

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Sheffield Hallam University		
Unit of Assessment: UOA23 – Education		
Title of case study: Improving the Effectiveness of Higher Education Widening Participation Programmes		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Colin McCaig	Professor of HE Policy	2003 - present
Professor Jacqueline Stevenson MBE	Head of Research	2014 – 2019
Dr Manuel Madriaga	Senior Lecturer	2004 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		

1. Summary of the impact

Research carried out by Sheffield Hallam University has improved the effectiveness of universities' widening participation programmes, directly influencing national policy in this area and driving changes in institutional policy and practice across the higher education sector in two distinct areas. The majority of UK universities now use tools, developed from Sheffield Hallam research and recommended by OFFA/OfS, to enhance the efficacy of financial support packages (bursaries) for students from poorer backgrounds. In addition, more collaborative and evidence-led approaches to outreach work have been extended across the sector in response to further research findings, translated through national policy into widespread institutional practice.

2. Underpinning research

McCaig and colleagues' research has sought to understand, challenge, and then improve the effectiveness of universities' widening participation (WP) strategies - the cumulation of approaches to remedy historic inequalities in the access to universities. It has contributed to the theoretical understanding of marketisation in higher education systems both in the UK and globally, and thus problematised the changing nature of policy in the area of widening participation (**R6**), and social mobility and fair access to higher education (**R3**, **R4**, **R5**). These developments have come from two broad programmes of research.

Firstly, McCaig et al investigated **the effectiveness of institutional financial support bursaries for higher education students from low income backgrounds**. This research was commissioned and funded by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), awarded on the basis of the track record and techniques developed by McCaig (PI) and Harrison (Co-I, University of the West of England (UWE)). Of particular relevance was their body of research exploring the quantitative impact of institutional financial support and national policy directives on widening participation outcomes, specifically focusing on: comparative analysis of financial support mechanisms (**R3**), and the diagnostic value of low participation neighbourhoods (**R4**). This was later extended with follow-on work on the epistemological challenges of university bursaries (**R2**).

The OFFA project, Closing the Gap, scoped and developed **a statistical model for the evaluation of the effectiveness of institutions' financial support packages** (bursaries, scholarships and fee discounts). This involved: quasi-experimental binary regression analysis of existing institutional datasets and the generation of a new dataset; the production of a survey tool (linking to individual bursary recipients); and an interview schedule designed to identify how

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bursary recipients used this support. The team included researchers and student data analysts from five HEIs (SHU, UWE, Oxford, King's College London, Bedfordshire), with the whole research programme co-ordinated by SHU. The research initially pooled five years of historical student data from the five institutions and **created an evaluation tool** based on four outcome variables: retention into second year of study, completion of degree within five years, attainment of 1st or 2:1, and good employability outcome (DLHE metric). The tool drew on data of characteristics including age on entry, gender, ethnicity, home domicile and entry qualifications. When applied to historic data, the tool demonstrated that bursary recipients performed at least as well as non-recipients across the outcome variables, and thus closed the expected gap in outcomes derived from low-income backgrounds (R1).

The tool **allowed users (HEIs) to undertake their own analysis**, specifically to: track recipients from enrolment to graduate outcomes through student records data; compare outcomes of bursary recipients with those slightly and significantly better off; evaluate the performance of recipients over time and in relation to changes in bursary support levels/conditions; use the tool collaboratively for institutional comparative purposes; link with the survey instrument developed as part of the project.

The second research programme focused on **collaborative outreach programmes**, where HEIs, Further Education Colleges (FECs), schools, employers, third sector bodies and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) partner to deliver focused activity to pupils living in areas with low levels of HE participation and where participation is lower than expected given GCSE attainment. This was funded by HEFCE and its successor body OfS, and sought to explore how consortia partnerships were working and which approaches appeared to be most effective. It specifically involved **examining the effectiveness of the design and implementation of collaborative approaches to outreach, and contributed to a fuller understanding of what worked, in what context and why**. This impact evaluation assessed the consequential changes resulting from the diversity of collaborative outreach programme interventions, using a range of experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies. The key recommendation of this evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) programme 2014-16 was that **collaborative outreach was demonstrating valuable benefits and should be further funded (R6)**.

3. References to the research

- R1. McCaig, C., Harrison, N., Mountford-Zimdars, A., Moore, D., Maylor, U., Stevenson, J., Ertle, H. and Carasso, H. (2016). Closing the Gap: Understanding the Impact of Institutional Financial Support on Student Success. Project Report for Office for Fair Access. <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/14889/1/Closing-the-gap-understanding-the-impact-of-institutional-financial-support-on-student-success.pdf>
- R2. Harrison, N. and McCaig, C. (2017). Examining the Epistemology of Impact and Success of Educational Interventions using a Reflective Case Study of University Bursaries, *British Educational Research Journal*, 43 (2), pp.290-309. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3263>
- R3. McCaig, C. (2016). The Retreat from Widening Participation? The National Scholarship Programme and New Access Agreements in English Higher Education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 41 (2), pp.215-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.916672>
- R4. Harrison, N. and McCaig, C. (2015). An Ecological Fallacy in Higher Education Policy: The Use, Overuse and Misuse of 'Low Participation Neighbourhoods', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39 (6), pp.793-817. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2013.858681>

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- R5.** McCaig, C. (2018). English Higher Education: Widening Participation and the Historical Context for System Differentiation. In: Bowl, M., McCaig, C. and Hughes, J., (eds.), *Equality and Differentiation in Marketised Higher Education: A New Level Playing Field?* Palgrave, pp.51-72. <https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783319783123>. Available on request.
- R6.** CFE (2018). Year One Report of the National Formative and Impact Evaluation, including Capacity Building with NCOP Consortia (SHU researchers McCaig and Madriaga). Project Report for HEFCE. http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/2018/08/2018_ncopyear1.pdf

All articles were rigorously peer-reviewed prior to publication in leading journals in the field.

4. Details of the impact

Sheffield Hallam research over the period 2014-20 has impacted on national policy and practice across the higher education sector. This has addressed two inter-related problems associated with the need for more effective evaluation of funded WP activities: i) demonstrating the value of financial support for students throughout their student journey, and ii) understanding the new potential of collaborative outreach programmes.

Closing the Gap Toolkit

Institutions have long been under pressure to shift expenditure away from direct financial support and towards more holistic and pastoral support for students from poorer backgrounds (**R1**). Sheffield Hallam's evaluation of the impact of the £478 million spent annually by institutions on bursaries, scholarships and fee waivers for lower income students and other under-represented groups led to a shift in OFFA/OfS policy with regard to the value and use of bursaries. The OFFA project commissioner noted: "*The team provided new understanding of how some bursaries are impactful in some contexts so that OFFA could promote better targeting of financial support. They also provided tools that were fit for purpose and accessible in all institutions so that understanding and capability was enhanced across the HE sector.*" (**E2**)

OfS note that "**publication of the toolkit has supported an improvement in the quality of evaluation by those providers who have used it**" and that "*findings from the statistical tool suggest that bursaries can be successful in supporting recipients to achieve the same outcomes as their more advantaged peers*" (**E1**).

Following the publication of Closing the Gap (**R1**), OFFA recommended that from 2016/17 **all HEIs use the tools developed, or develop their own equivalent tools, to evaluate the effectiveness of their bursary spending in their annual Access Agreements**. These findings must be agreed between institutions and OFFA as a condition of registration (**E1**). As of 2019/20, **over half of UK universities are using the Sheffield Hallam tools**, with the remainder having developed their own frameworks derived from the same principles (**E2**).

Professor Sir Les Ebdon, former Director of Fair Access to Higher Education at OFFA, has confirmed: "When I became Director of Fair Access in 2012, universities in England were spending millions of pounds on bursary schemes to attract and retain 'widening participation' students with no evidence of the effectiveness of this expenditure. Research by OFFA, which I headed, demonstrated such expenditure had little impact on a student's decision on whether to go into higher education or on which university to attend... The outcomes of this [Sheffield Hallam] research impressed us very much and, as a direct consequence, OFFA rewrote the advice that they gave institutions as to how to prepare their Access Agreements... One of the outcomes of the research was an evaluation tool as to the effectiveness of bursary spend. We required those higher education providers who were spending large sums on bursaries to students to evaluate

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that spend using the Sheffield Hallam University tool. Such evaluation persuaded a significant number of sceptical universities to redirect their access expenditure in the following years to more effective activity such as sustained outreach. I can think of few better examples as to **a rapid and decisive impact upon public policy and hundreds of millions of pounds of university expenditure** than this research by Professor McCaig. About **£250 million per year expenditure was moved by universities and colleges to more effective investment.**" (E9)

Follow-up evaluation with a sample of institutions using the tools found that doing so **led to them rethinking financial support.** This included changing their perception of the potential value and impact of student financial support, using the evidence generated to guide institutional decision making, and enhancing their overall evaluation practices. Users of the tools have reported shifting attitudes within institutions about the efficacy of their financial support, which brought a renewed focus on bursary support as a means to enhance retention, and thus successful study outcomes (E2).

OfS's perspective on the impact of the tools within universities is that: "*[This] research has led to a step change in evaluation practice within the sector. Decisions about student bursaries are now being made in light of more robust evidence and from a rigorous epistemological basis. As a secondary impact, we are aware that the capacity of many providers to use advanced statistical techniques to interrogate the data that they hold on their students has also increased as a result of adapting the framework for other purposes.*" (E2)

The University of Southampton, who were early adopters of the toolkit, found that: "We were... able to differentiate between the outcomes of those with the lowest household income and receiving a bursary and those [who] receive the next tier of support. These student's completion outcomes were different, suggesting the university needed to put in place additional interventions or support for these students... [The change of bursary levels following evaluation] **ensured that we continue to offer the bursary to those students who required funding whilst also expanding provision for the groups of students who we have identified as having lower non-continuation rates...** We also learnt that... 95% of students stated that they considered the bursary either important or very important in their ability to continue with their studies." (E2)

The University of Winchester reported that: "The tool has been very useful in disaggregating the data and showing differential performances in groups with certain characteristics. For example, on continuation into second year there are two negative results around entry qualifications and types of accommodation. The outcomes of the data confirm issues that the university is aware of, is considering and **determining its practice going forward.** As one example there is a multi-departmental project initiated to investigate the prior assessment experience of BTEC entrants in comparison to assessment at level 4." (E1)

Collaborative Outreach Programmes

Sheffield Hallam's research on the benefits of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) programme 2014-16 (R6), **led to the establishment of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), now known as Uni Connect.** Recommendations to the funder, HEFCE, specified that collaborative outreach activity should be continued, as it provided valuable and enduring outreach activity in schools and colleges. The potential of this model, identified in the 2016 research, resulted in the **extension and enhancement of collaborative outreach activity from 2017, with 29 collaborative networks now operating nationwide (E8).** During 2018-19 over 180,000 young people, across 1613 schools and colleges, took part in a collaborative outreach programme through the Uni Connect. **Uni Connect has subsequently had its funding extended to 2025,** as renewed collaborative approaches to HEI outreach programmes, initially advocated by Sheffield Hallam, continue to flourish.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- E1.** OfS (2020). Understanding the Impact of the Financial Support Evaluation Toolkit: Analysis and Findings. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/474c9580-e99a-4d24-a490-3474e85ae199/financial-support-evaluation-report-2016-17-2017-18.pdf>
- E2.** Rethinking the Impact of Institutional Financial Support for Students from Low Income Backgrounds: Supporting Evidence for an Impact Case Study
- E3.** Financial Support Evaluation Toolkit (linked within E1).
www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/financial-support-evaluation-toolkit/
- E4.** Guidance - Statistical Tool.
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/financial-support-evaluation-toolkit/statistical-tool/>
- E5.** Evidencing the Impact of your Institution's Financial Support (Delivered at UUK/OFFA Event, February 2017). <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/15258/>
- E6.** 2017-18 Access Agreements and Student Premium Funding: Guidance on how to Complete your Monitoring Return.
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/2017-18-access-agreements-and-student-premium-funding-guidance-on-how-to-complete-your-monitoring-return/>
- E7.** OfS (2018). Understanding the Evaluation of Access and Participation Outreach Interventions for under 16 Year Olds. <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/23720/>
- E8.** HEFCE (2016). Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs). <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/19106/>
- E9.** Testimonial letter from Professor Sir Les Ebdon, former Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, OFFA