



Delivering and Evaluating Participation after Access

Higher Education in
a Marketised System

Edited by

Liz Austen and Colin McCaig

Delivering and Evaluating Participation After Access

This book is an essential read not just for those working on widening access or student success, but anyone in higher education genuinely committed to providing opportunities for those from all backgrounds. As well as highlighting what could be done to improve the higher education experience of students from underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups it points to the challenges in understanding what impact could and should mean where this work is concerned. This work must encompass all of what higher education providers do from what they teach and how they do it to how they and their students are funded. The Labour government elected in 2024 has said that access and success in higher education for those from underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups it's no 1 priority for higher education. This won't be an easy commitment to meet by any means. Reading this book will help them achieve it.

—**Professor Graeme Atherton**, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor,
Regional Engagement, University of West London, Vice Principal,
Ruskin College and Head of the Ruskin Institute for Social Equity (RISE)

This book addresses the complexities of supporting student success in higher education. The authors identify a gap in understanding and evaluating the experiences of students referred to as 'widening participation.' The focus shifts from merely gaining access to higher education to participating successfully within it. The book also examines changes in the positioning of the student lifecycle within a marketised sector.

The first section outlines the editors' positionality and provides a critique of the political economy influencing contemporary policy development. It includes an analysis of how higher education evaluation has evolved to support a changed student agenda and its relationship to increasing regulation, aimed at avoiding failure rather than enhancing quality. Further chapters include case studies that offer insights into interventions such as financial incentives, designing inclusivity, professional identities, and their relationship to pedagogical positioning and student outcomes.

The concluding piece by the editors calls for a new discourse on evaluating participation effectiveness, post access. This is based on excellent critical analysis throughout the book, which positions effectiveness in a more sophisticated manner than within the prevalent market-driven higher education economy.

The book is a must-read for everyone interested in ensuring that *all* students benefit fully from their higher education experience.

—**Stella Jones-Devitt**, Independent HE Practitioner and
Visiting Professor, Leeds Beckett University

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

List of Abbreviations

Acronyms

AA	Access Agreement
APP	Access and Participation Plan
DAG	Degree Awarding Gap
DAP	Degree Awarding Powers
EDAG	Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEP	Higher Education Provider
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Project
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
NSS	National Student Survey
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
RAB	Resource Accounting Budget
RCT	Random Control Trial
SoTL	Scholarship of Learning and Teaching
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
TBE	Theory-Based Evaluation
ToC	Theory of Change
UT	University Title
WP	Widening Participation

Organisations

EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
FACE	Forum for Access and Continuing Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
NNECL	National Network of Education for Care Leavers
NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NESTA	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SMC	Social Mobility Commission
SPA	Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
SU	Student Union
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service
UKAT	UK Advising and Tutoring Association

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About the Contributors

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Delivering and Evaluating Participation After Access: Higher Education in a Marketised System

Liz Austen and Colin McCaig

Sheffield Hallam University, UK

This edited volume brings together expert practitioners in many areas of student success in the English (or UK) higher education (HE) system, with a particular focus on those accessing and participating in HE from underrepresented and otherwise disadvantaged groups (aka widening participation (WP) students). Part of our purpose is to explore what is different about supporting participation for WP students once they are in the system (as opposed to reaching out to them prior to recruitment); another purpose is to locate these developments in the changing policy background context for this work. Once we have established our positionality, the remainder of this book will fall into two major themes: **student success activities carried out by HE providers (HEPs) (what do we do?) and the evaluation of these activities (does it work?)**. These themes will be among those illustrated through four research-informed case-study chapters contributed by practitioners across a range of HEPs.

The starting point for this book is that delivering success in HE for these groups has traditionally been seen as different to outreach work designed to enhance wider access. For example, the two spheres of work are often carried out in very different contexts encompassing: age-ranges engaged with, physical sites of delivery, activities engaged in, and learning environments. These reflect essentially different purposes: outreach has traditionally been concerned with raising either (or both) the aspirations or educational attainment of disadvantaged young people in compulsory schooling, such that they may have more realistic chances of progressing to HE should they apply; student experience and success work, on the other hand, is based on identifying ways in which these cohorts can be supported once they are enrolled and often dispersed among the rest of the student body.

Here, the purpose is focused on retention, attainment, and eventual progression in terms of graduate outcomes. Where access work can and often is seen as part of institutional marketing, student success work is located in the pedagogic sphere of teaching and learning and professional support services and often subdivided between diverse academic departments and centralised directories.

This is the first major work on the design, delivery, and evaluation of student success activities by HEPs. Theoretically informed and contextualised within the English marketplace which clearly impacts widening access and participation work (McCaig, 2018; McCaig et al., 2022), this volume brings authorial perspectives from four case studies, reflecting the subdivision of this book into interventions to enhance success (what institutions do) and how they are evaluated for effectiveness (how institutions know if they work). Each will focus on the identification of a problem and then the component parts of a theory of change (evidence base for change, rationale, context, assumed outcomes, and design of activities) or evaluation plan (measures for outcomes, methods, findings, conclusions).

Two case studies will focus on the identification of the theory and rationale for change (evidence base for change, rationale, context, assumed outcomes, and design of activities), and two case studies will focus on evaluation plan and implementation (measures for outcomes, methods, findings, conclusions). The case studies are also focused on two types of intervention: interventions which are designed and delivered by central services and exist in spaces outside of courses and interventions which are designed by practitioners and delivered to students within courses. These chapters focus on theorising financial support for students and the design of an inclusive curriculum and evaluating learning gain/work-readiness and simulated placements.

We will conclude by suggesting that much of this work points to a new synthesis of discourses and practices drawn from quite distinct professional fields – WP outreach; quality assurance; and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. Taken together, they provide us with a unique take on how these policy/practice regimes have migrated into the student success space and how they are likely to evolve. We conclude with a robust critique of the default *risk of failure* discourse that sets the agenda for so much of this work, and urge a rethink of how the Labour government elected in 2024 could re-engineer the Office for Students (OfS) to encourage the regulator to acknowledge the *failure of risk* as a market mechanism.

Chapter Outlines

The second chapter, ‘Policy Context: The Political Economy of Access and Success in the English Market’, by Colin McCaig, outlines the historical policy context for the current emphasis on participation and student success as practised by English HEPs. Prior to the 2011 White Paper, *Students at the heart of the system* (DBIS, 2011) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and Higher Education Funding Council’s (HEFCE) Joint Strategy (DBIS, 2014) WP policy was primarily focused on ‘access to’ HE. However, once the main burden of the costs of HE was passed from the state to the individual student following the trebling

of tuition fees in 2010, institutions were steered towards focusing on ‘retention and success’ measures (DBIS, 2011). HEPs are now increasingly monitored by the market regulator against outcomes performance, completing the shift away from competition for access to competition for success.

Thereafter, evaluative work, long developed in the access and outreach environment, became steadily more important for institutions justifying their expenditure in Access Agreements (later Access and Participation Plans (APPs)) in terms of graduate outcomes, rather than just access. Following the establishment of the OfS after 2018 (HMSO, 2017) as a market regulator, with due regard for value-for-money and return on investment, given the state underwriting of the Student Loans system, monitoring of performance increasingly impacted the way institutions integrated, engaged with, and supported students enrolled from disadvantaged backgrounds. Student outcome factors have increasingly been central to risk-based regulation of the sector: monitoring data are collected to identify the risk of failure as a market signal to applicants. As noted elsewhere by one of our contributors: ‘the performance of evaluation is seductive in a marketised context’ (Clements, 2023, p. 70) to ‘satisfy the regulator’ which thus drives ‘performativity’ ... ‘within a risk-based system, a provider becomes more secure by evading opportunities for failure’ (Clements, 2023, p. 71). This chapter will also explore changes in the range of courses now on offer, including Foundation years and apprenticeships, and what this signifies for the support of participation after access.

Naomi Clements, in Chapter 3, introduces **the ‘Access and Participation’ and ‘Evaluation’ agenda**. Previous publications have explored the HE policy environment of WP but have had little to say about student experience and success activities for WP students once enrolled. This chapter will explore and critique the student success agenda beyond policy by focusing on the institutional imperatives to design, deliver, and evaluate the impact of interventions that enhance ‘participation’ outcomes, namely continuation/completion (retention), attainment and progression (to further study or employment), and foundational intermediary outcomes such as belonging and mattering.

The chapter will also include a discussion of: the language of success and participation and definition of outcomes (do we still use the term ‘WP?’); what does it mean and to whom; who are the stakeholders and who is responsible for student participation/success (and how that differs from the access space); embedding APP context in practice; which students are we supporting; overlaps and intersections with other institutional and regulatory priorities (like Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), B3); and specifically, whether student success activity and its leadership is a centralised or distributed responsibility. This chapter will therefore provide an introduction to the two themes of this book: student success activities carried out by HEPs (what do we do?) and the evaluation of these activities (does it work?).

Chapter 4, by Liz Austen, explores the question of **What do institutions do to support student success**. Following on from the context provided in Chapter 3, this chapter will provide a thematic introduction to the plethora of student success interventions which have been implemented in HE institutions across the student

lifecycle, namely student success and progress. Examples of intervention include Academic Skills Development, Student Well-being/Mental Health, Financial Support, Academic Advising, Employability and Careers (in curriculum and out), Induction/Transition, Learner Analytics Interventions (e.g. engagement check-ins), and Mentoring (peer or otherwise). This is in addition to pedagogic approaches. This chapter also includes consideration of the role of the Student Union/Associations and the associated support offer and extracurricular opportunities, student partnership/student representation. This chapter will also include an overview of how interventions are designed and why, touching on decisions about universal offers or targeted interventions. This chapter will include an overview of Theory of Change and use in participation/success spaces, following a legacy of utility in WP and specifically access contexts. It will also discuss the lack of theorising in this space.

Chapter 5, ‘How Does Financial Support Influence Student Success? Developing Theory and Evaluation’, by Elisabeth Moores, Liz Thomas, and Lizzy Woodfield, is the first of our case-study chapters. Financial support accounts for nearly half of the investments by English HEPs in widening access and promoting student success (OfS, 2020); for example, £382 million was invested in financial support through 2018–2019 access agreements (OfS, 2020) (from institution’s Additional Fee Income that derived from fees above the basic fee). There is, however, very little evidence to underpin the effectiveness of financial support to increase access or improve continuation, completion, and attainment, and much of the national evidence is inconclusive (Bowes et al., 2016; OFFA, 2010, 2015; OfS, 2020). The OfS is committed to evaluating and understanding more about the impact of student financial support because it is an under-theorised dimension of access and participation provision. Indeed, the OfS has developed a financial support evaluation toolkit, part authored by one of our editors (OFFA, 2016).

In this chapter, we present a brief review of the rationale for the introduction of bursaries and scholarships in UK HE following the introduction of higher tuition fees; a discussion about the potential benefits of financial support and research about the impact of bursaries and scholarships, including case-study examples from Aston University. We then discuss a theory of change approach to evaluation and consider how this approach to evaluation could be used to extend the evidence base about the impact of evaluation on student success.

‘Access without support is not opportunity’ (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Previous research has identified that financial support is most likely to impact on student success, rather than access, as the majority of applicants do not know whether or not they will receive institutional bursaries and scholarships prior to enrolment. Indeed, most money is allocated initially approximately half way through the first year of HE study. West et al. (2009) identify three possible impacts of financial support: psychological, behavioural, and economic. The OfS financial support evaluation toolkit focuses primarily on the economic impact and touches upon behavioural and psychological changes (such as greater participation in certain types of activities and feeling less anxious) (OFFA, 2016).

The literature has hinted at the importance of these latter benefits, and some of these issues have surfaced in the Aston evaluation research. The chapter concludes by offering a theoretically informed ‘theory of change’ evaluation framework, which incorporates these wider benefits of financial support, and considers how these might be combined over time to deliver improvements in continuation, attainment, and completion.

Chapter 6, by Sally Andrews, Kate Cuthbert, and Sue Lee, is based on another case study exploring **Designing Inclusivity Into the Curriculum**. Historically, HE institutions have been almost exclusively attended by the most privileged in society. Within a UK context, this typically means white, affluent students (historically male), whose family also pursued HE. In 1950, only 3.4% of the population attended HE. In 2021, this reached 38.2%. The increased proportion of students has resulted in a huge diversification of student demographic, with more students having disabilities, coming from deprived and/or low-participation backgrounds, and being ethnically and culturally diverse. How has the HE curriculum been transformed to reflect the student body it serves to support?

Since the late 1990s/early 2000s, the concept of ‘inclusive curriculum’ has been introduced across UK HE, and Staffordshire University is no exception. Inclusive curriculum aims to understand and ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed within their curriculum. This includes as a minimum the curriculum’s content and delivery (pedagogy), but may also consider the hidden curriculum, and the students’ own barriers and enablers to be enthused by, and engaged with, the curriculum. This chapter reviews and addresses some of the approaches taken to develop an inclusive curriculum, the theory behind these approaches, and how they could/should be implemented. Finally, given the lack of robust evidence on inclusive curricula impacting the experience or outcomes of students from diverse backgrounds, we explore how these approaches could be best evaluated within contextual constraints.

Turning to evaluation, Liz Austen, Julian Crockford, and Colin McCaig explore **How do institutions evidence effectiveness via evaluation?** We focus here on the evaluation of student experience and success activities, for which there is an internal, institutional imperative (business case) but also an external and ever-growing regulatory imperative. After an introduction to the politics of evaluation and OfS expectations (OfS, 2022), this chapter will discuss stages of evaluation planning following a Theory of Change, namely evaluation design, implementation, and reporting. This will include discussions about suitable indicators of success for success and types of method employed within this context, including ethical and epistemological debates around what works and claims of causality. Who evaluates will be considered alongside institutional structures, resourcing, and existing communities’ of evaluators in HE, including overlaps with domains such as practitioner reflection and action research. The following two chapters are case studies of evaluation in practice.

Chapter 8, ‘The Challenges of Measuring Work-Readiness and Evaluating an Intervention to Address Differential Outcomes: A Critical Analysis’ by Iwi-Ugiagbe-Green, Simon Massey, and Muzammal Mann, introduces interventions

designed to impact on continuation, degree awarding (attainment) and progression at Manchester Metropolitan University (e.g. induction activities). Aligned to outcomes identified in a Theory of Change, this chapter will explore a work-readiness capital framework and associated scale which has been designed, validated, and implemented to measure changes in work-readiness in students as a proxy for learning gain. Findings will be presented from the year one evaluation of 'learning gain' for some groups of students from different parts of the university.

The final case-study chapter, by Nathaniel Pickering and Julian Crockford, focuses on **An Evaluation of Dreams: Exploring the Assumption of a Participatory Evaluation of a Simulated Nursing Placement**. Student Engagement, Evaluation, and Research (STEER) is a centrally positioned team at Sheffield Hallam University which aims to explore and enhance student experience and outcomes. Sheffield Hallam is a large university focused on applied learning, with over 70% of students, has one or marker of underrepresentation (WP). Evaluators from STEER, in partnership with local practitioners, evaluated the impact of simulated placements to determine how they inform the experience and professional development of nursing degree students. The evaluation was co-designed as a student- and practitioner-led approach, using two advisory groups (student and delivery staff) to steer the research questions and design. A 'most significant change' approach to data gathering was utilised to gather grounded and unmediated student experience data and understand how students see and experience the simulated placement without 'leading' their reflections. This case study will focus on the evaluation plan and findings, placed within the context of a theory of change, and notes that intermediate outcome data may in fact be more useful than the final evaluation outcomes.

Chapter 10, 'Conclusion', by Colin McCaig and Liz Austen, takes stock of the changing context for the delivery and evaluation of activities designed to enhance participation after access. We will conclude by suggesting that much of this work points to a new synthesis of discourses and practices drawn from quite distinct professional fields – WP outreach (access) and student support and pedagogical practices (participation). Taken together, they provide us with a unique take on how these policy/practice regimes have migrated into the student success space as a consequence of a shift in priority from the market regulator. While we acknowledge, and critically analyse, the market drivers for much of this work, we also conclude by acknowledging the material benefit of this work for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the institutional benefit of expanding the evaluative mindset within academic disciplines as well as student success directorates, as exemplified by the case studies here presented. We also consider the effects of increasing financial instability across the sector and how this can impact participation after access work and conclude with an impassioned plea for a more relaxed regulatory regime, one that can foster cross-sector collaboration rather than competition and that acknowledges the failure of the default 'risk agenda' which always seeks evidence of (relative) failure as a market mechanism.

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