AU Ymlaen
Advance HE

Review of fee and access plan evaluation frameworks

A report for the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and Welsh Higher Education Providers

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1. Introduction

1.1 Review background

In line with the Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015, any institution in Wales that wishes for its full-time undergraduate higher education (HE) courses to be automatically designated for student support is required to submit an annual fee and access plan to HEFCW. HEFCW has a duty, under the same Act, to annually monitor compliance with fee limits and the general requirements of a fee and access plan, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of plans.

HEFCW sees effective evaluation as essential to the development of fee and access plans that can secure equality of opportunity and the promotion of HE. From the first plans under the Act, HEFCW conveyed its expectation that institutions develop evaluation frameworks, which set out how they will evaluate the effectiveness and impact of their plans from 2017/18 onwards.[1] HEFCW collected institutions' frameworks in early 2019, along with 2017/18 compliance and effectiveness reports. Not all institutions submitted frameworks and among those that did, approaches varied considerably.

While evaluation of plans is at an early stage, with institutions having only delivered two plans under the Act, HEFCW commissioned Advance HE to undertake a review to identify what progress has been made to date by institutions in developing their approaches to evaluation, including emerging effective practice that could be built upon and any areas of focus for future development.

1.1.1 Review objectives

The overarching objective of the review is to Inform HEFCW of institutions' progress and approaches to evaluation and to enable institutions to enhance their approach to evaluation to support development of their future fee and access plans.

To achieve this, the review sought to:

1. Ascertain what institutions are currently doing to evaluate fee and access plans and improve performance and effectiveness, identifying strengths and any areas for development.
2. Identify guiding principles to support future development of effective evaluation frameworks.

The current report presents first the guiding principles that were identified and follows this with the review findings.

1.1.2 Review methodology

Document review

The first part of the review entailed an analysis of the following documents:

3. Institutions' available fee and access plan evaluation frameworks to identify strengths as well as areas for development.
4. All institutions' 2020/21 fee and access plans to:
    a. Identify if / how institutions' evaluation frameworks have informed their plans and the fee and access planning process.
    b. Identify approaches being taken to evaluation amongst institutions who did not submit an evaluation framework to HEFCW.

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[1] See HEFCW circular W16/12HE paragraph 112. https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2016/W16%2012HE%202017_18%20Fee%20and%20access%20plan%20guidance%20v2.pdf

Literature review
Secondly, a targeted literature review located a range of relevant HE sector and widening access and participation evaluation frameworks and guidance from across the UK. Identified sources enabled some comparative analysis with Welsh institutions' practices to inform understanding of current strengths and gaps in evaluation. Additionally, they supported the creation of recommendations and guiding principles to enable institutions to strengthen evaluation frameworks.

1.1.3 Review limits

The review was desk-based and focused solely on the contents of the documents listed above. Therefore, it was not exhaustive and some existing institutional practices may have been missed.

Effective practice examples are presented throughout the report. They were chosen as illustrations of innovative or robust approaches in specific elements of evaluation and not as examples of overall exemplary approaches, since there were strengths and weaknesses in each evaluation framework.

The review, and its accompanying principles of effective evaluation frameworks, were not intended to provide detailed advice on evaluation methodologies, but instead to provide comment on institutions' progress with evaluation of their fee and access plans and to outline guiding principles to support future enhancement of evaluation frameworks.

1.2 What is fee and access plan evaluation?

What is evaluation?
Evaluation is an objective process of understanding how an intervention or service was implemented, what effects it had, for whom, how and why. Evaluation findings can identify 'what works', highlight good practice and help to ascertain whether resources are being allocating to activities that can best achieve desired outcomes, thus it is essential to future decision-making.

How does evaluation differ from monitoring?
It is important to note the difference between monitoring and evaluation since, in this review, we focus on evaluation. The two activities are linked but are not the same. Here we borrow from HEFCE's evaluation toolkit definitions (Dent et al., 2014):

+ Monitoring is the collection and analysis of data during a project and the comparison of this data against the targets and plans made for access and participation. Monitoring is part of project management and compliance and helps to ensure cost-effectiveness and project progress.
+ Evaluation is about making an assessment of the effectiveness and impact of what has been done. Data gathered for monitoring purposes is often used as part of evaluations, but the aims of the two activities are different.

What are the main types of evaluation?
Process evaluations aim to assess whether an intervention is being implemented as intended, while impact evaluations aim to provide an objective test of what changes have occurred, and the extent to which these changes can be attributed to an intervention (HM Treasury, 2011). Impact evaluation can identify if something worked, and what kind of results it had, and process evaluation can help to understand why an intervention worked or did not work, and how it might be improved (Taylor et al., 2016; Crockford et al., 2018). Both are, therefore, relevant to fee and access plan evaluation.

As with process and impact evaluation, both formative and summative evaluation are relevant to the fee and access plan process. Formative evaluation identifies what is happening during delivery, and can be used to inform implementation, while summative identifies the end results and can inform future directions (Taylor et al., 2016).

What are HEFCW's evaluation requirements?

HEFCW expects institutions to monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of fee and access plans annually. Monitoring and evaluation outcomes should inform:

+ Annual monitoring and effectiveness reports submitted to HEFCW.
+ Development of the next iteration of the fee and access plan, including:
  - Informing review of progress made on objectives, effectiveness of intervention strategies and investments and lessons learned from past plans;
  - Refinement of activities and services to be delivered as part of the new plan.

Evaluation frameworks

Institutions are required to develop and keep under review evaluation frameworks relating to evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of plans from 2017/18 onwards.

HEFCW expects evaluation frameworks to:

+ set out how they will evaluate fee and access plans' success or otherwise over time;
+ set out how new plans' development will be informed by evaluation outcomes;
+ assure institutions and HEFCW that the plan will deliver meaningful outcomes and meet ambitious targets.

HEFCW recognises that it might not be appropriate to evaluate all aspects of a fee and access plan every year. It anticipates that the frameworks may be updated periodically to ensure they remain fit for purpose and that it will continue to request updates on evaluation frameworks from institutions.

1.3 Why is fee and access plan evaluation important?

Evaluation is intrinsic to the development and delivery of effective work to widen access to and promote higher education and, therefore, is fundamental to fee and access plans. This is because evaluation enables:

+ **Best use of resources:** evaluation identifies whether resources (including the time of participants and practitioners) are being allocated to activities that can best achieve plan objectives.
+ **Continual enhancement:** evaluation supports evidence-based decision making about the implementation of an approach or activity, informing the development of future provision.
+ **Sharing what works:** evaluation highlights good practice that can be shared across the institution and more widely.
+ **Evidencing the difference made:** evaluation enables reporting to key stakeholders and HEFCW on the impact of widening access work, supporting the business case for activities.

2. Principles of effective fee and access plan evaluation frameworks

The following principles were designed to guide institutions in their future enhancement of their fee and access plan evaluation frameworks. They were informed by the findings of Advance HE's 2019 review of existing evaluation frameworks. It is recommended that the principles are read in conjunction with the review report that follows, where readers will find additional detail and examples to support their implementation.

1. Encompass strategic and provision-level evaluation

Evaluation frameworks are strategic documents that set out an institution's overarching approach to evaluation of its fee and access plans. However, frameworks should not focus solely on strategic-level monitoring and review of progress against plan targets using high-level student data. This is because this approach cannot identify whether specific activities are working, or not, nor whether they have contributed to meeting these top-level targets. Thus, the opportunity to learn about current practice and enhance future approaches is missed.

Instead, evaluation of fee and access plans should take place at individual provision-level, either focused on individual initiatives, such as a student support intervention, or suites of initiatives, such as financial assistance or outreach programmes. The findings from these evaluations should then be brought together and combined, or triangulated, with results from a review of progress against plan targets and achievement of investment commitments to identify the overall picture of progress.

> Evaluation frameworks should present how institutions will undertake evaluation at provision-level and bring the results of this together with results of strategic-level monitoring and review to identify overall progress.

2. Focus on an achievable yet diverse spread of provision

Fee and access plans are necessarily broad in their contents and institutions cannot evaluate everything in their plan each year. Institutions will thus benefit from taking a 'collage approach' whereby they carry out specific evaluations of different types of activity to build, over-time, a fuller picture of the effectiveness and impact of fee and access plan activity.

Of course, all elements of fee and access plan activity should undergo evaluation at some point within an ongoing, longitudinal cycle of evaluation, yet institutions will need to choose strategically where to focus their evaluation efforts each year. Care should be taken in selecting areas of focus to ensure that a balance of different provision is evaluated. Criteria should guide decisions about where to focus evaluation efforts, for example:

- **Existing evidence base** – is the activity new or as yet unproven, or is there research or evaluation evidence from within or outside the institution that already supports this activity?
- **Urgency** – is there any urgency to make future investment decisions on an activity, service or intervention?
- **Size and scale** – is the activity large in terms of scale of delivery or investment?
- **Balance** – is there a spread of different types of fee and access plan activities and services among those identified for evaluation this year?

> Evaluation frameworks should outline how institutions will focus their evaluation activity on a balanced selection of provision each year, within a cycle of evaluation across the whole plan.

3. Supported by an underlying theory

Identifying the underlying theory of change behind an intervention, or portfolio of interventions, can inform and guide approaches to evaluation.

Theories of change predict and map out the process by which activities should lead to desired outcomes. They explore causal relationships between interventions and desired outcomes, identify the mechanisms that might create change and what intermediate steps towards overarching goals might be expected. These aspects can become useful foci for specific evaluation activities, which can test these elements of the theory, and findings can be used to amend or refine the theory over time.

Ultimately, theories of change can be used as frameworks for understanding the contributions made by discrete fee and access plan activities, and wider portfolios of provision, to overarching plan objectives, and thus can support an institution's rationale for its selected plan provision.

> Evaluation frameworks should be underpinned by theories of change that identify the process by which individual activities should lead to achievement of desired outcomes, inform evaluation activities and ultimately strengthen the rationale for plan activities.

4. Take an evidence-based and rigorous approach

Evaluation should generate credible evidence via appropriate, rigorous research methods. What is rigorous and appropriate will depend on the activity in question, its stage of development, institutional context, as well as proportionality, for example, considering factors such as size of investment in the activity or the existing evidence base to support an intervention.

At a minimum, all evaluation should be based on collection and analysis of data and evidence (empirical research). Research methods might include:

+ **Quantitative data analysis** – both high-level student participation statistics and data on delivery of interventions.
+ **Participative research with students** – surveys, focus groups, interviews and case studies.
+ **Gathering evidence from staff** – using methods to obtain evaluation information from key staff.

Institutions should also strive to develop more sophisticated evaluation designs for appropriate programmes. As presented in the review report, there have been calls for more quasi-experimental and experimental evaluation designs in the access and participation field, where appropriate and feasible. Enlisting the assistance of, or working in collaboration with, research specialists within the institution, or externally, can support this endeavour.

> Evaluation frameworks should express the institution's evidence-based and rigorous approach to evaluation, highlighting some examples of research designs and methods for particular areas, to illustrate the robustness of the approach and therefore the reliability of results.

Aspects to consider are:

+ **Multiple and / or mixed methods** – using more than one (multiple) or mixed (quantitative and qualitative) research methods to increase reliability of findings is highly recommended.
+ **Comparing before and after** – using pre- and post-test or time series designs will enable comparison of the situation before and after an intervention, thereby giving clearer evidence of a change, though not proving that the change was necessarily a result of the intervention.
+ **Comparing intervention and no intervention** – a control or comparison group design will help to determine what would have happened to students who did not receive an intervention. Combining this with pre- and post-test or time series designs will further strengthen the approach.
+ **Randomisation** – in addition to a control group, randomisation of participants to treatment and control group removes the potential for selection bias to influence outcomes.

It will not be feasible or appropriate to use these types of designs to evaluate all fee and access plan interventions, particularly when it comes to control groups and randomisation. However, institutions can begin to explore future opportunities to employ such approaches to evaluate an achievable number of appropriate programmes.

5. Collaborative and distributed

Developing and implementing an effective evaluation framework depends on expert input and support from across the institution, including oversight by governance and management structures and expertise and knowledge from key people. This might include:

- **Governance and management group** – governing bodies and the key group(s) overseeing the plan process should be central to the development, delivery and oversight of evaluation.
- **Central support** – some institutions will have departments or teams who can assist with evaluation planning and execution, for example through providing key data.
- **Research and evaluation experts** - institutions with a research culture should be able to call on staff with evaluation expertise to support evaluations. Alternatively, institutions may find external consultancy support beneficial.
- **Practitioners** – those delivering plan activities and services have vital knowledge and experience that can inform evaluation approaches and be used as evidence.
- **Students** – student input is essential in the development and implementation of the evaluation approach.

> Evaluation frameworks should be developed and implemented in consultation with key fee and access plan groups, staff and students, and evaluation should be undertaken by initiative owners, in line with the overarching framework approach.

Evaluation activity should be distributed across the institution and undertaken by initiative and service owners, who are best placed to lead on evaluation of their areas of activity. To ensure a joined-up approach that aligns with the overarching evaluation framework, institutions can develop shared templates, tools or guidelines for evaluation.

6. Integrated and informs future enhancement

Evaluation of fee and access plans should be regarded as a vital and ongoing activity that is best achieved through embedding it into the planning, monitoring, and reviewing activities of an institution. Evaluation should, therefore, ideally be incorporated in the planning of the fee and access plan activities and services and form part of its delivery, and not be undertaken as a separate activity.

Evaluation of fee and access plan activities should enable evidence-based decision making about the continued implementation of an approach or initiative and/or its future development. Institutions need to act on evidence obtained through evaluation of what is working or not and adapt their processes and activities in light of this.

Firmly embedding evaluation within the fee and access plan process will enable this to be achieved. As an integrated part of the annual cycle of fee and access planning, evaluation findings can be more easily linked into the development of the next iteration of the plan. Institutions should outline how this will be achieved within their evaluation frameworks, for example, the processes, mechanisms and timelines that will enable evaluation activities to be fed-into the planning process.

> Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how evaluation is embedded within the fee and access plan process and delivery of activities, and how the results of evaluation are used to refine and develop future plans.

3. Summary of review of current practice

3.1 Key findings

Developing and embedding an evaluation framework

+ While some fee and access plans indicated that work to develop evaluation frameworks is underway, only half of all regulated institutions submitted evaluation frameworks to HEFCW in early 2019. This suggests that fee and access plan evaluation approaches are not yet consistently consolidated into strategic approaches within all institutions.
+ There was a large variation in approaches to presenting the available evaluation frameworks. The stronger approaches supplied a narrative to explain the framework, how it was developed and its rationale, and presented some examples of evaluation approaches for specific interventions or programmes.
+ The majority of the available evaluation frameworks had been developed specifically for the fee and access plan process.
+ There was some evidence of robust processes undertaken to develop the evaluation frameworks, including drawing on external evaluation guidance and testing of the approach. However, this information was not consistently evidence in all frameworks.
+ Involvement of key stakeholders in the development and implementation of evaluation was presented by some frameworks, such as fee and access plan groups, central departments and students. However, no mention was made of involvement of governing bodies, research and evaluation experts or practitioners.
+ Some had developed tools to distribute evaluation activity and/or foster a consistent approach to evaluation across the institution.

Defining an overarching approach

+ Evaluation frameworks should set out an institution's strategic, overarching approach to evaluation of its fee and access plans.
+ Several evaluation frameworks described what could be viewed as principles of evaluation that would be applied to all fee and access plan evaluation activities, such as that evaluation would be: evidence-based, process and impact focused, or summative and formative.
+ There was variation across the frameworks in terms of whether they were focused on strategic, or high-level evaluation, provision-level evaluation, or a combination of the two. The latter was the most robust approach.
+ The majority of frameworks (three of five) had decided to take a selective or focused approach whereby a selection of fee and access plan of activity would be evaluated each year. This seemed like a pragmatic approach, so long as the whole of the plan is evaluated within a rolling cycle of evaluation, as was indeed specified by one framework.
+ All 2020/21 plans contained an overview of approaches to monitoring and evaluation, but these were focused on monitoring, placing emphasis on the key groups and mechanisms for overseeing monitoring, and made little reference to determining effectiveness or impact.
+ There was a mismatch between what was in some of the evaluation frameworks and corresponding fee and access plans regarding overarching approaches to evaluation.

Designing evaluation

+ Detail of evaluation design was limited across the evaluation frameworks and plans. While evaluation frameworks are not the place for detailed information on evaluation designs for specific fee and access plan interventions, discussion of the institution's approach to evaluation design, with some examples, helps to demonstrate the robustness of an evaluation framework.

- The specifics of what was to be measured by provision-level evaluation, including progress against objectives and indicators of success, was not consistently discussed or presented in frameworks.
- Contrary to the move towards using these elsewhere in the UK HE sector, the review found no evidence of use of logic models or theories of change to underpin evaluation.
- While most institutions used a range of types of data and evidence to support evaluation of their fee and access plan activities, both quantitative and qualitative and gathered by a mixture of methods, several areas for development in terms of research design were identified:
  - There was a reliance on high-level student participation and outcomes data, with fewer examples of provision-level research methods.
  - Most data collection took place during or post-intervention, which means any change from the baseline position is harder to identify.
  - Not unsurprisingly, given evaluation of fee and access plans is at an early stage, the review found no examples of quasi-experimental and experimental research approaches, such as use of control groups and randomisation to identify what happened to students who did not receive an intervention or service. The reviewed literature indicated that future consideration of these types of designs could enhance widening access evaluation.

Acting on evaluation findings

- All but one of the available evaluation frameworks contained explanation or examples of how the outcomes of evaluation have been, and will be, used to inform future fee and access planning. In some cases, this was high-level information, simply stating that learning would be fed into the development of future projects and plans. In other cases, there was more information provided, which suggested a more developed approach to the use of evaluation findings.
- The plans showed that a range of data and evidence, presumably gathered through the annual monitoring and evaluation process, is used to provide evidence of progress within the plans, though this is rarely framed as having been drawn from evaluation findings.
- Only a minority of plans explained how evaluation of past plan activities had identified gaps or opportunities for improvement, which had been acted upon in the refinement of activities for the new plan.

3.2 Recommendations

Below we bring together the recommendations that are made in the following report and group them by report section. We suggest that these be considered in the context of the section of the report in which they appear, where readers will find more information and examples of practice that might support their implementation.

Developing and embedding an evaluation framework

1. All institutions should develop and submit a bespoke fee and access plan evaluation framework to HEFCW to provide assurance that their evaluation approaches and practices have been formalised and organised into a strategic and robust institutional approach.
2. Evaluation frameworks should include a narrative to explain the rationale for the approach, how it was developed, and how it will be implemented, and also present some detail or examples of evaluation design at provision / activity level.
3. Institutions should draw on relevant external guidelines for evaluation when developing their frameworks.
4. Evaluation frameworks should be tested or piloted on a sample of fee and access plan activity and findings used to refine the approach.

5. During development and implementation of evaluation frameworks, institutions should engage with: their governing body; key groups(s) involved in the fee and access plan process; and students, including potential, applicants and former students; and draw on the expertise of central support departments, research and evaluation experts and widening access practitioners.
6. Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how evaluation is built into the design, implementation and review of fee and access plan interventions, activities and services.
7. Evaluation should be linked with, and informed by, ongoing impact assessment processes.
8. Institutions consider creating standardised tools to support consistent implementation of their evaluation framework approach.

Defining an overarching approach

9. Evaluation frameworks should set out institutions' overarching approaches to evaluation of fee and access plans. This might include key principles for evaluation that will guide the evaluation of all fee and access plan activities.
10. Evaluation frameworks should include both strategic and provision-level approaches to evaluation, defining how the two will be linked to create an overall picture of progress.
11. Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how evaluation activities will be focused and achievable, for example through selecting key activities for evaluation each year within a rolling cycle of evaluation.
12. Institutions should broaden the monitoring and evaluation sections within their fee and access plans to encompass evaluation, as well as monitoring. These sections should align with evaluation approaches set out in evaluation frameworks, and vice versa.

Designing evaluation

13. Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how provision-level objectives and indicators of success, including short, medium and long-term, are used to guide evaluation activities.
14. Institutions should develop overarching theories of change for their fee and access plans, as well as individual theories of change for key activities, in order to predict the processes by which their activities should lead to their desired outcomes, support the rationale for their activities and identify key mechanisms and intermediate steps to interrogate through evaluation.
15. Evaluation frameworks should outline some of the evaluation designs and research methods that will be used to evaluate specific activities to evidence the robustness of the evaluation approach. These should:
    a. Combine impact evaluation with process evaluation to understand both whether an intervention worked and why.
    b. Include a mixture of different methods, including quantitative and qualitative, to increase the robustness of results, e.g. data analysis and participative research with students.
    c. Compare before and after, as often as possible, to measure any change from the baseline situation, e.g. response to a student questionnaire before and after an intervention.
16. Institutions should consider opportunities, current and/or future, for using quasi-experimental and experimental designs for evaluation of appropriate fee and access plan programmes or initiatives, drawing on the necessary research expertise from within or external to the institution as they do so.

Acting on evaluation findings

17. Within evaluation frameworks, institutions should go beyond simply stating that evaluation results will inform future plan development by outlining how this will be put into practice – for example, what mechanisms will be used, and at what point(s) of the year.
18. Within fee and access plans, institutions should make clear when evidence provided to show progress or lessons learned has come from evaluation activities and provide some detail about the evaluation method(s) that was used.
19. Within fee and access plans, institutions should be consistent in indicating when and how evaluation results have informed changes to provision, and when doing so, provide some information about the gaps or issues found, as well as what has been done to address these.

4. Developing and embedding an evaluation framework

In this section we consider how many evaluation frameworks were submitted to HEFCW, how these were presented and key aspects relating to how they were developed. We also present review findings relating to how evaluation approaches were designed and supported by key staff, groups and students, as well as factors that enable their implementation.

4.1 Overall progress with developing frameworks

Five institutions submitted evaluation frameworks to HEFCW in early 2019, setting out their approaches to and plans for evaluation of their fee and access plans from 2017/18 onwards. The fact that only half of all regulated institutions have submitted evaluation frameworks suggests that development of evaluation frameworks has not been uniformly prioritised across the sector. While it is clear from 2020/21 fee and access plans that all institutions have existing approaches to monitoring and evaluation, the lack of collation of these into a framework indicates that these may not be consistently formalised or organised into a strategic approach. However, it was clear from comments included in the plans of some of the institutions who had not submitted frameworks that work to develop frameworks is underway.

4.2 Presenting the framework

Among the frameworks that were submitted, there was great variety in how these were presented – from Word or PDF documents with significant narrative, tables or diagrams to excel files with little explanatory narrative. Those that included a narrative were stronger since they gave a context and rationale for the institution’s approach to evaluation. Use of tables was also an effective way to present evaluation methods for specific activities and evaluation tools to be used, e.g. templates.

There was also great variety in the level of detail provided. Some set out a high-level approach to evaluation only, while others set out examples of evaluation design for individual activities. A combination of the two was the most effective method since it showed the overarching approach in addition to how this would be implemented in practice.

4.3 Designing and embedding the framework

Not all frameworks contained information regarding how they had been developed nor how they would be integrated into fee and access planning or delivery, however among those that did, the following aspects were notable.

4.3.1 Designing a bespoke approach

Evaluations need to be tailored to the type of interventions being considered (HM Treasury, 2011). The majority of frameworks were designed specifically for the evaluation of institutions’ fee and access plans, which helped to ensure that they were appropriate and fit for purpose. However, one framework appeared to be a generic project evaluation policy that had not been tailored to the fee and access plan. Although it contained robust principles and processes for evaluation, without contextualisation to the fee and access plan it was not clear how effective it would be in practice.

4.3.2 Drawing on external approaches

Drawing on existing guidelines for evaluation can help to enhance an institution’s approach. Two institutions noted that they had used external approaches or guidance for evaluation to help them develop their frameworks. One used HM Treasury’s Green Book (2018) and Magenta Book (2011), which give guidance about designing and undertaking evaluation. Another used the evaluation guidance produced for HEFCW by the Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) (Taylor et al., 2016), which is specific to widening access. In both instances, external guidelines had prompted the institutions to think about key aspects of their approach, for example what types of evaluation would be needed. Other institutions may have drawn on external guidance, but this was not noted or evident in their frameworks.

4.3.3 Testing frameworks

Testing can help to ensure that approaches are effective and aid the future development of robust evaluation. It may be most helpful to test framework approaches on a selection of key initiatives. Two institutions explained that their frameworks had been tested or were in the process of being tested at the time of their submission to HEFCW.

Piloting the evaluation framework

Swansea University conducted an initial pilot evaluation of its 2016/17 fee and access plan and used the findings to enhance its strategic evaluation approach. "Undertaking our pilot evaluation proved very useful as it not only provided us with a foundation to work from, but it also helped us learn what worked well and what elements of the methodology needed improvement."

4.3.4 Involving key staff, groups and students

Guidance for evaluation of access and participation activity from across the UK is aligned in its promotion of a 'whole-institution' approach. This includes high levels of institutional engagement, support from senior people, oversight by relevant governance and management bodies and mechanisms, and draws on expertise and skills from across the institution (Dent et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016; OfS, 2019b). This is important both to the development or design of the framework and to the implementation of evaluation activity so we consider both here.

Key governance and management groups

Involvement of key groups that have oversight of the fee and access plan process and implementation will help to ensure that evaluation is linked into fee and access planning. Three of the frameworks noted engagement of such a group in the development of the approach, and in overseeing its implementation. In addition to a specific fee and access plan group, the governing body of the institution should also be involved in and have oversight of the evaluation framework. None of the frameworks made explicit mention of involvement of their governing body in the development or oversight of their framework.

Central functions

Two frameworks mentioned the role that central functions or departments play in evaluation. One stated its Strategic Planning Office had been involved in developing the framework and would supply key data as required for evaluation purposes. The other framework was developed and overseen by the institution's Project Management Office.

Evaluation / research experts

Many institutions have academics with research and evaluation expertise within their staff body who they could call upon to assist with the development and delivery of fee and access plan evaluation.

There was no mention within evaluation frameworks of whether such experts had been involved in the development of the framework, or would be involved in the design and delivery of evaluation activities.

One reference to collaborative research was found in a fee and access plan.

Collaborative research

Bangor University noted in its 2020/21 plan that it is undertaking a range of: "widening access research projects and KESS-funded research activities investigating the effectiveness of Welsh-medium engagement activities through the University's Collaborative Institute for Education Research, Evidence and Impact and The School Effectiveness and Improvement Service for North Wales".

Practitioners

There has been recent comment about an increasing tendency for HE access and participation evaluation to be undertaken without important input from the practitioners delivering the activity (Crockford et al., 2018). The review found no explicit mention of the role of practitioners in evaluation within frameworks, however this is not to say that they are not involved, for example they may be members of the key groups that oversee the fee and access plan, which were involved in the frameworks of several institutions. Practitioner involvement in designing and implementing the approach could, however, be further foregrounded.

Students

Institutions are required to clearly articulate within their plans the full extent of the institution's engagement with their student bodies, including students' involvement in developing, assessing and monitoring plans, which should include potential, applicants and former students as well as current students. This means that students need to be involved in the evaluation of plans and, therefore, how this will be achieved needs to be included within an institution's evaluation framework.

Of the five available frameworks, just one included mention of student involvement in evaluation, which related to their input to developing the framework. Within the plans themselves, Advance HE's review of fee and access plans (Hanesworth and Douglas Oloyede, 2019) found that six institutions discussed student involvement in the monitoring and evaluation of their 2019/20 plan, but this focused on student involvement in monitoring, usually through representation on an appropriate group, rather than involvement in co-creation of evaluation activities. This generally remains the case for 2020/21 plans, however, there were a few examples of institutions engaging students in the evaluation process that informed the new iteration of the plan, for example sharing results of evaluation through meetings or reports and seeking student input to decisions taken on the basis of evaluation results. In both frameworks and plans, current students were the focus in relation to evaluation; no explicit mention was found of involvement of applicants, potential or former students to inform evaluation.

4.3.5 Integrating evaluation into activity

Evaluation guidelines agree that evaluation should be an integrated part of an intervention or programme (Dent et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). Ideally, evaluation should be incorporated into the planning of the project and form part of its delivery, and thus should not be undertaken as a separate activity.

There was limited discussion of integration of evaluation into planning and delivery of activities or services within the available frameworks. One framework illustrated evaluation as part of the policy cycle, thereby showing evaluation as a key element of a cycle of continuous improvement, but information regarding how this would be realised was missing. The other frameworks appeared to implement separate evaluation activity rather than evaluation activity that was integrated into the delivery of the interventions, however there was insufficient information to confirm this.

Of course, a challenge here is that many fee and access plan activities and services have been delivered for a long period of time, so some evaluation approaches will necessarily need to be applied retrospectively. However, it is still relevant to outline how past evaluation approaches from across interventions and services have been drawn on to create the framework and the intention to integrate the evaluation framework approach in future.

4.3.6 Linking with impact assessment

Institutions should undertake ongoing impact assessment in relation to individuals with protected characteristics, Welsh medium provision and the Well-being of Future Generations goals and ways of working. This activity could usefully be aligned with, and feed into, the evaluation process of fee and access plans. Impact assessments should be carried out at the start of an intervention or activity to help shape the approach but could also be returned to the end of, or at key points during, delivery as a means to understand if the impacts predicted have been seen. This will provide evidence that can be used in evaluations and can inform future development of the activity(ies) in question. The review found no reference to impact assessment informing evaluation in frameworks or plans, thus, this is an area institutions should consider in future.

4.3.7 Creating shared tools

A ‘joined-up’ approach to evaluation can be supported by using common evaluation protocols or frameworks for evaluation of interventions (OfS, 2019b). As part of their evaluation framework approaches, three institutions created tools to support monitoring and evaluation across the institution. These varied in approach and stage of development at the time of submission, but included:

+ Monitoring and evaluation dashboards;
+ Templates with key questions for evaluation;
+ Record templates for outcome measures.

Use of such tools within institutions should help to distribute responsibility for evaluation and promote consistency of approach. However, supporting guidance and capacity building will be important to ensure interpretation and implementation of such tools is robust.

4.4 Recommendations

+ All institutions should develop and submit a bespoke fee and access plan evaluation framework to HEFCW to provide assurance that their evaluation approaches and practices have been formalised and organised into a strategic and robust institutional approach.
+ Evaluation frameworks should include a narrative to explain the rationale for the approach, how it was developed, and how it will be implemented, and also present some detail or examples of evaluation design at provision / activity level.
+ Institutions should draw on relevant external guidelines for evaluation when developing their frameworks.
+ Evaluation frameworks should be tested or piloted on a sample of fee and access plan activity and findings used to refine the approach.
+ During development and implementation of evaluation frameworks, institutions should engage with: their governing body; key groups(s) involved in the fee and access plan process; and students, including potential, applicants and former students; and draw on the expertise of central support departments, research and evaluation experts and widening access practitioners.
+ Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how evaluation is built into the design, implementation and review of fee and access plan interventions, activities and services.
+ Evaluation should be linked with, and informed by, ongoing impact assessment processes.
+ Institutions should consider creating standardised tools to support consistent implementation of their evaluation framework approach.

5. Defining an overarching approach

A key purpose of evaluation frameworks is to present institutions' strategic, overarching approaches to evaluation of fee and access plans. This section therefore draws the majority of its analysis from the five available evaluation frameworks. This is supplemented with information drawn from 2020/21 fee and access plans relating to overarching institutional approaches.

5.1 Defining overarching approaches in evaluation frameworks

Each of the five frameworks that were submitted to HEFCW had its own overarching approach, however some strengths and weaknesses can be identified across these, which are explored below.

5.1.1 Outlining institutional principles for evaluation

Some of the frameworks set out some guiding principles of evaluation that will inform the design and delivery of evaluation activity in a way that is consistent and robust. The following such principles were identified.

+ **Evidence-based**. All the available frameworks made reference to or illustrated the central role of evidence and data in their approach to evaluation. For example, several stressed the ongoing importance of gathering robust, reliable data for evaluation purposes.
+ **Process and/or impact focused.** One framework explained that the institution would undertake both types of evaluation, though with an emphasis on impact evaluation, while another highlighted it would focus on identifying and exploring the impacts of interventions.
+ **Formative and summative focused.** One evaluation framework made specific reference to undertaking both formative and summative evaluation, stating it would take a formative approach to evaluation within year (where possible) and a summative approach to evaluation at the end of the year.

5.1.2 Balancing strategic and provision-level evaluation

In the context of fee and access plan evaluation, a combination of provision level and strategic level evaluation is required in order to be able to show how individual activities and programmes of work impact on the achievement of overall plan targets and objectives.

+ **Strategic-level focused.** Two frameworks took approaches weighted more heavily towards the strategic-level, focusing more on evaluation of top-level progress on fee and access plan targets and giving less focus to, or information on, evaluation at service and activity level. This made it more difficult to see how individual activities will be evaluated, which reduced the sense of the robustness of the approach.
+ **Provision-level focused.** One framework gave more focus to provision-level evaluation, with examples of evaluation methods for individual activities. Although this was presented in a way that illustrated links between the provision-level evaluation and fee and access plan objectives, there was no explicit discussion of how the strategic, overall picture of progress would be determined.
+ **Balance of strategic and provision-level.** The remaining two frameworks presented an approach that explained further, though still not in great detail, how a combination of strategic-level and provision-level evaluation would inform overall assessment of efficacy and impact of the fee and access plan.

5.1.3 Identifying areas of focus for evaluation

Fee and access plans are necessarily broad in their contents, and it is not feasible to evaluate all provision in an in-depth manner in any one year. Indeed, HEFCW recognised in its guidance that it might not be appropriate to evaluate all aspects of a fee and access plan every year

- **Broad or non-specific approaches.** Two frameworks did not give an indication of whether they would select key areas to evaluate each year or attempt to evaluate the entirety of activity. This made it difficult to assess how achievable their approaches were.
- **Selective approaches.** The other three institutions' frameworks outlined how they intended to focus evaluation on a selection of objectives and aligned activities each year. This is a pragmatic approach that should enable in-depth evaluation of specific interventions and programmes.

  However, it is important that institutions ensure that the full breadth of fee and access plan activity is evaluated within a rolling cycle of evaluation, and that a balance of different types of activity is selected in each year (for example, avoiding too much focus on outreach activity). Additionally, institutions should make clear how they reach decisions about what to evaluate in a given year, for example through developing some criteria for evaluation prioritisation.

> **Selective approach**
> **Swansea University** decided that evaluation will be applied to selected key initiatives underpinning between three and four plan objectives to develop more in-depth understanding of effectiveness and impact of key activities, and how these result in progress towards fee and access plan objectives.

5.2 Outlining overarching approaches within fee and access plans

Since not all institutions submitted evaluation frameworks, the review also considered information on overarching approaches to evaluation provided within 2020/21 fee and access plans. We also considered the alignment between overarching approaches to evaluation presented in frameworks and plans among those who had submitted frameworks.

5.2.1 Overarching approaches of those without frameworks

All 2020/21 fee and access plans contained an overview of the institution's approach to monitoring and evaluation, which was most frequently positioned within a dedicated monitoring and evaluation section. While this should not take the place of an evaluation framework, it is still important for plans to communicate institutional strategic approaches to evaluation, especially since the frameworks are not publicly available.

A focus on monitoring over evaluation

A key commonality identified across the monitoring and evaluation content within plans was that they were primarily concerned with monitoring the delivery and performance of plans, and there was a lack of detail regarding evaluation of effectiveness and impact of activities. Almost all plans outlined which key group/s have oversight of the monitoring and evaluation process, again with an emphasis on their role in monitoring. Additionally, monitoring progress against targets was presented as central to the approach by the majority of institutions. This, of course, is essential to measuring performance against plan objectives and ultimately accounting for investment, however, it cannot identify whether activities impacted on performance against targets, or why activities worked, or did not.

Some examples of greater detail and exploration

However, there were a few notable exceptions in plans that included greater detail of their current approaches. For example, **Wrexham Glyndŵr University** gave detail about its evaluation approach for all outreach programmes involving learners, including gathering of participant feedback and student tracking. **Cardiff Metropolitan University** discussed types of evaluation and stated its intention to undertake process and impact evaluation in future.

5.2.2 Alignment between overarching approaches in frameworks and plans

While the evaluation framework is the primary place for setting out the institution's overarching approach to evaluation, these approaches should inform plans and, therefore, there should be alignment between the frameworks and the plans.

Some of the institutions that submitted frameworks reflected their framework approaches within their plans. However, there were also some mismatches between what was in plans regarding evaluation and what was presented in the frameworks. These included:

+ **Little or no mention of the approach** in the evaluation framework within monitoring and evaluation sections of plans;
+ **Providing a more extensive description** of the evaluation process in the plan than in the framework, such as the key steps that will be involved;
+ **Giving more details of implementation** of evaluation in the plan than in the framework, e.g. how responsibility for monitoring and evaluation will be distributed across the institution.

These were missed opportunities for using all available information to strengthen the plan or evaluation framework.

5.3 Recommendations

+ Evaluation frameworks should set out institutions' overarching approaches to evaluation of fee and access plans. This might include key principles for evaluation that will guide the evaluation of all fee and access plan activities.
+ Evaluation frameworks should include both strategic and provision-level approaches to evaluation, defining how the two will be linked to create an overall picture of progress.
+ Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how evaluation activities will be focused and achievable, for example through selecting key activities for evaluation each year within a rolling cycle of evaluation.
+ Institutions should broaden the monitoring and evaluation sections within their fee and access plans to encompass evaluation, as well as monitoring. These sections should align with evaluation approaches set out in evaluation frameworks, and vice versa.

6. Designing evaluation

Evaluation design is a crucial element of effective evaluation. Across the reviewed evaluation frameworks and fee and access plans there was only limited reference to evaluation design and research methods being used to evaluate efficacy and impact of plan activity. Of course, these are not specific requirements of either document, but discussion of approaches to and/or inclusion of examples of evaluation designs and methods within evaluation frameworks, and to a lesser extent in plans, will illustrate the robustness of evaluation and, therefore, the validity of results. This section draws out the aspects of evaluation design and types of research methods that were found in frameworks and plans and supplements this with good practice guidelines obtained through the literature review.

6.1 Identifying what success will look like

While institutions all have their overarching fee and access plan objectives, or their ultimate goals, fee and access plan interventions and services typically address smaller elements of these objectives. Identifying what interventions and services aim to achieve, and what meeting these aims will look like, is essential to being able to evaluate their success.

6.1.1 Objectives and indicators of success

An important step in evaluation design at provision-level is identifying what an intervention aims to achieve (its objectives) and what its achievement should look like (its indicators of success) (ECU, 2014; Crawford et al., 2017). This allows the gathering of meaningful data that enables impact to be assessed in terms of the goals of the interventions. Without objectives and indictors in place, it is very difficult to measure efficacy and impact. Though not a specific requirement, discussing or including these within frameworks can help to show that this aspect of evaluation planning has been undertaken.

Objectives

Three of the evaluation frameworks demonstrated, in different ways, that provision-level objectives were used to frame their evaluation. One framework set out what these objectives were for the key activities that were to be evaluated. Many 2020/21 fee and access plans set out objectives for different aspects of their provision, so these objectives clearly already exist, but they were not consistently linked into the evaluation frameworks.

Indicators

Two institutions demonstrated in their frameworks that indicators of success (though by other names) were used in evaluation:

- One showed how consideration of performance against indicators was built into evaluation conducted by initiative owners.
- The other outlined what some indicators of success were for specific activities to be evaluated. These included some qualitative indicators of changes in student knowledge, confidence and attitudes.

Short, medium and long-term indicators

It has been recommended that creating short-, medium- and long-term indicators of success or outcomes for interventions can assist in designing evaluation that measures progress along the path to longer-term desired outcomes (ECU, 2014; OfS, 2019b). The review found no explicit discussion or presentation of this kind of thinking in relation to fee and access plan evaluation. This is, therefore, an avenue that could be explored by institutions.

6.2 Designing an underlying theory or logic

In recent years, a number of HE sector bodies have recommended that institutions use frameworks or models as part of evaluation to better predict and understand processes of change and impact created by access and participation work (Taylor et al., 2016; OfS, 2019b; Steven and Thomas, 2019). These include logic models and theories of change, which can be defined as follows:

+ Logic models break down an intervention or programme into a series of stages or components within a linear process. They map inputs, outputs and outcomes.
+ Theories of change describe how and why change happens. They typically present the big picture of a programme of work, including issues that are outside of the institution's control, and show all the different ways that might lead to change, even those not related to the programme.

Theories of change are considered by some to be more appropriate in an access and participation context since they can better explore the inherent complexity of fields like outreach (Harrison and Waller, 2016; Crockford et al., 2018). A theory of change or logic model can be developed at different levels, so could be overarching for the whole fee and access plan, could focus on a specific plan objective and its aligned activities or could relate to an individual programme or intervention (Taylor et al., 2016).

As a recent access and equality-focused project in Scotland has shown, theories of change are useful planning tools that can help map out the process by which activities should lead to desired outcomes (Steven and Thomas, 2019). In this way, they explore causal relationships – or the mechanisms within an intervention that might create desired changes, as well as what 'small steps' might be seen along the journey towards longer-term desired impacts (Harrison and Waller, 2016). These aspects can then be explored through targeted evaluation activities. Findings of which can be mapped back on to the theory of change to create an overarching picture of effectiveness and impact. This reflective process also interrogates the theory of change, and ultimately the rationale for the activities, enabling it to be honed and strengthened (Harrison and Waller, 2016).

One evaluation framework made reference to logic models, specifically describing how it had considered WISERD's (Taylor et al., 2016) recommendation for institutions to use policy logic models to plan evaluation, however it did not say that a logic model had been developed. The review found no other explicit evidence of use of logic models or theories of change to develop or plan fee and access plan evaluation, neither at strategic nor provision-level. This is certainly an avenue for future consideration by institutions.

6.3 Identifying research methods

While an evaluation framework is not the place to present all detail about the evaluation designs and research methods across fee and access plan activities, presenting some high-level information about what kinds of methods have been used, and how these have been selected, gives evidence of the strength of the approach.

6.3.1 Overall progress

All frameworks made reference to, or illustrated the central role of, evidence and data in evaluation, suggesting that they aim to take an evidence-based approach, using empirical evidence to understand the efficacy and impact of their work. However, information about how this would be realised, i.e. what types of data and evidence were to be gathered and how, was less consistently presented in the evaluation frameworks, which impacted on the sense of their robustness. In preparing the 2020/21 fee and access plans, a range of types of data were evidently gathered and analysed by institutions, which was particularly visible in strategic review sections, however the level of detail about the methods used was limited. The following analysis presents the types of research methods found across frameworks and plans.

6.3.2 Quantitative data analysis

By far the most common form of research method for evaluation of fee and access plan efficacy and impact across the frameworks and plans was quantitative data analysis[2]. Institutions clearly relied heavily on this method to support their evaluation activities. The following trends were observed.

+ **High-level focus** - The majority of quantitative data analysis was focused on high-level data sets, such as student recruitment, retention and graduate outcome data. In the frameworks, this was particularly presented as having a central role in monitoring of progress against overarching fee and access plan targets.
+ **Some provision-level** - Some institutions also showed in their plans or frameworks that they analysed provision-level quantitative data, such as service usage or uptake data e.g. of bursaries, intervention participant or delivery data – e.g. number of events delivered.

When frameworks outlined how they would use a combination of high-level and provision-level quantitative data analysis, or gave examples of doing so, the evaluation approach appeared stronger, since it was clearer that they were, or would be, conducting evaluation at both activity and strategic level.

6.3.3 Participative research with students

Participatory methods provide insight into students' lives and experiences, which can assist in improving organisational practices in ways that are meaningful to students (Crockford et al., 2018). All institutions had undertaken at least some participatory research with students to gather both quantitative and qualitative evidence to support evaluation at strategic and provision-level. Data gathered through participatory methods were noted in two of the evaluation frameworks but were more commonly cited in fee and access plans, albeit with little accompanying information about the research methods that had been used.

The research methods with students were:

+ **Surveys** – The most common participative method across the plans. Typically, these were not specific to fee and access plan activities (e.g. NSS).
+ **Feedback and evaluation forms** – A fairly common method noted in plans and by two frameworks. Generally, these methods were discussed in broad terms as important to informing institutional approaches, but there were some specific examples of targeted exercises to gather student feedback regarding specific services or activities.
+ **Focus groups** – A rarely mentioned method, though included by one institution in its framework.
+ **Case studies** – Not mentioned in the frameworks but made an appearance in two plans.
+ **Interviews** – The rarest method across frameworks and plans. Mentioned in one framework.

Case studies

Wrexham Glyndŵr University used a range of case studies from students within the 'Objectives, activities and targets' section of its fee and access plan. These evidenced impact of fee and access plan related activity, e.g. student support, on individual students' experience and outcomes.

6.3.4 Gathering evaluation evidence from staff

Two institutions' evaluation frameworks illustrated how they had gathered evaluation evidence from key staff or initiative owners and had developed mechanisms for undertaking this. These approaches

[2] Quantitative data are data about numeric variables (e.g. how many; how much; or how often). Qualitative data are more descriptive in nature and help us to better understand less quantifiable aspects, such as 'how' and 'why' (ECU, 2014).

gathered quantitative data, such as student participation and outcomes data, NSS scores or number of activities delivered, and one also gathered qualitative evidence, namely descriptions or assessments of progress and impact from the staff members' perspectives. This is an effective way to gather information, and to distribute evaluation activity, and should promote consistency. However, supporting guidance and capacity building will be important to ensure interpretation and implementation of such tools is robust.

Template for evaluation by initiative owners

Swansea University developed a template to support evaluation by owners of key initiatives. This asked questions to aid them in reviewing how effective their initiative had been and what developments they may need to make in future plans.

6.3.5 Multi and mixed methods

Use of more than one research method is known as multimethodology research, and this can help to increase the reliability of findings. Use of a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods is known as mixed methods, and this can both quantify and help to understand the nature of impacts, for example, quantitative methods might identify that something did or did not work and qualitative methods might help to pinpoint why (HM Treasury, 2011; ECU, 2014).

The review found the intention to use multiple methods at a very high level in two institutions' frameworks. These outlined that results of evaluation at provision-level would be triangulated, or combined, with results of review of progress on fee and access plan targets and achievement of investments to give an overall picture of effectiveness and impact of the fee and access plan.

At provision-level, plans to use multi and mixed methods to evaluate specific interventions and programmes were clearly demonstrated by two frameworks, but less so by the others.

However, strategic review sections of institutions' 2020/21 plans often demonstrated that institutions are using a combination of different evidence sources, sometimes including a mixture of quantitative and qualitative evidence, to evaluate their performance annually. For example, an institution might provide quantitative data to explain overall progress in an area like student retention, then they might give student survey results regarding the student experience to support the interpretation of their progress. This existing practice can be built upon to create formalised multimethodology and mixed method approaches for evaluation frameworks.

Using mixed methods

Cardiff University's evaluation framework outlined a broad range of types of data sources to be gathered and analysed, including:

+ Feedback and evaluation forms (qualitative and quantitative);
+ Interview data (qualitative);
+ Attendance rates (quantitative);
+ Open and click rates (quantitative);
+ Student tracking data (quantitative).

6.4 Developing more robust research designs

There is a growing consensus about the need to enhance evaluative methods for widening access work in order to provide stronger evidence of which approaches are most effective. Emphasis has been on the development of more scientific evaluation methods for impact evaluation that can better demonstrate that the impact of an intervention is the result of that intervention, and not other factors (Dent et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2017; OfS, 2019b). While institutions have only delivered two plans and evaluation design is, therefore, still at an early stage for most, the frameworks of some institutions suggested they were aware of the challenge of attributing outcomes to interventions and were seeking to find ways to begin to do this.

The focus of development has been on the application to widening access evaluation of quasi-experimental and experimental designs, which are empirical approaches used to find out the impacts of interventions on their target populations. Below we explore types of such designs relevant to fee and access plans and comment on current progress in these domains.

6.4.1 Comparing before and after

Pre- and post-test designs

A type of quasi-experimental design, pre- and post-test evaluation designs compare the outcomes of those exposed to an intervention prior to, and after, the intervention (Taylor et al., 2016). There has been recent focus on using this type of design to strengthen evaluation of widening access activities, with OfS including this in its recently published standards of evidence (2019a).

Currently, the majority of data collection for fee and access plan evaluation appears to be administered post-intervention i.e. after changes to a service had been implemented or after an initiative had been delivered, with two exceptions outlined in the example box below. While this can provide evidence of students' experiences of a service or initiative or their thoughts regarding its impact, it cannot measure a change from the baseline situation. In order to do this, a pre-intervention measure needs to be taken, for example a survey undertaken before the intervention and repeated post-intervention. A move towards pre- and post-test designs across provision would strengthen evaluative approaches.

However, while this type of design provides a comparative element that can indicate whether changes have occurred, it does not prove that the intervention caused these changes rather than some other mechanism e.g. if attainment was measured at the beginning and end of the year, a change would be expected (hopefully) regardless of whether students took part in an intervention (Crawford et al., 2017). Additionally, a simple pre- and post-test design is unable to demonstrate long-term effects of an intervention.

Pre- and post-intervention designs

Aberystwyth University's 2020/21 fee and access plan explains its use of CareerTrack, which surveys students at their entry to third year, to collect baseline data and to inform provision of tailored careers services and opportunities, and then surveys students at their exit at graduation time to assess any change in their level of career readiness.

Cardiff University's evaluation framework shows how it used 'before' and 'after' evaluation forms to gather data from course participants before and after sessions for its Live Local Learn Local initiative.

Time series designs

Another quasi-experimental approach that involves time-series data, in which one group of students is observed repeatedly both before and after the administration of the activity or service. For example, you might examine the yearly progression rates to HE of students at a given school for several years both before and after the implementation of a widening access intervention. This approach is an improvement over a single pre and post-test design, which is unable to demonstrate long-term effects.

6.4.2 Comparing intervention with no intervention

Control or comparison group designs compare the outcomes of an intervention group with the outcomes of a control group, or a group which does not receive the intervention. These designs help to identify what would have happened to students without an intervention. However, unless randomisation is used (see further in the following section), they are still subject to concerns regarding validity because the treatment and control groups may not be comparable at baseline due to bias in the selection of participants of the intervention (Crawford et al., 2017). To further strengthen the approach, a pre- and post-test design can also be used. This then allows for use of 'difference-in-difference' statistical techniques, which can help to minimise selection bias (Taylor et al., 2016). A time series design can also be used in combination with control groups to produce more reliable results.

As well as the resource implications, there can be practical and ethical challenges with using control group designs in a widening access context, for example questions of whether it is ethical to not give an intervention to a control group of students, particularly when there is evidence that the intervention has a benefit (Crawford et al., 2017). However, there are methods that might be considered to help overcome these challenges, for example, creating 'virtual control groups' using existing data (Taylor et al., 2016).

Given the early stage of fee and access plan evaluation, it is not surprising that the review found no evidence that control or comparison groups have so far been used by institutions to evaluate fee and access activity. However, two institutions have evidently been thinking about this. One framework mentioned the need for future control group designs. Additionally, **Cardiff Metropolitan University's** 2020/21 fee and access plan mentions its intention to develop evaluation designs that enable comparison of the outcomes of those who have received and haven't received an intervention in future through using historic comparison and initiative comparison.

6.4.3 Experimental designs

Experimental designs, which randomly assign participations to treatment and control groups (e.g. randomised control trials), are often positioned at the top of the hierarchy of research designs because they are seen as the optimum way of removing bias in an intervention, meaning they can best isolate the impacts of an intervention from other factors. As such, there has been increasing support for their use in evaluation of widening access (Torgerson et al., 2014).

These designs are as yet rare in the field of widening access (Torgerson et al., 2014; Younger et al., 2018; Crockford et al., 2018) because they are challenging to execute for a range of reasons, such as practical difficulties in undertaking randomisation of student participants to interventions (Crawford et al., 2017; Crockford et al., 2018), as well as the challenges discussed above regarding control groups. This corresponds with our finding of no evidence in the fee and access plan frameworks or plans of consideration having yet been given to experimental research designs. However, there are some recent examples of such designs being employed successfully in widening access that might be looked to, such as for the national evaluation of phase one of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (CFE Research, Sheffield Hallam University, and Behavioural Insights Team, 2019).

6.4.4 Limits of quasi-experimental and experimental designs

The traditional hierarchy of evidence and corresponding research designs comes from the field of health and, as such, there are questions as to its transferability to a widening access context. Some question the ability of quasi and experimental designs to control for the myriad of potential variables that could impact on a student's access and progression within HE (Harrison and Waller, 2016; Crockford et al., 2018). Additionally, another criticism of these designs is that while they can provide evidence as to whether an intervention is effective, they do not evaluate the process by which outcomes occur, or the explanations for what happened, so do not answer the question of why it is effective (Harrison and Waller, 2016; Crockford et al., 2018). For these reasons, there is a need to undertake a range of types of evaluation, including both impact and process evaluation, to understand both whether an intervention worked and why (Harrison and Waller, 2016; Crockford et al., 2018).

6.5 Recommendations

- Evaluation frameworks should demonstrate how provision-level objectives and indicators of success, including short, medium and long-term, are used to guide evaluation activities.
- Institutions should develop overarching theories of change for their fee and access plans, as well as individual theories of change for key activities, in order to predict the processes by which their activities should lead to their desired outcomes, support the rationale for their activities and identify key mechanisms and intermediate steps to interrogate through evaluation.
- Evaluation frameworks should outline some of the evaluation designs and research methods that will be used to evaluate specific activities to evidence the robustness of the evaluation approach. These should:
  - Combine impact evaluation with process evaluation to understand both whether an intervention worked and why.
  - Include a mixture of different methods, including quantitative and qualitative, to increase the robustness of results, e.g. data analysis and participative research with students.
  - Compare before and after, as often as possible, to measure any change from the baseline situation, e.g. response to a student questionnaire before and after an intervention.
- Institutions should consider opportunities, current and/or future, for using quasi-experimental and experimental designs for evaluation of appropriate fee and access plan programmes or initiatives, drawing on the necessary research expertise from within or external to the institution as they do so.

7. Acting on evaluation findings

HEFCW expects that evaluation findings will feed into the fee and access plan decision-making process and inform new plans. Such an expectation is in line with similar guidance by other UK bodies (Dent et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016; OfS, 2019b).

This means institutions need to act on evidence of what is working and adapt their processes and activities in the light of evidence and lessons learned through their evaluation activity. Institutions should outline how this will be achieved within their evaluation frameworks and evidence that it has taken place within the plans themselves.

7.1 Approaches in frameworks

All but one of the evaluation frameworks contained explanation or examples of how the outcomes of evaluation have been, and will be, used to inform future fee and access planning. In some cases, this was high-level information, simply stating that learning would be fed into the development of future projects and plans. In other cases, there was more information provided, for example:

+ **Wrexham Glyndŵr University** outlined how within year and at the end of the year its Access and Retention Group received reports on progress against targets, opportunities and key issues for discussion, which informed the development of future plans.
+ **Swansea University** had built reflection on future developments into its template for evaluation by initiative owners, asking for information on whether initiatives will continue and how they would be developed, based on the evaluation results.

7.2 Evidence from fee and access plans

Use of evaluation findings to evidence progress

Advance HE's review of fee and access plans found that institutions had used more data and evidence to demonstrate progress within their strategic review year by year, working to improve the robustness of their rationale for their fee and access plan focus and contents (Hanesworth & Douglas Oloyede, 2019). This trend continued with the 2020/21 plans.

However, evidence provided was rarely framed as being the results of evaluation activity. More could be done to be clear when evidence provided has come from specific evaluation activities.

In addition, there are still many instances across plans of a lack of evidence, including that gleaned from evaluation activity, to support statements made about progress.

Use of evaluation results to refine provision

Several 2020/21 fee and access plans were explicit in explaining how evaluation of past plan activities had identified evidence of gaps or opportunities for improvement, which had been acted upon in the refinement of activities for the 2020/21 plan. For example:

+ Use of student feedback to change approaches to service provision (e.g. **Bangor University's** Library Services).
+ Evaluation results identifying improvements needed to outreach activities (e.g. **Swansea University** identified more planned, targeted and progressive outreach was required).

However, many of the plans did not indicate how evaluation had informed individual activities, so it is unclear whether evaluation results are informing refinement of provision. For those that did, the actual gaps or issues found by the evaluation, and the specific evaluation methods used to identify these, were not provided. Additional detail in these regards would give a greater sense of robust evaluation informing evidence-based practice.

7.3 Recommendations

+ Within evaluation frameworks, institutions should go beyond simply stating that evaluation results will inform future plan development by outlining how this will be put into practice – for example, what mechanisms will be used, and at what point(s) of the year.
+ Within fee and access plans, institutions should make clear when evidence provided to show progress or lessons learned has come from evaluation activities and provide some detail about the evaluation method(s) that was used to gather this.
+ Within fee and access plans, institutions should be consistent in indicating when and how evaluation results have informed changes to provision, and when doing so, provide some information about the gaps or issues found, as well as what has been done to address these.

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9. Useful resources

Resource	Summary
CFE Research, Sheffield Hallam University and the Behavioural Insights Team (2019) **The National Collaborative Outreach Programme: End of phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations**	This report presents the findings from the national formative and impact evaluations of Phase 1 of NCOP. It explores the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to the governance, implementation and delivery of outreach, and emerging evidence of the impact of the programme on target learners. The evaluation methods included a survey of partnership staff, field visits to partnerships, a baseline and follow-up survey of learner participants, three randomised control trials (RCTs) and a qualitative review of partnerships' evaluation evidence. Detailed information is supplied on the methods utilised and the rationale for the approach.
Crawford et al., (2017) **The evaluation of the impact of outreach: Proposed standards of evaluation practice and associated guidance**	A report for Office of Fair Access (OFFA) that sets out a suggested framework of standards of evidence for impact evaluation of widening participation (WP) activity, drawing on other existing frameworks and literature. It presents key stages and principles in impact evaluation, then defines the levels of evaluation evidence and accompanying guidance. These standards have been built upon by the Office for Students (OfS) to develop its Access and participation standards of evidence (see below).
Crockford et al., (2018) **Five years of WPREU: critical reflections on evaluation, policy and practice in widening participation and student success**	A report from the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (WPREU) at the University of Sheffield, which was set up a to undertake research and evaluation into the impact of the university's widening participation activities. It discusses the changing sector and policy environment in relation to WP and evaluation, shares WPREU's experience and progress in evaluating WP activity, and discusses a number of different evaluation approaches, considering the benefits and challenges of each. WPREU's webpages also provide a range of evaluation tools and guidance.
Dent et al., for HEFCE (2014) **Higher education outreach to widen participation – toolkits for practitioners 4: Evaluation**	A practical toolkit developed for HEFCE that defines evaluation and its relationship to monitoring of WP, assists with the selection of an evaluation model and methodology, assists with the collection and analysis of data and shows how evaluation can be reported to influence future action and effectiveness. It also contains a range of templates and tools to help with designing and undertaking WP evaluations.
Equality Challenge Unit (2014) **Measuring progress on equality: qualitative evidence**	Entry-level guidance focused on the key steps in measuring progress on equality and diversity in HE using qualitative evidence – this includes: identifying qualitative baselines and indicators, analysing qualitative data and reporting using qualitative data. Much is transferable to an access and participation context.
HM Treasury (2011)	Provides in-depth cross-government guidance on how evaluation – process, impact and economic – should be designed and undertaken. It presents standards of good practice in conducting evaluations and seeks to provide an understanding of the issues faced when

The magenta book: guidance for evaluation	undertaking evaluations of projects, policies, programmes and the delivery of services.
Sheffield Hallam University (2016) Understanding the impact of institutional financial support on student success	A suite of tools for assessing the impact of student financial support on student success (a statistical model, survey tools and interview tools) and a guide to support HE providers in using these tools and interpreting the outcomes developed for OFFA by Sheffield Hallam University. These were designed to improve financial support impact evaluation methods across the sector and make the outputs of evaluation more comparable. While focused on financial support, aspects of the approach are transferred to evaluation of other areas of access and participation work.
Office for Students (2019) + Access and participation standards of evidence + Using standards of evidence to evaluate impact of outreach + Evaluation self-assessment tool and guidance	+ *Access and participation standards of evidence* lays out the OfS's standards of evidence for impact evaluation and discusses how HE providers can strengthen their standards of evidence. It gives guidance on what type of evaluation to aim for and ways to strengthen the evidence-base, and also discusses the claims that can be made from different types of evidence. + *Using standards of evidence* is guidance for outreach practitioners who already have some experience with evaluation techniques and are looking to make evaluations more robust and embedded. The document highlights practices that can strengthen the evaluation of outreach and offers case studies and signposting to further sources. + *Evaluation self-assessment tool* aims to assist institutions to review whether their evaluation plans and methodologies go far enough to generate high quality evidence about the impact of activities in their access and participation plans.
Steven and Thomas (2019) Attracting diversity: end of project report	The final report of a project to widen access to equality groups undertaken in Scotland by 21 institutions (FE and HE). Contains some relevant sections to fee and access plan evaluation, such as tips for planning, undertaking and analysing results of quantitative and qualitative research with students. Additionally, it includes guidance and examples of using a theory of change to plan and evaluate access initiatives, with reflective questions.
Taylor et al., (WISERD) (2016) HEFCW widening access to higher education evaluation guidance	Guidance from WISERD for universities and widening access practitioners about how to evaluate their widening access strategies and practices. It was intended to supplement the HEFCE evaluation toolkit (Dent et al., 2014). It gives guidance on evaluation design, setting out guidance are four steps: 1. Outline a policy logic model 2. Decide the aims of the evaluation 3. Design the evaluation 4. The use of administrative data

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