banerjee and Myhill [**3.4**] advocated reforms to admissions practices and university support for BTEC/disadvantaged students across the FE/HE transition. This has led to institutional-level reforms at the four partner universities, University of Exeter, Loughborough University, University of Birmingham and Queen Mary University of London (QMUL): for example, QMUL note that the research findings have led to '*institutional changes in educational and pedagogical practices'*, including '*an impact on the teaching and learning strategy'* [**5.5**]. Both the Universities of Birmingham [**5.5**] and Warwick [**5.5**] have updated entry requirements '*altering the admissions information on their websites to indicate their willingness to consider BTEC students applying for their courses'* and to enable '*more appropriate decisions about the BTEC subjects accepted as entry to particular courses'*. Specific pre-entry support has been developed to enable disadvantaged students to be better prepared for university life. The University of Birmingham has revised their pre-entry module to include '*better targeted guidance for offer holders regarding the preparation work that they can undertake prior to arrival to aid transition'* and QMUL have developed a new module with '*units on students' social life,*

relationships, mental health and finances among others'. This picks up particularly on the social and emotional aspects of transition highlighted in our research and aims '*to bridge socio-cultural differences between incoming student's backgrounds and the teaching and learning culture at QMUL'* [**5.5**]. The University of Exeter [**5.5**] has created '*workshops and learning resources to support students prepare for learning within HE*' as part of their outreach delivery and, as a consequence of Covid-19, developed '*Discover University*', an online outreach platform where these resources can be accessed.

All four universities have changed their practices to provide both targeted and sustained support through the first year of university. Birmingham have developed a Mathematics Intervention module for students who feel their competence does not match the expectations of their degree programme and students have benefitted '*by gaining confidence and increased proficiency in mathematics'.* Exeter ran a Transition Conference for new students in 2018, and have since developed a programme which includes specific opportunities to engage at '*key points of the term where peaks in withdrawals occur'* [**5.5**]. Both Warwick and Birmingham have developed mentoring processes: a peer mentoring initiative at Warwick, where all first years are allocated a trained mentor for years 2 or 3 to provide support and guidance [**5.5**] and an interactive e-portfolio at Birmingham, which has enabled '*more meaningful tutorial conversations about personal and academic development'* [**5.5**]*.*

The findings have also informed national discussion and workshops with professionals at, for example, the Trent Institute for Teaching and Learning BTEC Conference at Nottingham Trent University; the Russell Group DVC/PVCs for Education meeting (April 2018); the ECU-Advance HE conference; the Chartered Association of Business Schools. An inaugural Social Mobility Conference in June 2019 at the University of Exeter brought together academics, local teachers and widening participation professionals. A Case Study of the project is published on the OfS website as an example of effective practice [**5.6**]. The findings were shared in 2019 with the National Education Opportunity Network (NEON), a network of 2500 professionals across the FE/HE divide, which helped '*attendees understand better the various challenges that BTEC students face as they transfer into universities'* [**5.7**]. Pearson have worked in a more sustained way with NEON drawing on the research '*to raise awareness of the needs of BTEC learners amongst outreach staff*', including the '*negative self-images BTEC students may have'* and '*the unintended deficit model used when describing BTEC learners*'. Pearson have also developed a *Best Practice Guide for working with BTEC Students* drawing on the co-created research, entitled 'Guiding Principles to Inform the Successful Progression of BTEC Students into Higher Education', published in December 2020. An outcome of the collaboration with Exeter is that Pearson believe they are in '*a good position to advise and support HEIs who may have historically accepted very few BTEC learners but are now keen to understand BTEC better as the cohort demographic evolves*' [**5.8**].

4.3 Informed guidance and advice on the use of contextualised admissions to support access to HE
The use of contextual admissions, where universities use information such as the school a potential student attends or where they live, in addition to the standard academic information, is increasingly informing admissions decision-making. The OfS has argued that this allows providers to '*identify and encourage students from under-represented groups'* and to take into consideration other factors which might affect a particular student's grades [**5.9**].

As a result of the research carried out by the Centre for Social Mobility on current practice in the use of contextual data in admissions in English universities [**3.5**], the Fair Education Alliance co-produced a report with Exeter as a resource for universities to improve their use of contextual data, which is published on the OfS website [**5.10**].

This report makes four key practical recommendations in summary:
1) That the OfS should continue to publicly encourage, incentivise and provide support to institutions using contextualised admissions to ensure fair access and promote social mobility

2) There should be improved access to relevant contextual data for institutions
3) Annual student intakes broken down by appropriate measures of education disadvantage should be made publicly available to hold institutions to account and drive improved use of contextual data.
4) There should be increased transparency for applicants in how Universities are using contextual data

The report is endorsed by the OfS and included in its July 2020 '*Topic Briefing for Universities on Contextual Admissions'*. The CSM was awarded a highly commended in the national Social Mobility awards for, in a short space of time having driven "innovation and achieved impacts directly affecting outcomes for social mobility" with reference to the contextual admissions and rapid response Covid work of the Centre.

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5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Office for Students published guidance on outreach evaluation

5.2 Letter from the Head of Access and Participation Evaluation, Office for Students, Commissioner Toolkit and NCOP project

5.3 Letter from the Convenor of the *Network of Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions* (NERUPI)

5.4 Letter from the National Collaborative Outreach Programme

5.5 Letters from HEI's: Queen Mary University of London, University of Birmingham, University of Warwick, University of Exeter

5.6 Case study: Improving student experiences of transition from further education to higher education, Office for Students https://web.archive.org/web/20201214162826/https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/case-study-university-of-exeter/

5.7 Letter from the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)

5.8 Letter from the Director of Research, Pearson Education Limited; the best practice guide can be accessed here https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/A2300-Pearson-BTEC-Neon-22PG-PRF5-1.pdf

5.9 Contextual admissions, Office for Students, July 2020 https://web.archive.org/web/20201214162950/https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/contextual-admissions/

5.10 Contextual admissions resources, Office for Students, July 2020 https://web.archive.org/web/20201214163130/https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/contextual-admissions/resources/

5.11 FEA recommendations on the use of contextualised admissions data by universities, Fair Education Alliance, July 2018 https://web.archive.org/web/20201214163245/https://www.faireducation.org.uk/news/2018/7/10/fair-education-alliance-contextualised-admissions-2018-press-release