

Priorities for the Evidence and Impact Exchange

1. Summary

- 1.1 Russell Group universities are engaging in a wide range of activities to widen access and support participation for disadvantaged and under-represented students. They are developing evaluative frameworks and collaborating with each other and leading academics, to build and apply evidence of “what works” within their institutions and more broadly.¹
- 1.2 We support the intention of the Evidence and Impact Exchange (hereafter “the Exchange”) to “encourage the generation, translation and adoption of high-quality evidence and evaluation” in order to further develop understanding of work with students from under-represented groups.²
- 1.3 In supporting the creation of the Exchange, the Office for Students should focus on helping universities to identify and disseminate effective practice as well as helping to ensure they have the tools to undertake robust evaluations of their work.
- 1.4 In order to be effective, the Exchange should:
 - primarily be a tool for practitioners, providing a “safe space” for sharing good practice and also enabling the sharing of evidence about what has not worked to support a greater understanding of how to maximise impact.
 - ensure it is relevant for all higher education institutions, recognising that different institutions face different challenges in widening access and supporting participation.
 - draw on and collate evidence from existing initiatives as well as identifying and addressing gaps in the evidence base – potentially through a series of funded research projects.
 - work with the sector, DfE, UCAS and others to unify, and make available, datasets used to indicate disadvantage and measure progress at each stage within the education system.
 - recognise there is no one-size-fits-all solution which can be applied across the sector and evaluation results at one institution will not necessarily be comparable with those at another as a result of differences in context.

2. Priorities for the Evidence and Impact Exchange

Who is the Exchange for?

- 2.1 The Exchange should primarily be a tool for practitioners to share evaluation results and access evidence of initiatives which have worked (or not worked) in similar contexts. In order to be effective, the platform needs to provide a “safe space” for this activity to take place. This is particularly important with regard to the sharing of negative or neutral evaluation results in order to help institutions more effectively target their activities and learn from the experience of others. We would recommend that the platform enables practitioners to share

¹ For example, King’s College London has a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework encompassing all widening participation activities across King’s, whilst the University of Sheffield has its own Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU) delivering institution-specific research projects about the impact of the University’s WP activities.

² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/using-evidence-to-improve-access-and-participation-outcomes/evidence-and-impact-exchange/>

results through the digital repository within a closed environment to promote usage and mitigate any reputational risk.

- 2.2 We recognise that policymakers, charities, employers and others will have a legitimate interest in the work of the Exchange. Indeed, there is an opportunity to build the evidence base on “what works” with regard to access and participation and so improve the efficacy of policy-making and interventions undertaken in partnership with other organisations. However, different potential users will have different needs and requirements, and some may be more equipped to understand and utilise the data and evidence available through the Exchange than others. The translation of the data and evidence shared by practitioners as well as other research organisations into easily accessible guidance and resources available to different audiences will be important in ensuring policymakers and other stakeholders can make use of the Exchange.
- 2.3 We welcome the intention for the Exchange to cover the full student lifecycle as this should ensure that it will be relevant for all higher education institutions. Ideally, the remit of the Exchange should be UK-wide as widening access and participation remains a key priority for universities in the devolved administrations; indeed, many collaborative programmes involve universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland working together.³ Supporting the identification of effective practice across the whole of the UK – and internationally – would be helpful in improving knowledge and understanding.

What should the Exchange do?

- 2.4 The purpose of the Exchange should be to support universities to identify and disseminate effective practice and to help to ensure they have the tools to undertake robust evaluations of their work. Individual universities face different challenges, and tailor their approach to admissions, widening access and participation accordingly. In supporting the work of the Exchange, the Office for Students should recognise the nature of initiatives which are targeted to address challenges specific to institutional mission, geographical location, and student demographics means there is no one-size-fits-all solution which can be applied across the sector. Evaluation results at one institution will not necessarily be comparable with those at another as a result of differences in context. The Exchange should not therefore be used as a regulatory tool.
- 2.5 The intention to identify and address gaps in the evidence base is welcome. This could involve running a series of funded research projects. For example, the evidence base with regard to the efficacy of interventions to raise attainment in schools is limited and further research is needed at a sector level to understand what works and which stakeholders (universities, schools, charities etc.) can most effectively address the issue.
- 2.6 Difficulties in tracking individual students through various administrative datasets need to be addressed so better evidence on student outcomes can be generated. The Exchange could work with the sector and others to unify, and make available, datasets used to indicate disadvantage and measure progress at each stage within the education system. This would enable more precise identification and tracking of students and so improve the evidence base. This should include linking into existing initiatives including the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) as well as supporting broader work to link administrative datasets and fully implement the unique learner number throughout the education sector.

³ For example, all 24 Russell Group universities are working together through [Advancing Access](#) to provide teachers with comprehensive information and advice about our universities’ admissions processes. The initiative is targeted at schools and colleges with low progression to higher education and the resources have been accessed by over 1,300 teachers so far.