

Institution: University of the West of England, Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 23		
Title of case study: Improving university outreach and retention policy and practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020		
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:
Dr Neil Harrison	Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor	2000 – 2018
Dr Richard Waller	Associate Professor	1995 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>UWE research has strongly influenced national policymaking on the practice and evaluation of university outreach and retention work, leading to revised guidance and significant changes in institutional practice with respect to over £700m of annual expenditure. Our analytical toolkit, formally adopted by the regulator and now used by over half of English universities, has directly led to what the Office for Students has called '<i>a step change in evaluation practice</i>'. Our findings have also influenced understanding of effective outreach models including use of bursaries and helped to improve the activities delivered, including developing new methodological and theoretical approaches now widely adopted by English universities.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Government has become increasingly concerned about the slow pace at which participation in higher education among disadvantaged groups is growing in England, and these students' lower-than-average rates of completion once admitted. The regulator (originally the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), now the Office for Students (OfS)) was charged to require universities to be more explicit about their expenditure and evidence of effectiveness. Our early research (P1/P2) identified problems that sit within this policy context, leading to further work (P3/P4) commissioned by OFFA/OfS which generated traditional research outputs alongside changes in policy and guidance (outlined in Section 4). We undertook four projects, with overlapping scope, between 2013 and 2018:</p> <p>P1: '<i>Evaluation of the UWE Bursary Scheme</i>' (Harrison and Waller – 2013-14: R1);</p> <p>P2: '<i>Assessing Impact and Measuring Success</i>' (Harrison and Waller – 2014-15: R2/R3/R4/R5; G1);</p> <p>P3: '<i>Understanding the Impact of Institutional Financial Support on Student Success</i>' (multi-university study with Harrison as strand leader – 2015-17: R6; G2);</p> <p>P4: '<i>Understanding the Evaluation of Outreach Interventions for Under 16 Year Olds</i>' (multi-university study led by Harrison – 2017-18: R3/R4; G3).</p>		

Together these projects addressed key challenges by (a) examining the effectiveness of bursaries and devising an evaluation toolkit, and (b) critiquing prevailing theories of outreach work to create a new conceptual model.

Evaluating bursary programmes

Student bursaries comprise a significant proportion of universities' outreach and retention spend. Project **P1** demonstrated that students value bursaries highly for assisting them to complete their course, offering greater control over expenditure and establishing a motivating reciprocity with their university. However, they only rarely influence student decisions about entering higher education. These findings were cross-validated with parallel work at the University of Bristol (**R1**). Project **P3** led to the development and testing of a new analytical 'toolkit', adopted by OFFA, enabling universities to undertake robust evaluations of their bursary programmes using Higher Education Statistics Agency data and their own student records. This was accompanied by an epistemological exegesis on interpreting the complex results (**R6**).

New models to improve outreach work and evaluation

Our research (**P2/P4**) found that universities have struggled to develop robust methodologies to evaluate their outreach work due to the complexity of young people's decision-making processes and the myriad influences upon them (**R2**). One reason is that many universities lack a clear epistemology based on a 'theory of change' to underpin their evaluations (**R3**), with a focus on distant endpoint outcomes like entry to higher education rather than intermediate effects such as increased self-efficacy or school engagement (**R3**). Furthermore, outreach work with young people under 16 has declined due to perceived difficulties in evidencing effectiveness across the long timeframes between outreach work and entry to higher education (**R2**).

Projects **P2** and **P4** also revealed an undue emphasis on 'aspiration-raising' within outreach programmes, despite growing research evidence that this is not salient to young people's decisions to enter higher education, whereas there is little focus on attainment or influencing expectations among teachers and parents (**R2/R5**). This led to the adaptation of Markus and Nurius's 'possible selves' theory to provide a new conceptual framework for outreach (**R4**).

3. References to the research

R1 Harrison, N., Davies, S., Harris, R. and Waller, R. (2018) Access, participation and capabilities: theorising the contribution of university bursaries to students' wellbeing, flourishing and success. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 48(6), pp. 677-695.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764x.2017.1401586> (Project **P1**)

R2 Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2017a) Success and impact in widening participation: what works and how do we know? *Higher Education Policy* 30(2), pp. 141-160.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-016-0020-x> (Project **P2**)

R3 Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2017b) Evaluating outreach activities: overcoming challenges through a realist 'small steps' approach. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 21(2/3), pp. 81-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2016.1256353> (Project **P2**)

R4 Harrison, N. (2018) Using the lens of 'possible selves' to explore access to higher education: a new conceptual model for practice, policy, and research. *Social Sciences* (online), 7(10), p. 209. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100209> (Projects **P2/P4**)

R5 Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2018) Challenging discourses of aspiration: the role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal* 44(5), pp. 914-938. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3475> (Project **P2**)

R6 Harrison, N. and McCaig, C. (2017) Examining the epistemology of impact and success of educational interventions using a reflective case study of university bursaries. *British Educational Research Journal* 43(2), pp. 290-309. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3263> (Project **P3**)

Evidence of the quality of the supporting research

G1 Harrison, N. and Waller, R. *Assessing Impact and Measuring Success in widening participation initiatives (AIMS)*, Society for Research into Higher Education (Annual Research Awards: member awards), 2013, £10,000.

G2 Harrison, N. *Understanding the impact of financial support on student success: an institutional approach*, Office for Fair Access, 2014 - 2016, £15,542.

G3 Harrison, N. *Understanding the evaluation of outreach interventions to widen access to higher education for under 16 year olds in England from disadvantaged backgrounds*, Office for Fair Access, 2017, £9,250.

4. Details of the impact

The principal pathway to impact from our research has been a close working relationship with OFFA/OfS, built over many years and culminating in Harrison being commissioned by tender to undertake multi-university projects **P3** (as strand leader) and **P4** (as overall leader). This has afforded frequent contact with the OFFA/OfS evidence and policy teams, including direct engagement with the Director. Thus, our research fed directly into national policymaking on outreach and retention, influencing practice among English universities with respect to over £700m of annual expenditure (**S1**).

OfS evaluation toolkit

All English universities are now strongly encouraged by the OfS (**S2** p34, **S3** p35) to use our toolkit (developed in Project **P3** and published as **S4**) for evaluating their bursary programmes. This toolkit enables universities to better understand the impact of their financial support schemes on retention and success using advanced statistical techniques, and thereby make improvements to targeting and implementation of these programmes. The OfS confirms that

'the application of Dr Harrison's research has led to a step change in evaluation practice within the sector' (S1).

Over half of English universities are already using our toolkit (with more adopting over time), and a recent OfS report concludes that it has:

'given providers access to a tested and robustly designed evaluation approach' which has 'supported an improvement in the quality of evaluation by those providers who have used it', with providers using 'evidence from evaluation findings to inform changes to their financial support provision' (S5 p3).

The toolkit has been widely adopted by practitioners using it to improve their bursary programmes (**S5**). For example, it has played a 'key role' in evaluating and refocusing Brunel University's £12m bursary package (**S6**). It also led to an accumulation of evidence supporting the effectiveness of bursaries, supplementing the evidence collected through

Project **P1** and leading to a marked shift in OfS thinking which had previously been sceptical about their value (**S5** p3). Furthermore, universities are making use of the large-scale datasets and advanced statistical techniques produced through the toolkit, resulting in improved understandings of the student experience (**S5** p5 and **S1**).

Influencing outreach models

Our findings from projects **P2** and **P4**, which were adopted by the OfS in **S4**, led to a marked conceptual shift away from the previous focus on ‘aspiration-raising’ as the main aim of outreach work. Once common, this terminology is no longer used by the OfS in its regulatory guidance (**S1**) as it has been convinced the concept has little utility in explaining young people’s decisions. Southern Universities Network (**S7**) describe how our research led them to abandon ‘aspiration-raising’ as the guiding principle of their work, replacing it with our proposed ‘possible selves’ framework when planning outreach activities and their evaluation.

Raising the profile of early outreach work

Our research found that outreach work with people aged under 16, when there is most opportunity to influence their future trajectories, had been in decline due to difficulties evaluating impact. The findings from projects **P2** and **P4**, incorporated in **S8**, have re-raised the profile of such early outreach work (**S9**). Reflecting this, the OfS will in future require universities to report separately on their expenditure with this group (**S9** pp.23-24).

Changing institutional approaches to outreach work

Finally, our research across all four projects has seeded a wider conversation with policymakers around the epistemology of effectiveness within outreach work. This resulted in a richer appreciation of attitudinal and behavioural changes for young people within a complex social field. The OfS testimonial states that our research has

‘contributed strategically to [its] thinking about what constitutes good evidence with respect to interventions intended to influence long-term decision-making’ (S1).

Crucially, this includes a new emphasis on using our ‘theory of change’ approach to conceiving and evaluating outreach activities (**R3**), now actively promoted by the OfS (**S3** p19). The testimonial from the University of Oxford (**S10**) explains how our work has been used in developing their ‘Monitoring, Sharing and Evaluation Guide’, specifically by exploring how disadvantaged young people are encouraged towards higher education through intermediate steps.

The OfS is confident that our research means

‘decisions about student bursaries are now being made in light of more robust evidence and from a rigorous epistemological basis’

and that it supports

‘evidence-led practice by providers [that] will be instrumental in targeting their outreach activities and reducing the gaps in participation between the most and least represented young people’ (S1).

As practice changes recently made by universities filter through to outcomes for current and future students, the impact of our research will come to further fruition in the lives of those young people.

5. Sources to corroborate impact

S1 Testimonial from Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S2 Office for Students Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance (28 February 2019) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-guidance-on-access-and-participation-plans-for-2019-20>

S3 Office for Students Regulatory Advice 6: How to prepare your access and participation plan (28 February 2019) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/be7f0bd1-cf28-49dd-ba2f-012fee5fdf01/regulatory-advice-6-how-to-prepare-your-access-and-participation-plan-guidance.pdf>

S4 Office for Students practitioner toolkit: Financial Support Evaluation Statistical Tool (devised by Dr Neil Harrison) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/financial-support-evaluation-toolkit/statistical-tool/>

S5 Office for Students report: Understanding the impact of the financial support evaluation toolkit – Analysis and findings (18 February 2020) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financial-support-evaluation-toolkit-analysis>

S6 Testimonial from Executive Officer to the Vice-Provost Education, Brunel University, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S7 Testimonial from Head of Southern Universities Network (SUN) – a National Collaborative Outreach Partnership of seven universities in Hampshire and Dorset, funded through the Office for Students, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S8 Office for Students report (lead author – Dr Neil Harrison): Understanding the evaluation of access and participation outreach interventions for under 16 year olds <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/understanding-the-evaluation-of-access-and-participation-outreach-interventions-for-under-16-year-olds>

S9 Office for Students consultation report: A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education – Consultation outcomes (13 December 2018) <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-new-approach-to-regulating-access-and-participation-in-english-higher-education-consultation-outcomes>

S10 Testimonial from Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach Office, University of Oxford, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team