

Evaluation of the Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Competition

Formative Evaluation Report 1 – Summary

Introduction

SQW has been commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the **Office for Students and Research England's £10 million 'Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange' Competition**. The Competition is supporting 20 projects to develop and share understanding of effective practice in student engagement, and to inform on-going knowledge exchange (KE) policy and investment.

The broad aims of the evaluation are:

- to identify and evaluate project-level and Competition-level evidence on the benefits to students and partners of engaging in KE activities;
- to work with projects to ensure the quality, robustness and effectiveness of project-level monitoring and evaluation; and
- to present the learning in different ways to inform the higher education sector, share good practice and provide evidence to support new partnership and interventions.

The evaluation activities include a meta-evaluation of projects' self-evaluation reports, assessing the quality, coverage and credibility of evidence generated by the projects. **As part of this, SQW developed an Evaluation Reporting Template for projects to provide data on their activities, outputs, outcomes, plans for evaluation, and key learning** at regular six-monthly intervals. The template has been designed to enable projects to provide evidence in a robust and consistent way, to inform the Competition-level evaluation and generate overarching learning and conclusions. The completed Reporting Templates will be used throughout the evaluation period to inform a series of formative reports. **This paper is a high-level summary of the first formative report, based on a detailed review of the second Evaluation Reporting Templates submitted in May 2021¹.**

¹ Covering 19 of the 20 projects, as agreed with the OfS, as one project has had a significantly delayed start and therefore light touch engagement with the evaluation.

Findings

Project progress

In the second Evaluation Reporting Template, projects were asked to provide a **high-level summary of progress within the reporting period** (to end-March 2021²), and how this compares to what was planned/anticipated, although it is noted that not all projects included comprehensive commentary on progress relative to their initial plans.

Delivery progress was very mixed across the projects. A high-level assessment by SQW of progress against expectations found seven projects are considered to be 'behind', eight projects are 'on-track', three projects are 'ahead', and one project's progress is not known. This means that **11 of the 19 projects are assessed to be on-track or ahead of their plans, with under a half (7) behind at this point.** Of the seven projects which are considered to be behind, **six appear to be experiencing minor delays** (mainly due to accommodating restrictions as a result of COVID-19 associated with delivery and difficulty filling staff roles and recruiting partner organisations). These factors do not appear to be major concerns for the projects with mitigating actions in place or planned. **One of the seven projects considered to be 'behind' has experienced significant delays**, as a substantial element of their planned activity includes international travel which has been affected by COVID-19 restrictions (however, they have indicated that this delay has been discussed and agreed with Research England and the OfS). Owing to delays in delivery, underspend is evident across the projects, with seven of the projects reporting underspend in Year 1 of project delivery.

Projects were also asked to provide **details on any significant changes to their project plans.** In most cases, the scope of planned activity has not changed substantively since the previous reporting period (not unexpected as material changes were made in 2020 in response to COVID-19 and covered in first Evaluation Reporting Template to end-December 2020). However there have been some changes since early-2021 which may have implications for the nature of engagement and outputs and outcomes, and therefore the project-level evaluation. For example, **three projects have added new strands of activity** (such as interventions with local schools, a 'Future Leaders' intervention, and activities to boost student engagement) and **three projects have revised the scope of their activity** (one 'suspending' a strand of their project, one project 'compressing' their project due to the pandemic, and one project only recruiting one student cohort instead of two).

The nature of project activity, and stage of delivery, varies significantly across, and in some instances within, projects; several projects are multi-strand, meaning they have several components/strands, which are at different stages of delivery. However, **nearly all projects have completed set-up** (one multi-strand project is still in the process of setting up one strand), and **most projects have moved on to marketing and recruitment activities.** Additionally, **most**

² Project reports were submitted in May 2021. Projects were asked to include progress/data up until end of March 2021. It is noted that some projects have included data/activities into April/May 2021. It is not possible to identify all instances where this may be the case.

(16) projects delivered core practical KE activities to some extent in the reporting period, with two of those projects choosing to deliver a ‘pilot stage’ to test activities before rolling out to larger groups. Outside of their core KE activities, several projects have also made progress against other activities, such as gathering evaluation data, attending/presenting at conferences/events and development of materials (such as KE Frameworks and toolkits, as discussed below).

Outputs and outcomes

Projects were asked to update the ‘core outputs’ and ‘other outputs’ tables within the **Evaluation Reporting Template**, including ‘target’ outputs (reflecting targets for the two-year project as a whole) and ‘achieved’ outputs to date (up to end of March 2021). A high-level summary of ‘core outputs’ reported is at Table 1.

Projects have continued to make good progress delivering outputs. Since the first report, projects have clarified targets, and in some cases these have increased. The expectation now is that over 13,000 students will be engaged through projects funded by the Competition, and strong progress has been made against this target, with over 5,700 students engaged by March 2021.

Table 1: Core outputs

Core output	Target	Achieved (as of March 2021)
Overall number of students engaged	13,274	5,762
Overall number of partners engaged	1,874	1,185
Number of events delivered	150	552
Number of toolkits/materials produced	28	103

The volume of partners engaged is also very encouraging, with approaching 1,200 partners engaged across the projects. This demonstrates the significant breadth of activity and provides a strong basis on which to derive evidence on the nature of benefits for partners from their involvement in student KE activity as project delivery progresses. Targets for events delivered and toolkits/materials produced have also been exceeded even at this early stage. This is due to two projects in particular, which reported substantial achievements on both outputs but which did not originally expect to realise these outputs, and it may also reflect that online delivery owing to COVID-19 has led to a higher number of online events and development of toolkits/materials.

The Evaluation Reporting Template also asked projects to **define any ‘under-represented’ groups they are seeking to engage and report on outputs for these groups** (if relevant). In the completed templates for the first reporting period, nearly half (nine) of the 19 projects did not provide a definition; however this has much improved in the second reporting template, with 15 of the 19 providing definitions. Across the projects a wide range of groups are being targeted, with ten groups mentioned, ranging across characteristics/under-represented groups targeted by

the Competition. **Students from low-income/low-educational backgrounds, students with disabilities and students from minority ethnic backgrounds are most commonly cited.**

From the first to second report, the expected outcomes have remained the same for a majority of projects; this is expected, given the general consistency in activity discussed above. Figure 1 below summarises each beneficiary group, the number of projects that identified outcomes for that group and common outcomes found across projects (mentioned by at least two projects).

Few projects have reported ‘achieved’ outcomes to date, which is to be expected at this stage. That said, three projects reported achieved outcomes related to: (i) improved student skills; and (ii) developed/improved relationships between the higher education institutions (HEI(s)) and partner organisations/businesses (as evidenced by surveys and interviews with businesses or partners).

Figure 1: Summary of anticipated outcomes by beneficiary group

Students (18)	HEIs (17)	Non-HEI partners (19)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased employability and professionalism • Improved networks • Improved skills (e.g. entrepreneurship, communication) • Increased participation and engagement with local communities • Ability to self-reflect and identify further areas for development • Improved confidence <p><i>Under-represented groups (7)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of barriers to access • Better targeting of student recruitment • Improved exposure for target groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved understanding of KE / enhanced evidence base to inform future activities • Enhanced understanding of barriers to participation in KE / models and frameworks of to be scaled up / sustained • New / enhanced relationships / networks with partners • Increased civic partnership / engagement with the local community • Improved HEI staff skills (e.g., communication, collaboration) • Increased awareness / participation in KE by HEI staff • Improved recruitment practices • Income / fundraising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed / improved relationship(s) with HEI(s) • Developed / improved relationships with local community • Better understanding of possible solutions to business / organisation problems and challenges • Increased understanding of benefits and opportunities related to engagement in KE / with students • Access to graduates for potential employment • Contribute to / influence enterprise education in HEIs • Improved staff skills (e.g. communication, collaboration)

Source: SQW based review of second project evaluation reports

Emerging learning

Projects were asked to reflect on their achievements, challenges and learning during the second reporting period. **Key learning points are centred around how to effectively engage students and partners, and responses to the challenge of COVID-19** (which has remained the main challenge for projects). This emphasis is perhaps to be expected given the early stages of the Competition, where focus has been on completing the set-up phase, and recruitment of participants and partners, and given that the pandemic is still affecting the mechanisms through

which project activities can be delivered (and the every-day life of students and project partners more broadly). It appears that the need to move to remote delivery and increase use of digital solutions, due to COVID-19, provided a fruitful ground for quite a few learning opportunities.

Some key points of learning identified include:

- Online event formats are more accessible to students, especially those with caring or work responsibilities, and the recruitment of student mentors can help to enhance engagement
- The use of pre-event briefings can minimise the risk of poor attendance, and the use of 'breakout rooms' in virtual events/sessions can be more effective than open discussions in terms of maximising student involvement
- Regular communication (between staff, students, business partners and stakeholders) is key to overall project momentum and outcomes from KE partnerships
- Well-established relationships with partners and a proactive approach to enabling engagement via virtual alternatives to activities has helped address the challenges of COVID-19.

On-going evaluation perspectives

It is a priority of the Competition-level evaluation led by SQW to work with projects to enable them to design and deliver evaluation plans that will be able to capture evidence of outcomes in a consistent and reliable way. **Projects have, therefore, been asked to include details of their evaluation plans in the Evaluation Reporting Templates.**

The review of the second project reports suggest that **a majority of projects have improved their Logic Models, Theories of Change and evaluation plans since the first report submission** (end-December 2020). Across the projects, common changes include drafting evaluation research questions, adding assumptions to Theories of Change, updating evaluation timelines to reflect delays (due to COVID-19), and reconsidering/changing data sources to be used for comparison data. The changes that were introduced, for the most part, reflect a progress in the maturity of the projects' delivery and evaluation design and plans. In addition, the projects' updates indicate that a number of projects have made progress in delivering their evaluation tasks.

However, areas of concern remain for the Competition-level evaluation. First, for many projects **there is limited consideration of the limitations and risks of their evaluation plan.** For example, the majority of the projects did not appear to have considered formally the limitations of the evaluation designs, or mitigating measures for identified limitations have not been considered. Common risks and limitations identified by SQW include reliance on primary data collection from students (subject to research fatigue, non-response, response bias); reliance on linking with university-wide data (with concerns over securing consents and agreements); and issues with gaining access to secondary data from external sources. Second, there may be **some challenges associated with the use of comparison groups.** While a number of projects opt for

a pre- and post- evaluation design, others aim to identify a counterfactual through a comparison group, and although comparison groups have been identified (i.e., non-participant students, UK FE/HE data, wider university community), issues of recruitment of these groups and the timing of data collection and analysis remains uncertain on some cases.