



MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY INITIATIVES

Expert Summary 01/2014 by Peter Wilkins and Jennifer de Vries

PURPOSE

This summary aims to assist practitioners who are commissioning, planning or commencing evaluations of equity initiatives in higher education by identifying key issues for consideration and outlining key sources of guidance on the planning and implementing of evaluation.

BACKGROUND TO ISSUE

Australian universities are undertaking a wide range of Outreach, Access and Support initiatives to improve student equity and social inclusion within higher education. A growing need has been identified by practitioners who design and deliver equity initiatives, for improved evaluation approaches of these initiatives, to better understand what works well and why, across the sector.

KEY POINTS

Evaluation in general:

- Evaluation requires systematic, rigorous and objective approaches to answer specific questions about how well initiatives and strategies are working. Evaluation should be considered within the planning and development phase of equity initiatives. Its audience should be clearly defined to ensure it is:
 - scoped
 - planned, and
 - reported on appropriately.
 - An essential starting point for an evaluation is clarity about the objectives of the initiative and the context in which it is being implemented.
 - Evaluations can address performance at different levels in what is often described as a performance hierarchy or results chain which includes **inputs** (what is needed to do this), **activities** (what are you doing), **outputs** (what is the immediate response), **outcomes** (have planned objectives been met) and **impacts** (how will this affect what people do in the future) (see Figure 1). Deciding on which aspect or aspects to be evaluated is an important consideration when designing the questions to be answered.
 - As some equity initiatives may have more than one objective it is essential to adopt an appropriate evaluation method to answer each objective. Explicit criteria must be established against which judgements about performance can be made.
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 - Evaluations should be designed for particular purposes and cost-effective. Importantly, evaluations must be used for learning in relation to improving current initiatives, designing future initiatives, and serve as accountability purposes for outcomes and impact of initiatives.
 - There are considerable benefits in linking evaluation and performance systems so that information systems established to monitor performance provide valuable information which can be built on when an evaluation is conducted.
 - Identifying cause and effect relationships is a particular challenge where multiple factors may influence outcomes. When interpreting outcomes of equity initiatives, careful consideration must be given to factors arising from external changes including changes in government policy. Providing analysis and commentary on outcomes had the initiative not occurred, also referred to as the counterfactual, draws together relevant information and provides valuable insights. Contribution Analysis is a useful method to address the issue of whether the initiative delivered the expected outcomes or the extent to which other factors impacted on the outcomes.
 - Evaluation reporting should be appropriate for the intended audience and learning shared with other stakeholders and others in the field, exposing evaluation work to review and to share best practice.

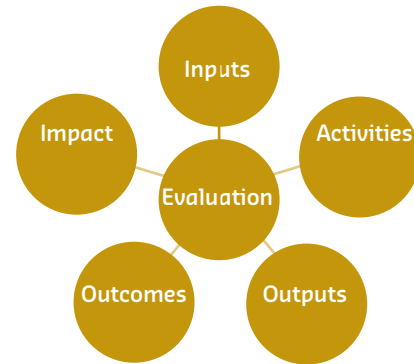


Figure 1: Evaluation involves five key aspects.

Specific to equity evaluations:

- Conceptual frameworks that may be helpful include a focus on access, participation and outcomes, and analysis in terms of performance against standards and targets, differences between sub-groups and the distribution across a population.
- Clear identification of equity groups in the planning of initiatives needs to be matched by the design of monitoring and evaluation methods that will enable the experience of these groups to be tracked and analysed.
- Great care is needed if population groups are treated as identical and if reliance is placed solely on the norm. Separating target populations can help to inform whether the most disadvantaged have benefited from the intervention. Engaging in Reach analysis, can assist in identifying all those that an intervention seeks to influence and the extent to which sub-groups within the equity population benefit from the intervention.

Specific to student equity evaluations:

- Student equity in higher education can be considered in terms of the phases of attraction/recruitment, retention, completion and progression (to employment and postgraduate studies). It is likely that equity performance is assessed within fields of study, as well as at the individual institutional level. Equity-focussed initiatives can be grouped in terms of **Outreach** - reaching prospective students; **Access** - helping get them into university; and **Support** - improving the retention, completion and career progression of students.
- Understanding the experience of both those who do enrol and successfully move through higher education and those who don't may be important.
- Many factors play a part in student participation, retention and success. Contribution Analysis and similar approaches enable the significance and interplay of these factors to be better understood.
- An evaluation framework for student equity in higher education has been developed by the Group of Eight (Go8) universities and warrants consideration. The *Group of Eight Framework for Evaluation of Equity Initiatives* document "... provides an exploration of potential methods for evaluating a range of equity programs, noting some of the methodological complexities involved. There is an emphasis on looking beyond access and participation to ensuring academic achievement and outcomes". A suite of key indicators is presented measuring performance across ten objectives along with related guides on evaluation methods.

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