

Impact assessment in higher education: A strategic view from the UK.

Impact assessment in the context of recognising and determining the impact of a new policy, strategy, intervention or initiative on individuals, and/or an institution, has never had more prominence in the higher education sector than it has done over the last five to ten years. Senior leaders are keen to ensure that strategic objectives are met, with positive outcomes for all involved, and a good return on investment for the institution. When embarking on any large-scale strategic initiative, it is important to determine the vision and intended outcomes for the project/intervention within the available timeframe and budget, so that any impact can be effectively measured. This paper will explore the issues and approaches associated with impact assessment at the strategic level in universities, using the UK as a case study.

Impact can take place at a range of levels: At individual level, across a cohort, course/programme, or subject area; or across an entire institution. Baseline conditions prior to introducing any intervention must be noted at the start of the project, so that it is possible to recognise any changes that arise post-intervention. The extent to which observed changes can be attributed to the intervention itself, will depend upon the range of other variables in operation at the time. The methods chosen to measure and evaluate impact will necessarily vary according to the exact nature of the intervention.

With the massification of higher education, students, employers and parents are keen to understand the value of attaining a higher education qualification and experience. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, prospective students and employers clearly want to know what is on offer at different Higher Education Providers (HEPs), given the variable fees charged by each. This is particularly true in the United Kingdom (UK), where students have been required to pay tuition fees since 1998, following the introduction of the 'Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998.' Successive legislation (including the 2004 'Higher Education Act,' and the 2010 'Browne Review'), has been introduced to enable English universities to charge variable tuition fees up to £6-9K since 2012. Whilst there has been a gradual increase in the tuition fees that can be charged to students in the UK, there has not, as yet, been the adoption of a 'free market' approach to student fees that was anticipated by many in the sector. Research undertaken by ComRes on behalf of Universities UK (UUK, 2017) with over a thousand full-time and part-time undergraduate students from HEPs from a range of mission groups¹ found that 47% of undergraduate students regarded themselves as a customer of their university when asked whether they saw themselves as a customer of a variety of organisations, institutions or people, with this figure varying slightly according to gender and institutional mission group.

The increased institutional competition between HEPs for student numbers following the removal of student number control in English Universities in 2015; and in Australian Universities in 2012, has led to significant capital investment in estates facilities, particularly new buildings for student learning; learning resources (e.g. library resource & IT facilities, including enhanced Wi-Fi provision); new students' union buildings and student accommodation. For example, the Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE) Estates Management Report 2016 (which reported on the academic year 2014/15), reported that capital expenditure had grown 5.6% on the previous year, reaching a record high of £2.75bn per annum, with University estate increasing 200,000 square metres from the previous year. Unsurprisingly, HEPs are keen to raise their profiles nationally and internationally, promoting to prospective students via websites and marketing materials the significant investments they have made in facilities, and the positive impact of their large-scale, cross-institutional strategic initiatives on learning, teaching, assessment and the overarching student experience.

¹ The ComRes study interviewed over a thousand full-time and part-time undergraduate university students from a mix of Higher Education Providers: Russell Group (27%), Pre-1992 (23%), Post-1992 (49%) and small institutions (1%)

The creation of a number of national and international bodies with responsibility for taking forward learning, teaching and student-experience has helped raise the profile of this agenda across the higher education sector. These include the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA) established in 2003, whose mission is to *'improve learning outcomes by raising the status and quality of teaching in higher education;*' the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) which was established in the early 1970s as the primary scholarly society for learning and teaching in Australia & New Zealand, with responsibility for promoting the development of higher education policy, practice, the study of teaching and learning and the building of strong academic communities; the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) established in 2004, to facilitate international collaboration and scholarship of teaching and learning within and between disciplines and across educational levels; and the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association (HETL) founded in 2010 to bring together higher education professionals and thought leaders from around the world to dialogue, network, and collaborate on issues relevant to teaching and learning in higher education.

Professionalisation of learning and teaching in higher education in the UK has been aided by the sector's creation of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF), a nationally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within higher education teaching and learning support. Internationally, several countries are now drawing upon this framework to enhance their own professional practice in learning and teaching, accrediting Postgraduate Certificates of Higher Education and Academic Practice and other appropriate staff development programmes against the UKPSF. Within the UK, effective and innovative learning and teaching has become a key strategic priority for HEPs over recent years, with many UK HEPs now requiring their academic staff to gain Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) as a condition of appointment and promotion, to ensure they meet explicit criteria appropriate for their roles as specified in the national framework (UK PSF). At an international level a number of HEPs are now engaging in this area drawing upon practice from the UK, with over 70,000 HEA Fellows worldwide (HEA, 2017d).

Within the UK, the majority of government initiatives and both national and institutional reward and recognition schemes in higher education now reference impact in their criteria and/or grading descriptors. For example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Catalyst Fund (which was established to drive innovation, and enhance excellence and efficiency in higher education), requires impacts from interventions and innovations to be evaluated. Similarly, those individuals awarded Principal Fellowship through the internationally recognised, HEA-accredited professional recognition scheme, are required to meet the top level Descriptor (Descriptor 4) of the 2011 UK PSF. This Descriptor requires individuals to be able to *'provide evidence of a sustained and effective record of impact at a strategic level in relation to teaching and learning, as part of a wider commitment to academic practice.'* Other national, and international reward and recognition schemes highlight the importance of evaluating impact when driving forward teaching excellence at a strategic level. For example, the 'Outstanding' grading descriptor for Criterion 1.1 of the international HEA Global Teaching Excellence Award Scheme requires evidence of *'A strategy for promoting and rewarding excellence in teaching and learning (which) is embedded across the whole institution, and it has an effective and established culture of monitoring and evaluating its impact'* (HEA, 2017a); and when awarding National Teaching Fellowships in the UK, the highest grading goes to candidates who can demonstrate that they have made an *'outstanding contribution that has had a transformative impact on student learning over a range of projects both internally and externally to the nominating institution.'* (HEA, 2017b).

The UK government introduced a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for the UK in 2016, with the aim of raising esteem for teaching; recognising and rewarding excellent teaching; better informing students' choices about what, and where to study; and better meeting the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions. Entry into Year 2 TEF was voluntary for HEPs, provided that they met the scheme's eligibility and pre-requisite

requirements, one of which was to '*meet the requirements of the quality assessment system in their home nation*' (DfE, 2016). HEPs were required to demonstrate in their institutional written TEF Provider Submissions the '*impact and effectiveness of teaching on the student experience and outcomes they achieve*' (HEFCE, 2016). The guidance recommended a focus on impact, rather than a description of institutional strategies or approaches, with an encouragement for HEPs to demonstrate impact empirically, as far as was possible. Whilst engagement with TEF has to date been voluntary, many HEPs saw the benefit of participating in Year 2 TEF (2016/17) both reputationally, and in terms of recruitment (particularly international recruitment). The vast majority of UK HEPs took part in Year 2 TEF in 2016/17: 279 English providers, seven Welsh providers, five Scottish providers and two providers in Northern Ireland. (HEFCE, 2017). The potential linking of TEF rating to fees and international recruitment that were mooted at the time of introduction of TEF, has since been put on hold by the English Government. There is, however the opportunity to reconsider this as part of the Statutory Independent Review of TEF scheduled to take place in 2018/19. Whilst TEF has been renamed the 'Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework' in autumn 2017, the TEF acronym remains unchanged. With the introduction of a new regulator for English Universities: The Office for Students (OfS) which replaces HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA); and the introduction of a new regulatory framework for higher education in England from January 2018 through the 'Higher Education and Research Act 2017,' there is a proposal for OfS to make entry into TEF compulsory from 2019/20, as an ongoing registration condition for all Approved and Approved (Fee Cap) Providers that have at least 500 undergraduate, higher education students (DfE. 2017). Under this proposal, smaller providers who meet the eligibility requirements would be able to continue to participate in TEF on a voluntary basis. The consultation closes in December 2017.

With the increased international focus on student experience and learning and teaching in higher education, there has been the creation of specific departments and posts with strategic responsibility for driving forward these agendas across institutions. For example, the majority of HEPs now have a Pro Vice-Chancellor and/or Deputy Vice-Chancellor with strategic responsibility for leading Learning and Teaching/Education and/or Student Experience across the whole institution, supported by one, or more, central departments that offer dedicated support for staff and students. Examples include Centres of excellence for Learning & Teaching; Departments of Learning Enhancement; Learning Institutes; and Centres for Student Life/Student Success/Student Engagement. These central teams work cross-institutionally with academic and professional services staff to assure, innovate and enhance the quality of learning and teaching, and the overall student experience across the whole organisation. They play a key role in driving the institutional sharing of good practice, as well as evaluating the impact of any strategic initiatives designed to enhance or innovate learning, teaching and the student experience.

It is important to evaluate any strategic initiatives/projects from both a financial and pedagogic perspective. HEPs now offer a vast range of varied provision to a diverse group of learners: Undergraduate, postgraduate, professional, higher and degree apprenticeships, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and small private online age 5 of 8 courses (SPOCs); with students learning part-time, full-time, online, on campus, or via blended and/or work-based learning courses. Students are keen to know how their fees are being spent, and what they can expect for the money they pay. This has been evidenced in the annual UK-wide 'Student Academic Experience Survey' that has been undertaken by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) over the last eleven years, where teaching quality, 'value for money,' academic teaching qualifications and the meeting of student expectations have been key emergent trends. The most recent survey (2017), shows a year on year downward trend from 2012 in perceived 'value for money,' with only 35% of all student respondents in 2017 feeling that they have received good, or very good, 'value for money' with variations according to domicile and ethnicity. Data in the report highlight the centrality of teaching quality to the student experience, and the value placed on this by students, both

in terms of continued professional development and training for staff in teaching, and through institutional budget priorities. When asked which areas they would most/least prefer their university to save money on, student respondents ranked cuts to student support services, the number of teaching hours and spend on learning facilities as their least preferred options (47%, 42% & 41% respectively). If money had to be saved, then students would prefer; preferring instead for their university to spend less on buildings (45%) and sports/social facilities (45%) (Neves & Hillman, 2017). In another research project undertaken by ComRes (UUK, 2017), students identified 'good facilities available for studying,' 'high quality lecturers and tutors,' 'high quality course content,' 'future career prospects' and 'academically challenging' as their top five reasons why courses are good 'value for money.'

Given the competitive nature of higher education in today's global marketplace, HEPs are clearly interested in determining return on investment, and the impact of large-scale strategic projects on the academic community (both staff and students). Impact assessment is therefore necessary to understand whether, and how, specific interventions have affected pedagogic practice, student learning and engagement, student satisfaction and the retention, progression and achievement of learners. This is not a simple exercise given the vast array of variables that exists in any learner cohort (e.g. prior attainment and demographic differences such as gender, age and ethnicity). Whilst it is virtually impossible to determine any direct causal effect of a strategic intervention on a performance measure such as graduate outcomes, due to the range of variables highlighted above, there are some specific tools available that can help with this evaluation work. For example, a toolkit to evaluate the long-term value and impact of continuing professional development for teachers and learners in higher education (Kneale *et al.*, 2016); and a 'Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) tool' (HEFCE, 2006) which can be used to provide-feedback on all stages of any building project from initial concept through to occupation. Areas of focus for the POE include consideration of whether the building performs as intended once built; any changes to users' needs; a review of the effectiveness of all stages of the project, and any learning points that can be gained to inform future projects. Other measures that can be utilised to evaluate the impact of projects include project-specific questionnaires and focus groups with end users; locally run standard questionnaires (e.g. module evaluation questionnaires); and national/international survey tools such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and UK Engagement Survey (UKES) in the UK; and international surveys of student engagement, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in North America, and the Australian Universities Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) which is employed in Australia and New Zealand. With students paying a significant amount of money in fees, and HEPs holding limited budgets, there is a need to ensure that strategic investments are directed to the areas identified to be of most value for students (e.g. UUK, 2017 & Neves & Hillman, 2017). It is also important to ensure that the intended strong and positive impact on the student learning experience is realised by any interventions.

Appropriate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be established from the outset when introducing any new intervention, so that progress against each KPI can be effectively monitored. It is standard practice to establish a Project Board or Steering Group, comprising key stakeholders, with responsibility for providing the necessary project governance and oversight. This group ensures that milestones and project deliverables are met in line with stakeholder requirements, within the agreed timeframe and budget. There is generally a requirement for the project team to provide progress updates and regular reports to the Project Board or Steering Group throughout the life-cycle of the project, to ensure that stakeholder needs continue to be met, with the opportunity for stakeholders to amend the brief mid-project where necessary, and evaluate options where appropriate. A post-implementation report provides the mechanism to report back on immediate and short-term evaluations of impact, together with recommendations for what future evaluative work should be undertaken. For example, feedback might be collected from both staff and students on the design and facilities within a refreshed classroom environment on completion of the building work, but the impact

of this project on curriculum, pedagogic design and student learning would take much longer to assess, drawing upon a large range of data.

In addition to the work of Project Boards and Project Steering Groups, further evaluation of impact would normally feed through an HEP's deliberative structures, with consideration of whether, and how, strategic projects/initiatives have enhanced and/or innovated student learning and/or the overall student experience. Typically, this takes the form of reports from small-scale, internally-funded research projects involving academic and professional support staff and students that have been established to evaluate impact through a range of mechanisms, which tend to include staff and student questionnaires and focus groups. In addition, HEPs use their existing quality assurance mechanisms to determine the impact of strategic interventions. For example, annual and continual monitoring, reports from external examiners, national student survey data (e.g. NSS, PTES & UKES) and internal student feedback surveys (e.g. module evaluation questionnaires and institutional surveys), together with data from periodic reviews.

It is important to evaluate impact throughout any project, as changes can be made to the design and delivery of the intervention as the project develops in response to data received. Similarly, there can be institutional learning from projects if there is full evaluation of impact during, and on completion of the project. At a time when resources are finite, and competition from the marketplace strong, it has never been more important to have a clear and evidence-based evaluation of impact for any strategic projects and initiatives undertaken by a Higher Education Provider (HEP).

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