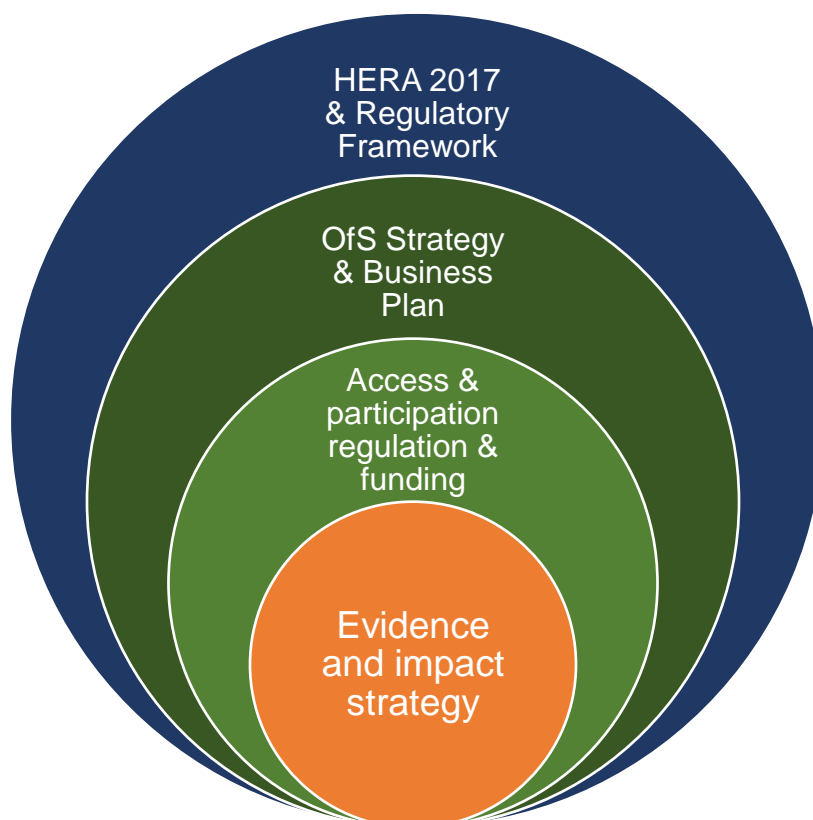


Annex C: Evidence and impact strategy for access and participation

Introduction

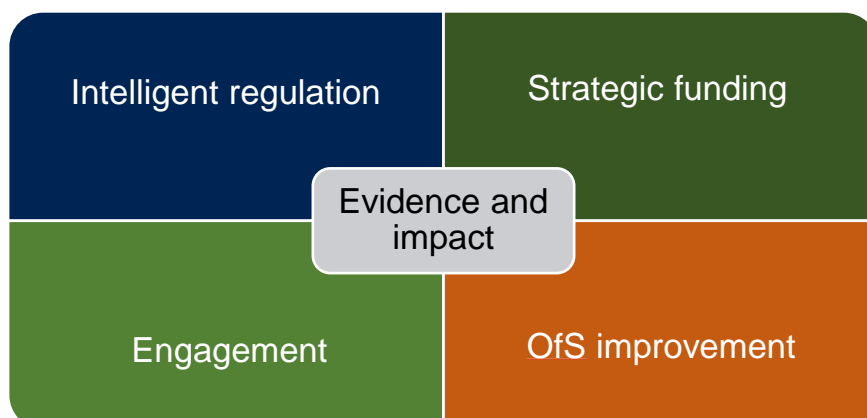
1. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) establishes functions for the OfS to approve an Access and Participation Plan (s.29) including provisions relating to the promotion of equality of opportunity, to issue guidance as to the matters to which it will have regard in deciding whether to approve plans (s.29(4)), and to identify and give advice on good practice in relation to the promotion of equality of opportunity (s.35). Our Evidence and Impact strategy for access and participation sets out how we will drive improvements in the use of evidence and evaluation to support these functions in particular but has the potential to be extended to other regulatory functions.

2. The regulatory framework enables the OfS to shape debate and focus. Through our influencing power, we can promote innovation and encourage dissemination about what works. The OfS Business Plan states that “All access and participation activity should be underpinned by evidence and ‘what works’”.



3. We have structured this strategy around five core activities:
- a. Intelligent, risk-based, regulation to set expectations for providers
 - b. Supporting providers to be able to meet these expectations
 - c. Strategic funding to drive innovation and build networks
 - d. Engaging external stakeholders to embed change in providers

- e. Improvement within OfS to embed change across the organisation.



4. The OfS vision for Evidence and Impact is that:

Evidence and evaluation are used effectively by OfS and higher education providers to drive improvements in access and participation

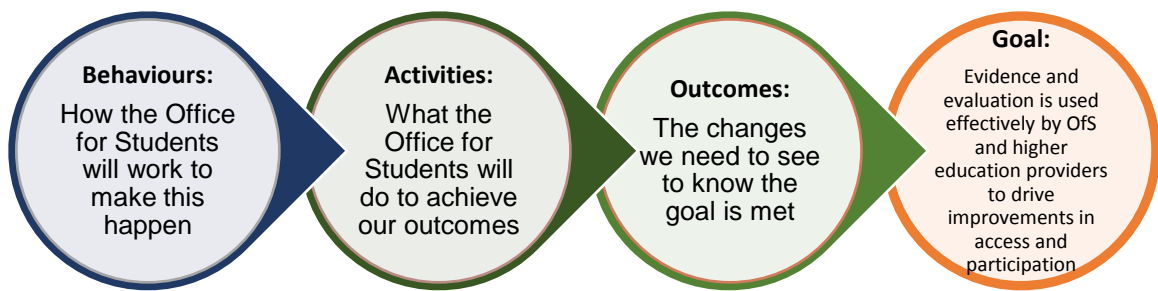
Why this matters

5. Given the scale of activity and investment to improve access and participation, we believe there is a need for a significant improvement in the generation, use and dissemination of evidence about what works to improve outcomes for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds across the student lifecycle. Where there is evidence currently, this is not being applied effectively and providers are not systematically evaluating their investments to learn what is and is not working, and where efficiencies can be made.

6. Better use of evidence in decision making, and higher quality evaluation design and implementation, will improve the impact of interventions, meaning more effective use of the large sums spent each year on access and participation interventions and an improvement in outcomes for students.

The strategy

7. This paper sets out the proposed Evidence and impact strategy for access and participation. A significant amount of stakeholder engagement and evidence gathering has been undertaken to ensure that the strategy is live to current research and the needs of the OfS and sector. We have sought to recognise and mobilise a breadth of expertise to pioneer the collaborative, reflective and ambitious way of working that underpins this strategy.



What change do we want to see

8. We have outlined three core changes we need to see in the OfS and higher education providers and these outcomes will form the basis of how we measure success. The change we need to see in providers is a change we need to see in ourselves as an intelligent regulator, so our proposed outcomes for providers mirror those for the OfS.

9. First, we want providers and the OfS to **commit necessary resource** to evidence-informed strategy, programme design and evaluation. This means evidence is valued as a strategic priority and used to drive innovation and improvement and that appropriate resource and skills are dedicated to this work.

10. Second, we want providers and the OfS to use **research and evidence to inform design of programmes**. For providers, this means they understand the gaps in performance and make evidenced decisions about how to close those gaps. Programmes, policies and investments are informed by research and evidence of what works and providers choose appropriate and meaningful outcomes for their programmes, with a credible theory of change about how to get there. For the OfS this means that all regulation, funding and advice are informed by evidence.

11. Third, providers and the OfS **use evaluation to understand impact and improve**. This means providers and the OfS design and run robust evaluations appropriate to their investment and activities, and they interpret evaluation findings to improve the design of strategies, policies and programmes.

Commit to evidence-informed strategy, development and collaboration

Use research and evidence to inform investments

Use evaluation and evidence to understand impact and improve outcomes

Our proposed activities

Intelligent regulation

12. This means making changes to the regulatory processes to make sure providers value and use evidence and evaluation to improve the impact of access and participation, including:

- Introducing an evidence and **evaluation self-assessment tool** and action plan for providers to reflect and benchmark where they are now and where they need to get to, and then deliver an action plan to drive change
- Setting **higher expectations** and more targeted interventions to enhance how evidence and evaluation are being embedded and used in the access and participation regulation process
- Having **clearer guidance** to enable providers to demonstrate how the use of evidence and evaluation is improving understanding and impact through the regulatory process
- Introducing an **annual impact report** and enhanced monitoring to capture performance **grow the evidence**.

13. There is limited evidence available for providers to understand how to best target their investments. We will contribute to the growth of evidence to enable providers to use research and evidence to inform investments in a number of ways, including:

- i. **Evidence and Impact Exchange** is an independent body generating, synthesising and disseminating high quality evidence to enhance social mobility. We will:
 - Ensure alignment on what constitutes effective evidence and evaluation between EIX and OfS
 - Establish a common language, vocabulary, advice and guidance between OfS and EIX
 - Support the development of common measures, survey tools and frameworks
 - Consider how best to incentivise collaboration and co-creation
 - Launch the EIX in spring 2019

ii. **OfS commissions and facilitates evaluation, analysis and research** to inform our regulatory approach. This will enable us to understand what is working and how to improve, including evidence generated by providers through the access and participation regulation and strategic funding. We will:

- Establish our research and evaluation priorities in line with regulatory and funding aims and to complement areas of focus for EIX
- Address research, evidence and evaluation gaps across the lifecycle
- Ensure that we are contributing to national understanding through publishing research and analysis

Supporting Providers

Guidance and training

14. We are raising expectations of providers and they will need support to get there. Guidance and training will be focused on: good practice in programme design, designing and running rigorous evaluation, and learning from evaluation and evidence. To do this we will:

- Review existing evaluation and evidence training and events to identify gaps
- Align with and learn from NCOP evidence and data groups
- Inform regulatory guidance in line with research
- Design and/or facilitate training in line with regulatory guidance
- Training and guidance should cover the whole lifecycle
- Explore how we can support increased professionalism in field

Measuring impact

15. Making better use of data will allow providers to more rigorously evaluate the impact of their interventions and mobilise this knowledge to improve practice. New systems will need to be developed that enable better use of data while protecting the student interest. These activities will complement and support the approach outlined in the OfS data strategy. How we will enable providers to use evaluation to understand impact and improve will include:

- **Mapping available data:** identify what data is available to providers to help them understand their investments across the lifecycle. This includes:
 - the publication of performance data dashboard for regulation
 - our work with DfE, HESA, UCAS and tracking bodies to develop a central tracking and evaluation service to support providers to understand impact and maintained data in a secure way
- **Improving understanding of counterfactuals:** support providers to rigorously understand what happens to participants on programmes and what happens to similar non-participants

- **Develop shared outcome frameworks:** understand and develop a consistent approach to measuring outcomes across the lifecycle. For example, understanding the sustained impact of pre-university investment.

Strategic funding

16. We will use funding to drive innovation and collaboration. We will use our investment in the National Collaborative Outreach Programme and develop future Innovation Challenge Fund programmes to enable providers to value evidence and evaluation and use knowledge to improve the impact of access and participation. We want to enhance how we use strategic funding to sustain improvements and innovations in evaluation practice and generation of evidence. We will make sure that we embed evidence and evaluation into existing strategic funding. To do this we will:

- Plan how we can draw on strategic funding to meet our evidence and regulatory priorities
- Draw on the experience of proven evaluation frameworks for previous funded programmes, for example:
 - **Addressing Barriers to Student Success:** Develop a consistent method for evaluating the impact of funding at a provider and programme level.
 - **National Collaborative Outreach Programme:** Use strategic funding to improve evaluation practice.
- Engage with other funders such as Research Councils and third sector organisations to share investment to maximise impact and share practice.
- Help reduce costs of evaluation, as appropriate (e.g. supporting evaluation networks for small and specialist providers)
- Embed evidence and evaluation in strategic funding, e.g. advising how to robustly evaluate the impact of the projects funded through the Innovation Challenge Fund such as the recent Mental Health and Local Graduates calls.

Engaging external stakeholders

17. We are setting high expectations of providers to demonstrate how they value and use evidence and evaluation and this will be challenging for many providers in terms of capabilities, resources and confidence. The success of this strategy will be determined by how effectively we persuade our stakeholders of the value of evidence and evaluation in decision making.

18. Our communications and engagement strategy is essential if we are going to realise and sustain the change we want to see. This is concerned with our public voice, our ability to affect change through a call for action, but also facilitating more national and international evidence through our levers of persuasion and convening.

19. A key change will be how we communicate and disseminate evidence and how we promote effective practice of A&P work. To do this we will:

- Establish communications and stakeholder strategy
- Segment our audiences, and tailor and target communications

- Use behavioural insights to ensure our regulatory guidance is making the greatest impact.

Improvement within the OfS

20. For this strategy to succeed there needs to be a commitment to improving access and participation as a collective effort across the OfS. We will nurture and sustain an evidence culture across the organisation, embedding more consistent processes and methods for measuring the impact of government investment. We must demonstrate that everything we do is delivering value for target audiences and society. The key areas for change include:

- **Processes:** we will develop processes to make sure existing and new access and participation activity and investment are underpinned by evidence and robust evaluation, for example:
 - Project management, contracting, project support, training and professional development
 - A more consistent approach to evidence and evaluation would help us understand and articulate the impact of our investment and demonstrate our intelligent regulation
- **Internal communication strategy:** we will implement a comprehensive strategy for staff engagement and communication.

How we will measure success

21. We are in the process of finalising key performance measures for our work to drive improvements across the OfS. At a high-level these will be focused on:

- **Closing gaps:** we see the strategy's measures of success linked to the OfS KPMs relating to closing gaps in access and participation. The strategy will provide a strategic framework for how the OfS can pressure and enable providers and their partnerships to make progress and to know where and how to intervene if improvement is slow
- **Overarching measure:** We will measure success of the strategy through KPM 6: "The percentage of providers with A&P Plans that contain robust evaluation methods focused on impact and leading to improved practice" as measured by the regulatory assessment process.