



THEORY OF CHANGE

Debates and Applications to Access and
Participation in Higher Education

Edited by

Samuel Dent, Anna Mountford-Zimdars
and Ciaran Burke

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THEORY OF CHANGE

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Higher Education

EDITED BY

SAMUEL DENT

Staffordshire University, UK

ANNA MOUNTFORD-ZIMDARS

University of Exeter, UK

And

CIARAN BURKE

University of the West of England, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Dr Samuel Dent PFHEA, is Head of Academic Development at Staffordshire University. Prior to this Samuel was Academic Development Manager at Nottingham Trent University leading the Educational Research and Evaluation Team, which he established in 2018; the Trent Institute for Learning and Teaching; and the Educational Development Team. He holds a PhD from Sheffield Hallam University, and was named the 2016 emerging researcher by the Forum on Access and Continuing Education for his initial findings. Since then, he has received numerous awards and shaped practice in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom and Ireland, including being cited in the Office for Students regulatory framework. In 2020, he was recognised as a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy for his contribution, to the HE sector and his reputation for weaving together research and practice on HE inequalities.

Anna Mountford-Zimdars is Professor of Social Mobility and Joint Director of the Centre for Social Mobility, at the University of Exeter. Anna leads the academic professional programme (APP, formerly PCAP), and she served for two years (2018-2019) as a TEF national panel Widening Participation (WP) Expert and serves on the Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) academic advisory group. As well

as being an invited expert to the Milburn Commission on Social Mobility and the UUK social mobility academic reference group (both 2016) she has participated in an OfS working group for the WP TEF metrics.

Anna joined the University of Exeter after researching Higher Education inequality at King's College London, she undertook her post-doctoral research at the University of Manchester where she was part of the Institute for Social Change and was a visiting scholar at the Harvard Kennedy School. During her doctoral studies at New College, Oxford, she also spent time at the New York University Steinhardt School of Education as a visiting scholar. Anna is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA) and Principal Fellow of ASPIRE, a member of the SRHE and academic associate of Advance HE.

Dr Ciaran Burke is an Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of the West of England. Prior to this he was an Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Derby. A native of Belfast, Ciaran studied Sociology at undergraduate and then postgraduate level at Queen's University Belfast. His PhD thesis focused on the role of social class on graduate employment pathways. During his time as a PhD student, he was the founding member of the British Sociological Association's Bourdieu Study Group and organised numerous conferences and seminars on social theory and inequalities/culture/consumption, continuing on his involvement in the academic community he has recently become a convenor of the SRHE Employability, Enterprise and Work-Based Learning Network. On graduating with his PhD in 2012, Ciaran took up a lectureship in Sociology at Ulster University. During his time as an ECR, he published and co-edited four books with Routledge and Bloomsbury focusing on social theory, higher education and graduate employment

including a monograph based on his PhD research ‘Culture, Capitals and Graduate Futures: Degrees of Class’ (2016). After five years as a lecturer, Ciaran joined the University of Derby as an Associate Professor of Higher Education – roles included acting as a mentor to junior colleagues and supporting academic writing and funding strategies. Ciaran has established himself as an authority on social theory and graduate employment/careers, often working within interdisciplinary research teams. In addition, his current research has focused on social inequality and Service Pupils and disability and method. Ciaran’s research has been funded by numerous organisations beginning with internal University funding before extending to HECSU, SRHE, HEFCE/OfS and NCOP.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Daniela Bandeva is an Abertay University BSc(Hons) Computing Graduate. Originally from Bulgaria, she came to Scotland in 2015 to start her HE journey. She has been involved with Abertay Students Association(SA) since 2017, when she was elected Vice President. In 2020 she was elected President of Abertay SA. As part of her time as elected officer, she has worked passionately to advocate for student experience and well-being and mental health, while promoting more inclusive campus culture. In addition, Daniela has worked with numerous voluntary organisations to promote inclusivity, solidarity, and support in the community.

Vanessa Baptista is the Widening Participation and Equality Coordinator at the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama. Her role entails supporting widening participation and youth outreach teams at each of the six CDD member schools to robustly evidence the purpose and impact of their interventions. Prior to this, she worked at AccessHE, the pan-London network driving the HE access, success and progression agenda for underrepresented learners across the capital, where she supported the AccessHE Creative Forum

Greg Brown is Student Retention and Surveys Manager at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Before taking up this role, Greg was Data and Evaluation Manager at HeppSY, the

Uni Connect Programme partnership for South Yorkshire. This was after spending 3 years at the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU) at the University of Sheffield as a researcher and evaluator. Greg's work focusses on developing theory-driven approaches to evaluation, to support the identification of promising and impactful programmes to support learners across the student lifecycle.

Vicky Cotterill is the Data and Research Officer for DANCOP (Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Programme) based at the University of Derby. Vicky has worked with DANCOP since Phase One of the programme, joining after completing her BA(Hons) and MA in Education. Vicky has 16 years of experience working with data for quality, compliance and regulatory purposes.

Julian Crockford is currently Chief Programmes Officer at Villiers Park Educational Trust. Prior to this Julian managed the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit at the University of Sheffield. There he oversaw a range of short-term and longitudinal research and evaluation projects focusing on the whole student journey, student success and progression, inclusive learning and teaching and equality and diversity issues.

Anna Davey is the Data and Research Manager for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Programme (DANCOP) and has worked in further and higher education for 21 years. Within further education she held a variety of roles including supporting young people in an academic and pastoral capacity, and embedding learner voice into practice. For the past 4 years Anna has lead on the monitoring and evaluation of DANCOP.

Kantha Dayaram is an International Accreditation Reviewer with the UAE Higher Education Commission, and the

Australian Quality Assurance Body. She was the Head of School and Director of Teaching and Learning at the School of Management, Curtin University, Australia. She was the recipient of the faculty-teaching award for innovative post-graduate teaching. She designed and developed undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs internationally.

Jill Hanson joined the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) at the University of Derby as a researcher in 2016. Her undergraduate degree was in psychology at the University of Aberdeen and her PhD, at the University of Hertfordshire, explored aspects of well-being in an organisational and health psychology context. Jill worked as senior lecturer in the school of business at the University of Derby for several years with a focus on employability and research methods before joining iCeGS. In her current role Jill has led on a longitudinal study of sixth form students examining their decision-making about higher education (HE) and the sources of information they use, as well as leading on the evaluation of the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Programme. Jill was also involved in working with Career and Enterprise Company Primary Fund applicants in a consultancy role aimed at developing a Theory of Change for their programmes.

Neil Harrison is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and Deputy Director of the Rees Centre, which specialises in research to support evidence-based policymaking around the education of children in care and care-experienced adults. He has written widely about access to higher education for disadvantaged and marginalised groups, with a focus on the epistemological basis of evaluating outreach programmes, including working on several projects for the Office for Students and its predecessors. Prior to his academic career, he worked as a

practitioner and manager in widening participation and student welfare roles. Neil's new co-edited book entitled *Marginalised Communities in Higher Education: Disadvantage, Mobility and Indigeneity* was published by Routledge in August 2021.

Catherine Kelly is a PhD candidate at the University of Bristol researching the influence of WP evaluation on practice and policy decision-making in English higher education providers. Prior to starting a PhD, Catherine worked as a Research Associate for a National Collaborative Outreach Programme Consortium, evaluating their widening participation work. Catherine's passion for evaluation and using theory of change started whilst studying for a master's degree at Vanderbilt University in the United States, she used her knowledge of evaluation in her role as project officer for the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), and helped design an evaluation planning tool for HEAT database users in universities across England

Luke Millard is Dean of Teaching and Learning at Abertay University. His research is in the field of student retention and particularly around the first year student experience and the addressing of inequalities through course design and student opportunity. In addition, Luke has written extensively on student engagement and the impact of student employment on their success.

Joanne Moore is a Research Fellow of the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter. She has formerly held roles as an educational researcher at the University of Manchester and Open University. She has a detailed understanding of widening participation policy and practice, including co-authoring a guide to data sources for widening participation practitioners. She is currently working on a

collaborative project to support evaluation of the impact of outreach.

Subhadarsini Parida received a scholarship from Cooperative Research Centre Low Carbon Living for her PhD research on the impact of green buildings on employees' performance. Subhadarsini is an experienced multidisciplinary researcher in the areas of sustainable living, green HRM, social leadership, asset management, green buildings, autonomous vehicles and social license. She has experience in working with various research centres where she worked with local government, small business, and industry. In her current role at Centre of Innovative Practices, Edith Cowan University, she is leading a team of researchers and working with the Department of Transport (Perth) to evaluate the implementation of autonomous vehicles in Perth. Additionally, she worked with the Australasian Centre for Rail Innovation in the area of social license. Subhadarsini has presented her research on international platforms including ANZAM and BAM conference.

Dr Jon Rainford works on the margins between academic and professional services. He is an Associate Lecturer and Honorary Associate in Access, Open and Cross Curricular Innovation at the Open University as well as working as an independent consultant and evaluator. His work in higher education has been focused on widening access and success and is currently working to look at how technology can enhance both access and student success, especially in moving to online delivery. Having interests in the Sociology of Higher Education, his research focuses on exploring the gaps between policy and practice in relation to widening participation in higher education. He was previously Widening Participation and Access Coordinator at the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama where he developed and implemented their first institutional evaluation strategy.

Reena Tiwari is a Curtin University Academy Fellow, Australia. She received the Australian National Award for Teaching Excellence for leading and inspiring a model of teaching and research which has established a point of difference in the profession, with its commitment to community engagement and philanthropy (including Lakhnu rural development project in India, Slum Action project in India, Wedge coastal shack community project in Western Australia, To Walk or Not to Walk project in New Delhi, and Body performance in East Perth project for which support and funds were received from industry and professional bodies. She held the position of Head of Department Architecture and Interior Architecture and has been the Director of International Cooperation Research Cluster at Curtin University. She is an executive committee member for Urban Development Institute of Australia, Urban Design Institute of Australia and the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand.

Julie Blackwell Young is Quality Enhancement Manager at Abertay University. Her areas of interest are around partnership working (students as partners and academic/professional services partnerships), curriculum design and development, gamification and staff development.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Dent, Anna Mountford-Zimdars, and Ciaran Burke

Enormous efforts and funds have been spent to increase diversity in higher education in places like the United Kingdom. However, the impact of these efforts could be greater. One avenue to enhance impact is being more careful in how activities are designed, drawing on a Theory of Change (ToC) and evaluating their impact.

The idea behind this book was initially to help build a common lexicon and understanding of *ToC* as an approach to the evaluation of Access and Widening Participation (WP) problems in higher education (HE). We knew that evaluation had grown in significance in English HE since the early 2010s. A weakness of prior national infrastructure has been the temptation to ‘do’ the intervention first, retrospectively monitor its progress, establish target and speak in some way about its impact. This had been characteristic of Aimhigher, a national, regional and sub-regional WP initiative which struggled in debates around its purpose and success by failing to coherently evidence its effectiveness. As [Doyle and Griffin \(2012\)](#) show in their analysis of evaluations of Aimhigher’s work, the late establishment of targets and difficulties accessing and monitoring data sets cumulatively meant that

Aimhigher had difficulty proving the extent to which it had ‘widened participation and contributed to improvements in social justice’ (Doyle & Griffin, 2012, pp. 81–82). Ultimately leading to Aimhigher’s swift closure in 2010, as part of the government’s rapid austerity measures (BBC News, 2010).

Discussion of evaluation, however was not just UK centric, the global HE policy landscape, has seen a significant set of moves which has favoured the ability to robustly evidence and evaluate the ‘change’ or Impact of access and WP activity, such as in Australia, Ireland and the United States. Yet in the United Kingdom, this has featured the explicit introduction of ToC by the Office for Students (OFS) into policy, and sits against a background of historically patchy evidence of clear ‘impact’ from some previous WP projects: as in the case of Aimhigher above. Alongside an increasingly metricised approach to HE, within an increasingly marketised and regulatory context, which can have the potential to undermine or prove counter intuitive to attempts to achieve greater equity or WP in HE.

Despite these shifts and policy changes there is a lack of HE-related texts and content, which focuses specifically on a ToC. At present HE practitioners who are being guided towards ToC approaches are seeking their source material in different sources, such as around public policy, and projects connected to agriculture, international development and social services (Mason & Barnes, 2007; Mayne & Johnson, 2015; Sullivan & Stewart, 2006). This text, then, brings together for the first time some of the researchers and practitioners who have produced conference papers, and occasional journal articles on ToC.

Yet, nationally, there has been a cumulative need for HE practitioners from a range of disciplines and backgrounds to use the ToC approach, particularly to meet regulatory requirements, such as institutional Access and Participation

Plan (OFS, 2021a), or to frame their practice for funding opportunities (OFS, 2021b). The need for robust evaluation strategies for practice/intervention or research grants in HE is increasingly leading a wider range of practitioners to engage in ToC approaches.

However, this increasing focus on ‘change’ and ‘impact’ in the contexts described above has the potential to compromise the integrity of research and evaluation when fitting it together to respond to a specific context or policy imperative, particularly when this landscape can favour specific methods or approaches – see the increased narrative in WonkHE and Time Higher around Randomised Control Trials (Hume, 2019).

The aim of this book, then, seeks to address these gaps through discussion of the ToC approach in the context of Access and Participation in HE, and develop a more coherent understanding of what is ToC, and how to use it. We do this in two ways: section one, which looks at the growth of the approach and some of the theoretical debates and questions raised. While in section two we present a series of practice-orientated case studies from a range of perspectives, which presents ideas and initiatives around ‘Change’, from different contexts (national, international, disciplinary), and stages of the student lifecycle, from access to university, participation in HE and preparation for post-graduate skills.

Section One explores the more theoretical and contextual dates around ToC in HE. In Chapter 1, Harrison explores the epistemological (how we know things) questions created by the adoption of ToC and the use of evaluation in Access and WP work. After over 20 years of work in this field, there is an argument that there is an epistemological deficit in the field, and that practitioners and policy makers have frequently fallen back on simplistic conceptualisations of human behavioural change and how it can be evidenced. Through this,

Harrison poses five new, but related, questions to help frame the debate for the 2020s. They focus on the unhelpful ubiquity of aspirations as a conceptual framework, the ‘deadweight’ of mistargeted access work, the epistemic problems of data collected from prospective students, the failure of elite universities to widen access and why similar young people make different decisions about their future. From this discussion it is hoped that these five new questions will open up new epistemological spaces for questioning what access work is done and how we understand success.

Finally in this section, Chapter 2 presents a discussion of how evaluative models can be built conceptually, and Brown et al. discuss specifically the nature of ‘casual modelling’ and different approaches to this. Presenting two different contextual models, with examples, the chapter invites the reader to think about how such base methodological assumptions and decisions are important, and have huge consequences for how knowledge about the impact of a programme or policy is created. Concluding, however, that at the heart of both approaches is the need to use ToC and similar theory building tools to focus evaluative inquiry.

Section Two of this book then moves on to present a series of chapters that are written by researchers, evaluators and practitioners, and discuss the application of ToC in different contexts. Chapter 3 focuses a project conducted on the Standards of Evaluation Practice, commencing under the Office for Fair Access and concluded under the OFS. Moore et al. share how this project leads to the creation of a self-assessment tool which asks practitioners to discuss their own ToC in evaluation work; the overarching project has a ToC in that it drew on the regulatory powers of the government to propose reflection among practitioners thus changing and impacting their practices. The findings show how a ToC researcher-practitioner-government partnership can drive up quality and standards.

In Chapter 4, Rainford and Baptista focus on how a ToC approach was used to support evaluation of widening access projects in a small specialist arts HE institution. This chapter reflects on a hub and spoke model of training and support that was developed to support WP practitioners based in small schools to develop their own ToC models and to conduct appropriate local evaluation. This approach used intensive training including the scaffolded development of a ToC model for one intervention and ongoing remote support to support replication for other projects. The chapter will draw out the ways on the journey to a more robust evaluation and highlight some of the challenges that the use of ToC approach can create, offering lessons for other small specialist organisations.

In Chapter 5, Kelly provides a reflective case study of being an evaluator for a National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) and the use of ToC to underpin the evaluation approach. Discussing the decisions that were made to develop and focus the evaluation strategy, the chapter goes on to describe our use of ToC to evaluate two activities delivered by the consortium. Concluding this chapter, Kelly reflects on how, in hindsight, the strategy could have been improved by applying a systems-thinking approach and involving stakeholders more intentionally and collaboratively in the process.

Chapter 6 sees Millard et al. consider the concept of student-led change and how it can impact on the curriculum, the wider student experience and the perceptions of faculty. In this chapter they consider an example of partnership working that saw students co-creating design projects that required boundary spanning approaches to change. In doing so they expose some of the challenges to change, in this regard within reticent academic schools and even the friction between who owns the student voice – a Student’s Association or the course team – and how this can be addressed and redirected to collaborative approaches.

Finally Chapter 7 concludes the second section with the discussion of a project focused around preparing graduates to be globally employable and socially responsible leaders. Here Dayaram et al. present the finding of a research project which looked at the effectiveness of intervention-based resources employed in teaching and assessing three key values for a socially responsible leader – collaboration, common purpose and consciousness of self, employing a Social Change Model of Leadership (SCM) to strengthen students’ leadership capability. The chapter analyses the qualitative data from the pre- and post-surveys and examines the results of the intervention-based approach effecting social leadership change.

This book may have been born in a period where evaluation has been a growing factor in policy. As we will now go onto discuss in the next chapter, ToC’s significance was already a point of intense debate and discussion. But with the continuation of the pandemic and the deepening of social and economic scars still to come, we suggest that Evaluation, and the potential debates around ToC, will be even more significant.

As robust evaluation, evidence of impact, and a history of successful change and delivery are likely to guide what work and interventions are funded and successful in an even tougher economic and political climate.

Indeed, the rapid policy making during the Covid pandemic has highlighted that ToCs would do awfully well to be mainstreamed into government policy making. Too often was the blunt, rapid policy making in the pandemic missing key issues by not holistically considering what the policies wanted to achieve. Omissions in many Western countries included a slow start to realising and addressing students’ differential access to digital learning, the disappearance of free school lunches for those relying on them for their main meal,

and a realisation that education is about well-being, interaction and community and not for the transmission or mastering of facts.

With this in mind we draw this work to a close in the conclusion with seven key tips, which distill some of the thinking across the contributing authors' chapters. The goal being to empower you the reader in going forward, in whatever context, country or project, to utilise ToC and the debates within this book on policy, practice and pedagogy designed to reduce social inequalities.

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