Theory, evaluation, and practice in widening participation: A framework approach to assessing impact

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The English higher education (HE) system is deeply stratified, with younger students from more privileged backgrounds comprising the majority of the student population. Over the last 15 years considerable investment has been made to widen participation but attempts to evaluate these initiatives and demonstrate impact have presented a major challenge for the HE sector. This paper explores the development and application of a framework for evaluating and researching university-led interventions. Drawing largely on the theoretical work of Bourdieu it provides a basis for designing and evaluating programmes and activities to develop student cultural capital and habitus, and foster agency and a sense of belonging in HE settings.

Keywords: widening participation; evaluation; research; impact; reflexivity; Bourdieu

Introduction

The English higher education (HE) system is deeply stratified, with younger students from more privileged backgrounds comprising the majority of the student population (HESA, 2014). Concerns around upskilling the workforce and social mobility have resulted in a number of policy interventions over the last 15 years, designed to widen participation in HE. In England, an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has been established to scrutinize the HE sector's efforts in this area. Early, high-profile widening participation (WP) initiatives such as Aimhigher, which ran from 2004 to 2011, were largely concerned with increasing the proportion of younger students from under-represented groups progressing to HE. As a result there has been a strong focus on developing pre-entry activities such as summer schools and campus visits to engage school and college students. Recent data from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2010; 2013) have shown a steady increase in the rate of progression to HE of under-represented groups; however, it is not possible to make direct links between these macro-level changes and specific local activity.

How to evaluate WP initiatives poses a major challenge for the HE sector, and this paper explores the development and application of a framework for evaluating and researching university-led interventions. Drawing largely on the theoretical work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) it provides a basis for designing and evaluating programmes and activities to develop student cultural capital and habitus, and foster agency and a sense of belonging in HE settings. It actively rejects a 'deficit' model to explain the low participation and attainment of students from social groups under-represented in HE. Our approach does not deny the need for institutional change and increased reflexivity on the part of the academy with

regard to its own exclusionary practices. However, attempts to avoid a deficit approach can fall into the trap of regarding the mere opportunity to engage with education and university study as sufficient (Sen, 2005), underestimating the different capabilities that students possess to access HE. We regard successful HE as a transformational experience for *all* students, but recognize that the practices of the academy are more culturally resonant with those of the middle-class student majority. From this perspective, WP interventions described here are viewed as developing the capitals and capacities students need to effectively negotiate the transition into HE and succeed as a university student.

The framework presented in this paper encapsulates this transformative process, operationalizing capitals, capacities, and practices that students develop into a set of learning outcomes organized under overarching aims. The framework is designed to be accessible to policymakers, academics, practitioners, and non-specialists alike, and this paper focuses on its development and application to access and entry to HE.

The framework, initially developed in one university, has been trialled as part of a network comprising several institutions commonly known as NERUPI (Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions).[1] It has been designed to maximize the impact of WP interventions on three levels, by: (1) providing a robust theoretical and evidence-based rationale for the types of intervention that are designed and delivered; (2) providing clear aims and learning outcomes for interventions, which enables more strategic and reflexive design and delivery; and (3) rationalizing and integrating evaluation processes across programmes of intervention to improve data quality and utility, and more effectively demonstrate impact using a range of indicators:

> As the demand for more rigorous evaluation of the impact of widening participation gathers momentum we need to ensure that it is informed by academic research ... In turn, academic research ... should not be confined to describing the problems but should start contributing to solutions.

> (Whitty *et al.*, 2015: 58)

The need to develop effective approaches for evaluating WP interventions is widely recognized across the HE sector, and in government. In a study commissioned by HEFCE to assess the impact of Aimhigher, Gorard and Smith (2006) famously criticized the lack of rigour in evaluation of outreach activities. Moreover, they claimed that the approaches used had failed to demonstrate whether the activities had any impact at all on increasing university progression rates among under-represented groups:

> In summary, there is limited evidence about the effectiveness of different pre-entry interventions with young people. Much of the research in this area has focused on students' perceptions of interventions, rather than tracking them into HE.

> (Gorard and Smith, 2006: 35)

Gorard and Smith's claims jarred with the perceptions of many, particularly practitioners, who robustly defended the transformative power of WP interventions. Arguably, Gorard and Smith used narrow methodological criteria to reach their conclusions, but some of their criticisms can still be levelled at interventions being made within this field today. Furthermore, because many interventions are not overtly informed by theory or research evidence there can appear to be little rationale for their design, content, and style of delivery, or understanding of how they might contribute to WP in HE.

The NERUPI Framework utilizes theoretical understandings about WP and factors that might hinder or facilitate progression to university to inform practice, and establish the criteria against which the impact of interventions are assessed. It integrates three previously

disconnected areas in this field: (1) theoretical perspectives and related academic research; (2) external monitoring requirements; and (3) evaluation processes to assess the effectiveness of institutional or collaborative interventions.

Theoretical perspectives and related academic research

In order to understand the rationale for WP policies in the UK, it is important to situate them theoretically and politically. Over the last fifty years a growing body of educational research has elucidated some of the reasons for disparities in attainment and progression rates to HE between different social groups, pointing to the importance of social and cultural factors in shaping educational success and progression to HE (Hayton and Paczuska, 2002; Archer *et al.*, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Burke, 2012; Reay *et al.*, 2013; Whitty *et al.*, 2015). The importance of 'cultural' factors in socio-economic disadvantage was recognized by the New Labour Government, which in 1997 set up a 'Social Exclusion Unit' to inform policy, as well as launching a number of initiatives including Aimhigher. However, New Labour's understanding of this issue was strongly influenced by very particular notions of social and cultural capital associated with middle-class values (Gamarnikow and Green, 1999; Gewirtz, 2001), with policies developed to address the perceived 'deficits' of socially and economically excluded groups.

In recent years, academic research into the underlying factors affecting educational disadvantage and differential participation has become more nuanced. Although the concept of 'capitals' is still employed to explain disparities, the more illuminating studies are theoretically informed by a Bourdieusian approach (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's fundamental recognition of power differentials between social groups enables us to consider cultural differences more dispassionately. The inclusion of power allows us to circumvent the trap of understanding educational disparities through a 'deficit model', where individuals are deemed responsible for their perceived failure and lack of certain capacities. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* provides a more complex exposition of how cultural background and setting shapes individual experience, capacities, practices, and dispositions, and locates privilege, inequality, and agency within specific contexts, thus enabling a more in-depth analysis of contributory factors.

Important insights into how culture operates in maintaining and reproducing educational disadvantage are revealed by researchers (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Reay *et al.*, 2013; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013) who have drawn heavily, although not exclusively, on Bourdieu's theoretical approach. Employing predominantly qualitative methodologies they have investigated how under-represented groups are constituted and constitute themselves within an 'alien' HE cultural setting. While research has highlighted previously hidden sociocultural issues, with the potential to inform interventions, there is limited awareness of this research within the HE sector and its significance for WP. Some WP practitioners do engage with the findings and take them into account when developing interventions. Nevertheless, even in these cases, theoretical foundations are rarely made explicit in the aims, design, or evaluation of the activities themselves. This is partly because traditional approaches to evaluation do not easily lend themselves to capturing and assessing the impact of less tangible factors, which are so important in enabling personal, and institutional, transformations (Hayton *et al.*, 2015).

External monitoring requirements

Monitoring, evaluating, and assessing impact can seem burdensome to higher education institutions (HEIs), but they are important aspects of any policy initiative that seeks to change existing practice. Without some level of external accountability, WP can be assigned a lower

priority within institutions already fully employed delivering their 'core business' of teaching and research. Engaging more fully with this agenda requires a culture change in staff attitudes and understandings, institutional strategies, and administrative processes, in particular those relating to recruitment, admissions, student experience, and progression. A transitional 'space' has to be developed within an HEI to nurture and embed new ways of thinking and working. Furthermore, this space, which we refer to as the 'field' of widening participation (Naidoo, 2004; Whitty *et al.*, 2015) has to extend beyond institutional boundaries, particularly with regard to access and outreach, where collaboration with schools and engagement of parents and communities is so crucial.

Until recently the main focus of OFFA and HEFCE monitoring exercises has been collecting evidence of activity, requiring HEIs to report expenditure, set and agree output targets, and demonstrate how activity meets those targets. For most HEIs, establishing robust internal reporting systems, combined with the development of policies, systems, and activities, represented a considerable institutional undertaking. However, the call for greater evidence of impact and effectiveness has gathered momentum within government and among HE senior managers, particularly following the introduction of higher university fees in 2012, when expenditure on WP was linked to fee income. OFFA's guidance for producing Access Agreements (OFFA, 2015a; OFFA, 2015b) and Monitoring Returns (OFFA/HEFCE, 2014) represent something of a step change in target-setting and requirements for monitoring and evaluation. With greater acknowledgement of institutional differences and the issues facing a wider range of social groups, a strong emphasis on demonstrating impact has moved evaluation far beyond logging the number of participants engaged in 'outreach' events. Many HEIs now employ staff to evaluate WP activities in order to capture and demonstrate impact to OFFA and HEFCE, but also to generate information for their own managerial purposes.

Effectiveness of WP activities and interventions

As we have seen, WP research and evaluation have been criticized for their lack of rigour. Gorard and Smith summarize the issue as follows:

> Those advocating specific interventions often claim success for them, but most interventions have had no rigorous evaluation. We encountered no randomised controlled trials or similar. This makes it difficult to judge the success, or otherwise, of any attempts to widen participation in the short term.

(Gorard and Smith, 2006: 116)

Demonstrating causal links between WP interventions and increased participation of under-represented groups in HE is challenging. The issue of attribution bedevils many social justice initiatives, and attempting to address these through quantitative methods, control groups, and longitudinal studies are fraught with methodological issues and contradictions (Copestake, 2014). For example, let us consider two typical university outreach activities: a GCSE mathematics 'masterclass' and a 'return to study workshop' for prospective mature students. However engaging and successful the 'masterclass' might be, it could only ever be one element contributing to an improved grade at GCSE maths. To claim greater impact would negate the work of schools, teachers, and other cultural factors. Similarly, a 'return to study workshop' might be deemed successful in meeting its learning objectives, but its participants may not progress to HE for practical reasons, such as finance or caring responsibilities.

Larger data sets and sample sizes can address some of these issues and the HE Access Tracker (HEAT) database, designed to assess the long-term impact of WP interventions through

tracking participants' progression patterns, is an example of this in practice. However, practical and policy imperatives in the fluid and developing field of WP demand both a more immediate and a more nuanced response.

While randomized controlled trials (RCTs), longitudinal studies, large data sets, and tracking participants can contribute to elucidating the overall picture of student participation in HE, they cannot inform day-to-day practice at the micro-level. One of the most commonly used 'measures' of success by practitioners is the much-criticized participant 'happy sheet' or evaluation form. Despite its limitations as a tool for demonstrating a causal link between interventions and progression to university it does have other uses. It can provide a useful means of collecting participant data, such as gender, ethnicity, residence in a Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN), or family background in HE, in order to monitor participation from under-represented groups. More importantly, it provides practitioners with immediate feedback about the success of the intervention itself, which can inform future delivery. While it is difficult to demonstrate a causal link between positive student feedback and subsequent progression to HE, most would accept that a negative experience would be less likely to encourage progression. More significantly, a systematic exploration of the intervention (or process) can provide opportunities for reflexivity among participants and providers, leading to increased understandings of the issues affecting progression.

The challenges surrounding WP evaluation are similar to those associated with assessing the effectiveness of financial aid to developing countries. In both cases the value of experimental methods is limited: 'Experimental black boxes are poorly suited to the evaluation of complicated or complex programmes in unstable environments' (Picciotto, 2012: 223). Although the economic and social environment of the UK is relatively stable compared with many developing countries, the education system has been the site of considerable change: the introduction of academies and free schools outside local authority control, changes in curriculum and examinations, the revolution in further education, and increasing HE participation are only a few examples of transformation taking place over the last two decades. From this perspective the education system can be regarded as a highly unstable context, with WP, itself a relatively new area, comprising largely experimental practice and an underdeveloped theoretical base.

Picciotto's (2012: 215–16) account of the decade-long debate within the development evaluation community resonates strongly with debates concerning WP. Funders wanted categorical proof about which programmes were effective, and considerable philanthropic resources were invested in obtaining it. However, a large international team with almost unlimited funding was unable to identify one definitive approach for evaluating programmes, and reached an uneasy consensus that a mixed-methods approach was required.

To summarize, while research has elucidated some of the factors behind low participation and attainment among groups under-represented in HE, its findings are not informing the design, evaluation, and monitoring of interventions, or being comprehensively disseminated to practitioners. Practitioner research and evaluation has focused on the successful delivery of activities, with little direct engagement with research literature, although day-to-day practices reflect a tacit knowledge that is evidenced by its findings.

Monitoring processes, linked to expenditure, have been useful tools in the generation and recording of activity, but have had limited engagement with metadata such as HEFCE's analyses of trends in participation (HEFCE, 2010; HEFCE, 2013), with theoretical research, or with practitioner evaluations. The framework presented here seeks to overcome this lack of connectivity and provide a more coherent basis for assessing the impact of WP interventions.

The NERUPI Framework

The NERUPI Framework is theoretically underpinned by the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and his notions of capitals, field, and habitus. It is important to recognize that Bourdieu's ideas developed over several decades and that definitions have varied over time. In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, first published in 1992, Bourdieu describes what he sees as his basic proposition regarding capital, which 'presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely economic capital, cultural capital and social capital' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007: 119). These capitals are assigned value by the social groups with pre-existing status and power in a particular setting – or 'field' – who generally attribute higher value to qualities and knowledge that reflect their own capacities. In relation to educational 'success', Bourdieu (1986) regards both social and cultural capital as highly significant. Again writing in 1992, he explains social capital as the benefits an individual and group can acquire from an established set of relationships (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007: 119). He further refines this in terms of education to identify 'academic capital' as the capacity to understand the unspoken rules and customs within the academy (Bourdieu, 1986). In 'The forms of capital' (1986) he explains how differences in educational 'ability' are largely the result of an investment in developing certain forms of cultural capital. In later work he further refines the concept of cultural capital using the term 'intellectual' or 'scientific capital' to encompass specific subject knowledge and expertise. In order to avoid confusion, we have adopted the term 'intellectual capital' when referring to subject knowledge.

    The NERUPI Framework is predicated on a cultural model of widening participation, which locates interventions within a contextual field of engagement where student habitus and the institutional habituses of school and university intersect. In this respect, the framework's emphasis on students' habitus and capital is underpinned by an acknowledgement of HEIs' responsibilities to deliver 'enabling' interventions, which facilitate institutional reflexivity as well as personal change for participants.

    The development of the framework was informed by action research and its capacity to 'make a direct contribution to transformative action' (Kemmis, 2010: 425). It combined a top-down theoretical analysis of the aims of WP interventions with a bottom-up analysis of how the design, content, and delivery of interventions meet specific objectives, and contribute to the aims of wider programmes of intervention. This dual process combined research and practice through an iterative, reflexive analysis of research literature alongside evaluation feedback from participants and practitioners. This revealed a number of important areas of resonance; for example, while practitioners did not employ the term 'habitus', they implicitly understood the importance of overcoming participants' anxieties about 'fitting in' within a university setting.

Social and academic capitals

Although students from lower socio-economic groups may have aspirations to progress to HE, they may 'have less developed capacities to realise them' (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Bok, 2010: 176). They may be unable to access accurate 'hot' knowledge about HE within their social networks (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and consequently may be unable to develop the 'navigational capacities' to make informed choices about university (Appadurai, 2004). These two factors are addressed through the framework's *Progression Curriculum*, (Paczuska, 2002) and the first two of the framework's overarching aims, to:

    (1) develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education and graduate employment

(2) develop students' capacity to navigate higher education and graduate employment sectors and make informed choices.

Habitus and identity

The next strand is concerned with *student identity* and preparing students for the experience of HE. It is theoretically underpinned by Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and research on how sociocultural factors shape students' perspectives and experience (for example, Archer *et al.*, 2012; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Reay *et al.*, 2009). Developing student 'resilience' emerged as a key concern in the development of this strand of the framework, in acknowledgement of the complex challenges that students from under-represented groups can face when accessing and experiencing an unfamiliar HE environment. It informs the design and delivery of interventions that enable students to anticipate, experience, and reflect upon the challenges of HE within a transitional 'third space' (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013), from which they can negotiate the cultural landscape of the academy. Foregrounding student identity and resilience also opens up opportunities for institutional reflection and challenging normative views and attitudes. The student identity strand of the framework is encapsulated in its third aim, to:

(3) develop students' confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenge of university life and graduate progression.

Intellectual and skills capital

Early WP policy initiatives such as Aimhigher were largely focused on raising aspirations and awareness. The problematic nature of these two aims has been the subject of much discussion, but in actuality raising attainment presents more challenges. It has been argued that it is the role of schools and colleges to ensure that students achieve good examination results, not HEIs. Certainly without engagement through the school curriculum with what Young (2008) describes as 'powerful knowledge', young people are placed at a serious disadvantage. Young's formulation correlates closely with the 'facilitating subjects', such as maths, the sciences, English, history, and languages (Russell Group, 2015), valued by selective universities. The competitive nature of admissions to undergraduate degree programmes, particularly at selective universities, means that good grades in these subjects are crucial. However, the importance of cultural factors in explaining the differential attainment rates of particular social groups is often overlooked:

> Resource differences and collective efforts and investments made or not within families become translated into individual 'ability' ... identities become tied to routes and programmes inscribing social barriers and academic boundaries which are constantly re-privileged within education policy and schools ... children and their performances are essentialised rather than seen as socially, culturally and economically 'made up'.
>
> (Ball, 2010:162)

Reay *et al.* (2013) demonstrated in detail how middle-class parents mobilize their cultural capital to engage positively with the school system and ensure the educational success of their children. Their study highlighted the differential challenges working-class parents face in supporting their children and how this can impact on examination grades and opportunities for progression to HE.

Slow progress in widening access to the most selective HEIs, combined with increased pressure to meet Access Agreement targets, has led some HEIs to develop interventions with the explicit aim of raising attainment. Universities are well placed to contextualize subject

knowledge, demonstrate how the school curriculum relates to research and careers, and provide access to facilities and opportunities to engage with academic staff.

When developing the NERUPI Framework, subject 'knowledge' was differentiated from academic 'skills' and incorporated under two distinct aims. This acknowledged that certain groups of students may have had limited opportunities to develop skills such as essay writing and independent research, which are essential for successful university study. In some cases, such as mature students returning to study, the development of academic study skills is a major part of pre- and post-entry activity. The fourth aim in the framework is concerned with skills development and builds on Bourdieu's taxonomy through the notion of 'skills capital', which is acquired and demonstrated through academic practice. It incorporates WP interventions that set out to:

(4) develop students' study skills and capacity for academic attainment and successful graduate progression.

The final strand of the framework relates to the *knowledge curriculum* and developing students' 'intellectual capital'. This strand is multifaceted and incorporates subject-specific interventions that extend and contextualize students' existing knowledge. This process is encapsulated in the fifth aim of the framework, to:

(5) develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge.

Practical learning outcomes

The theory- and evidence-based top-down process of generating overarching aims for WP interventions has coincided with a bottom-up analysis and mapping of the programme of interventions delivered by the University of Bath's Widening Participation Outreach Team, which includes campus visits, HE talks, subject taster days, GCSE options days, residential summer schools, and the university's bespoke *On Track to Bath* intensive programme for post-16 students. The published aims of the interventions did not fully encapsulate the sophisticated thinking behind different types of intervention, or the tacit knowledge and expertise that informed their design, content, and delivery.

While similar interventions shared some common aims, these were not always consistent and there was no structure to demonstrate how interventions were interrelated, or to indicate differential levels of impact that might be high- and low-intensity activities. Interventions were 'floating' as bounded entities with self-referential aims, but without a framework to locate them within the context of an overall programme.

One of the first tasks involved in generating the framework involved formally distinguishing between types of intervention and categorizing them as either low, medium, or high intensity. Low-intensity interventions were defined as primarily aspirational, for example campus visits. Medium-intensity interventions were also broadly aspirational, but incorporated active learning elements, for example GCSE options days or subject taster days, designed to develop students' capacity to navigate future progression to HE. High-intensity interventions were defined as sustained or residential activities, for example *On Track to Bath*, tutoring schemes, and summer schools, designed to raise attainment by developing skills and intellectual capital.

The categorization of interventions by 'intensity' ran concomitant with a stratification of interventions into four outreach levels, based on the year groups at which they were targeted: Level 0 (Year 6 and below); Level 1 (Years 8–9); Level 2 (Years 10–11); and Level 3 (post-16); with two additional levels: Level 4 (transition) and Level 5 (in HE), which are not discussed here. The

existing aims were rationalized to generate a stratified set of level-specific learning outcomes for each of the five overarching theoretical aims. This rationalization process entailed further analysis of the design and content of interventions to identify additional learning outcomes, which had not been reflected among their original aims.

This process served the dual purpose of mapping a diverse range of WP provision and locating it within a framework where the learning outcomes for interventions are integrated, rationalized, stratified, and specifically aligned with the aims of an inclusive programme of WP activity. The design and evaluation of interventions are tailored to match the expected outcomes at each level, enabling more effective assessment of impact. Mapping the programme of activity also served as a useful planning tool, by highlighting gaps in current provision and informing the design of new interventions.

The framework's integration of theoretically informed aims with practical learning outcomes enables both a macro-analysis of the impact and effectiveness of WP interventions, and a micro-analysis of its individual components. The stratification of learning outcomes by level and categorization of interventions into low, medium, and high intensity has provided a methodological rationale for more nuanced and meaningful evaluation processes, which are attuned to the intensity of an intervention, level of delivery, and expected impact.

An illustrative example of how the framework has been utilized to assess and demonstrate impact is the two Year-12 residential summer schools, in STEM and social sciences, delivered by the University of Bath. Both summer schools are categorized as high-intensity interventions in terms of their content, delivery, and residential nature, but more importantly so are their learning outcomes and expected impact on supporting student progression to a high-tariff university.

By taking previous practice into account and clearly defining the aims and learning outcomes associated with a Level-3 activity, the framework assisted organizers at the macro-level with designing the programmes for the summer schools, and at the micro-level with designing individual sessions. It provided a conceptual structure for the event, which assisted organizers with communicating its purpose to university academics, support staff, and student ambassadors. The learning outcomes provided clear criteria against which the overall event and individual sessions could be evaluated, through a corresponding set of evaluation questions. These questions featured in a four-stage mixed-method evaluation process, which included: (1) pre-event online student questionnaire; (2) in-event observation and semi-structured interviews; (3) end-of-event interactive student poll and semi-structured reflective group discussion; and (4) post-event online student questionnaire. The data generated from students were supported by additional data collected from university academics, support staff, and student ambassadors involved in the delivery of the event.

To demonstrate, some end-of-event student data from the 2015 Year-12 STEM Summer School will be presented as evidence in support of each of the key Level-3 learning outcomes for each of the five aims in the framework.

For the first aim, to '*develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education and graduate employment*', the key Level-3 learning outcome is to '*enable students to investigate course and placement options, and social and leisure opportunities at the University of Bath and other universities*'. In the end-of-event interactive student poll, 98 per cent agreed (74 per cent strongly) that attending the event had increased their knowledge about course and placement opportunities in HE and opportunities for university graduates. This finding was supported by the qualitative data generated from the end-of-event reflective discussion, which demonstrated that students had gained a better understanding of HE and opportunities for graduates in their subject area, as one explained:

> It was good to be learning something new. It showed you where you could go if you continued doing chemistry and it was really interesting.

For the second aim, to '*develop students' capacity to navigate higher education and graduate employment sectors and make informed choices*', the key Level-3 learning outcome is to '*enable students to evaluate course, student finance and graduate employment opportunities and make informed choices that align with personal interests*'. In the end-of-event interactive student poll, 74 per cent agreed (34 per cent strongly) that attending the summer school had helped them to make an informed decision about which course to study. This finding was again supported by qualitative data obtained from the end-of-event reflective discussion, where students emphasized how useful it had been to explore subject areas, courses, and graduate opportunities with academics and students working in these fields. One commented:

> The summer school really strengthened my knowledge of what course I want to do. I wasn't sure if I wanted to take a science or engineering course, but now I definitely know what course I want to do.

For the third aim, to '*develop students' confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenge of university life and graduate progression*', the key Level-3 learning outcome is to '*enable students to anticipate challenges they will face in higher education and make a successful transition to university*'. In the end-of-event student poll, 89 per cent agreed (42 per cent strongly) that attending the summer school had made them feel more confident in their ability to succeed at university. This was supported by qualitative data from the end-of-event reflective discussion, which one student encapsulated by saying:

> I had never done anything like this before, and university just seemed really scary. Doing this has made me feel much more confident about going and, like, I really want to go to university.

For the fourth aim, to '*develop students' study skills and capacity for academic attainment and successful graduate progression*', the key Level-3 learning outcome is to '*enable students to enhance academic skills through collaborative projects that develop capacity for critical thinking, independent research and self-directed learning*'. In the end-of-event student poll, 81 per cent agreed (21 per cent strongly) that attending the summer school had given them skills that would help them to succeed in their studies. This resonated with qualitative data obtained from the end-of-event reflective discussion, where students highlighted new skills they had gained and how the experience had increased their motivation to apply themselves to their studies:

> The experience has certainly fuelled my enthusiasm to continue to study hard and get the grades that I need for taking a chemistry degree.

Finally, for the fifth aim, to '*develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge*', the key Level-3 learning outcomes are to enable students to: (a) '*situate existing knowledge within wider fields of knowledge and apply to other contexts*'; and (b) '*situate existing knowledge and interests within the context of university degree programmes and academic disciplines*'. In the end-of-event student poll, 87 per cent agreed (34 per cent strongly) that attending the summer school had increased their understanding of their subject area. In the end-of-event discussion, many students iterated how they had gained a better understanding of how knowledge gained at *school was connected to university subject areas*:

> The biology project gave you a real insight into how science really works. With GCSEs you don't really go down to the source of the information. The lecturer gave us a real insight into her work. You feel much more exposed to the scientific world than you do in a school classroom.

By integrating clear theoretical aims with practical learning outcomes, the NERUPI evaluation framework has provided a comprehensive structure for locating WP interventions, which enables a more strategic approach to planning, delivering, and evaluating interventions and programmes of activity. The structured approach has enabled rationalization of the design and delivery of interventions and also provided a structure in which to methodologically locate evaluation processes and more effectively assess and demonstrate impact. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently flexible to encompass a range of methodological approaches appropriate to the intervention and the age group. Through its application in the field of widening participation to higher education, it provides a useful tool for making interventions and evaluation more effective, developing institutional reflexivity, improving monitoring, and contributing to theoretical understandings within the field.

Note

1. The Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) Framework was initially developed by Annette Hayton, Head of Widening Participation, University of Bath, and Andrew Bengry-Howell, Bath Spa University.

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Annette Hayton is Head of Widening Participation at the University of Bath and has many years of experience in managing widening participation activities. Annette is interested in how educational theory can be developed and applied in practice to promote positive change within the system.

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