

Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Competition

Formative Evaluation Report 2 - Summary

Introduction

SQW has been commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the **Office for Students and Research England 'Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange' Competition**. The Competition is supporting 20 projects to develop and share understanding of effective practice in student engagement in knowledge exchange (KE), and to inform on-going 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 activities, 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 learning at six-monthly intervals. The completed Reporting Templates will be used throughout the evaluation to inform a series of formative reports. **This paper is a summary of the second formative report, based on a detailed review of the third Evaluation Reporting Templates, covering activities up to November 2021.**

Project progress

Progress against delivery plans

Since the previous reporting period (up to March 2021) there has been an **accelerated progress in delivery of activities for the majority of the projects**. This is particularly positive given the on-going challenge of delivering student-focussed KE activity during the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption this has caused for individuals and institutions. Projects appeared to have

effectively implemented the earlier adaptations to their project design and mode of delivery to address this challenge, with digital solutions used to deliver activities remotely where possible.

This has enabled **most projects to remain on track and/or catch-up from delays experienced in the first few months of the Competition**. Specifically, of the 20 projects, most were assessed by SQW as 'on-track' (x12) or 'ahead of schedule' (x2) by November 2021, compared to their delivery plan. For those projects 'behind schedule' (x6), four were confident that they will be back 'on track' within the next few months, with changes made to project design and momentum building in delivery. Two projects (which are reliant on 'in-person' activities, not easily adaptable to online delivery) remain well-behind in delivery.

Project scope and management

Most projects did not make any substantive changes in the scope or scale of their projects since the last report. This is not unexpected, as material changes were made in many cases in mid to late 2020 in the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, two projects reported they had scaled-back to a modest extent the number of students they hope to engage; and one project was in the process of revising their project design and activities plans, due to the challenges posed by the on-going COVID-19 restrictions.

Around half of the projects have experienced changes in staff responsible for project management and delivery since the initial launch in mid-2020; this includes both personnel changes to existing positions, and the recruitment of new staff members, as projects have matured, and new roles have been identified. By November 2021, 19 of the 20 projects indicated they were at full staffing capacity. Changes in personnel (where relevant) required time and resource to manage, but this does not appear to have caused any significant issues or impacted adversely on delivery progress overall.

Overview of activities delivered

The type of KE activity delivered has varied considerably across the projects, which reflects their wide-ranging scope, focus and the different student groups engaged. However, across this diversity, the activity has commonly included large-scale events and webinars, workshops, outreach work and partnering students with external partners to design and deliver targeted KE activities. Common types of activity have included:

- **Delivery of 'enterprise challenges'**, including via specific events, where students have worked in groups or have partnered with external organisations to develop new or improved products or services, progressing concepts from design through to delivery.
- **Work placements**, where students have been placed in various roles in partner organisations (such as schools, hospitals, small to medium enterprises (SMEs)) to gain experience, to share knowledge with staff, and to undertake targeted projects delivering against the aims and objectives of the partner. In some projects, student placement followed training sessions or participation in enterprise challenges. In other projects, placements have been followed by

debrief sessions with students, to identify learning to be shared more widely with the student body.

- **Identification and sharing of thematic content with organisations**, including in some cases through co-production with students.
- **Development of specialist knowledge exchange content and materials**, including for example through calls for and publication of research papers on knowledge exchange; and the development of toolkits to provide guidance on good practice in knowledge exchange.

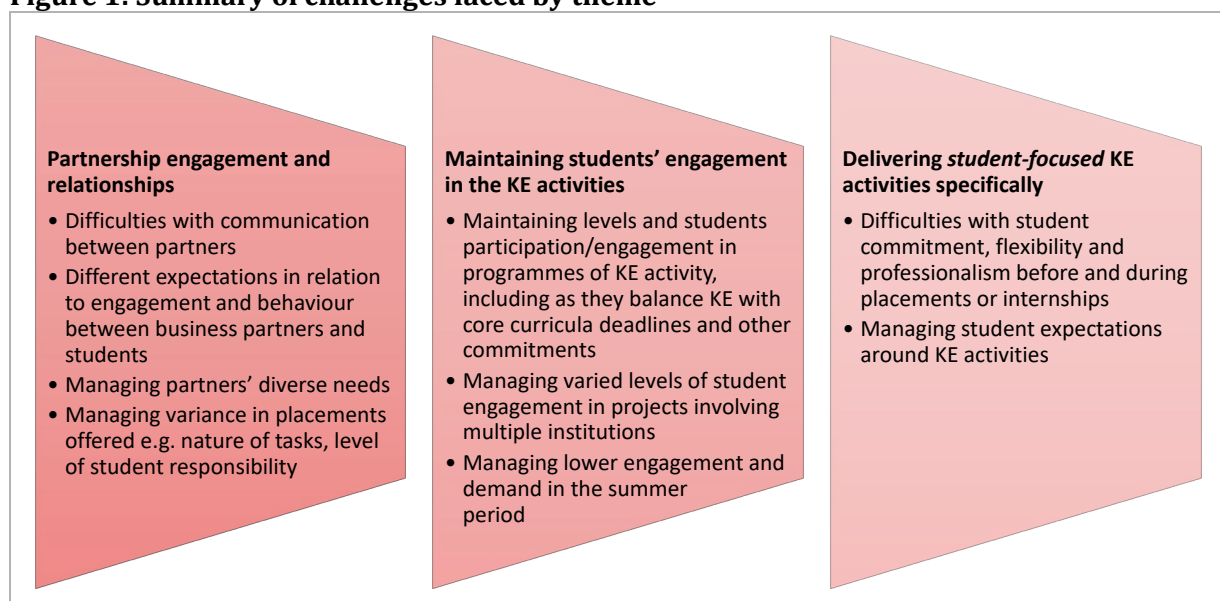
Since the previous reporting period there has also been a notable **increase in the level of marketing and awareness raising activities delivered**. Projects appeared to have refocused their marketing campaigns to attract new students. This includes showcasing examples of observed early benefits for students engaged to date to better ‘sell’ the KE activity to new students; many projects reported that this has worked well and helped in securing engagement and keeping momentum in delivery.

Three other points are noted in relation to activities over the latest reporting period. First, many of the projects have started to collect evidence in relation to outputs and outcomes of activities delivered to a varying scope and coverage. Second, dissemination activities of learning and experiences seems to have become increasingly prominent. Third, there is evidence of some projects beginning to plan for the longer-term legacy and sustainability of activity post-Competition.

Challenges faced

While, overall, projects have made good progress in the latest reporting period, some challenges were evident, with three areas emerging, as set out in the figure below.

Figure 1: Summary of challenges faced by theme



Source: SQW analysis of completed Evaluation Reporting Templates

It is interesting that there is a consistent theme related to both partners and students in terms of challenges around balancing and aligning expectations and behaviours between private sector organisations in particular and students in the delivery of KE activity. This is not unexpected, and should not be taken too far at this stage, with activity on-going in all cases. However, this does have implications for on-going activity and learning.

On-going challenges related to COVID-19 were also cited, including on-going restrictions within universities or partner organisations limiting engagement in external events, and a perceived or explicit apprehension around engagement with in-person activity or events.

Outputs and outcomes

Projects have continued to make good progress in delivering against core Competition

outputs: students engaged, partners engaged, events delivered, and toolkits/materials produced.

The expectation is that approximately 13,200 students will be engaged through projects funded by the Competition, although the level of engagement will vary by project. Strong progress has been made against this target, with **approximately 10,100 students engaged so far**. This is a substantive increase on the level of engagement reported in the previous reporting template (c. 5,700 at that point). Looking at the spread of engagement across the projects, nine projects reported engagement with up to 500 students, six between 500-1,000 students and four of over 1,000 students. As such, whilst some projects are engaging with more students than others – as would be expected – a substantial volume of students have been engaged in KE activity across the portfolio of projects supported by the Competition.

In addition, the expectation is that approximately 1,600 partners will be engaged by the Competition. Again, strong progress has been made against this target, **with 1,375 partners engaged across the projects so far**. This is an increase of approximately 200 partners engaged on the level of partner engagement reported in the previous reporting template.

Notably, Competition targets for the number of events delivered (346) and toolkits/materials produced (32) have been met, with approximately **850 events delivered so far, and 175 toolkits/materials produced**. This is driven by two projects reporting substantial but initially unexpected achievements against these outputs. The over-performance may also reflect in part that the pivot to online delivery owing to COVID-19 has led to a higher number of events and development of further toolkits/materials (which are needed in the absence of face-to-face engagement).

Other outputs include published articles and/or literature reviews, development of websites and webpages, social media activities, development of templates or frameworks for future KE activities and curating new training programmes (including for academic staff), and the delivery of conference presentations. These outputs are important to the intended role of the Competition in seeking to share learning with others beyond project partners to inform KE practice and policy more broadly.

Few projects have reported ‘achieved’ outcomes to date, which is expected at this interim stage. This said, four projects reported achieved outcomes related to: improved student skills, strengthening student networks, increased employability and professionalism through exposure to professional world, strengthening relationships between the higher education institutions (HEIs) and partner organisations/businesses, and partner organisations/businesses gaining a better understanding of possible solutions to business challenges. Projects have indicated that outcomes have been evidenced by surveys or questionnaires and interviews with businesses and partners.

Emerging learning

The Table below summarises the key learning points at this stage based on the completed Evaluation Reporting Templates. The Competition is generating considerable learning on how to engage and work with students, partners and academics in the delivery of KE activities. The learning covers both ‘process’ perspectives and ‘impact’ perspectives.

Table 1: Summary of emerging learning from projects

Emerging learning from projects in relation to ...

... project delivery and communications

- A flexible and blended offer (e.g. a mix of virtual and face-to-face) is increasingly common. However, there is the risk online activity leads to less direct interaction and meaningful connection between students, partners and those leading KE activities; this risk needs to be recognised and managed carefully.
- Regular communication between delivery staff, students, partners and stakeholders is key to maintaining momentum and managing expectations in KE delivery.
- Feedback/post-completion surveys often have high non-response rates which can limit their usefulness as an evaluation method. Instead, framing evaluation activities (such as psychometric tests) as opportunities to gain an understanding of how their skills can be improved might be more attractive to students.

... student engagement and participation

- Formal terminology relating to KE can be unclear and opaque to some students; finding alternatives and language that directly reflects the student experience, and the practical ways in which engagement can support their personal and development and future prospects, can make the projects more appealing to students and encourage engagement.
- Holding events and activities at a variety of times and for different durations can help with participation, particularly for students who have caring responsibilities or other time commitments.
- Regular reminders (e.g. e-mails, texts, phone calls) are often necessary to ensure that student engagement is maintained throughout the delivery cycle of relevant KE activities.
- Listening to the ‘student voice’, and seeking to create a ‘sense of community’ amongst participants in KE, can help student participants to feel valued and that their views are heard. This in turn can facilitate effective delivery and, subsequently, achievement of outcomes.

Emerging learning from projects in relation to ...

- Wraparound support for students undertaking KE activities (e.g. during preparation, onboarding and reflection) can enhance the student experience and the quality of KE. This may include developing training materials and accessible resources (e.g. videos, online materials), which can help students value reflective learning skills.
- When facing low engagement from students, focusing on the 'quality' of engagement and interaction can result in high levels of student satisfaction.
- The importance of communicating and providing training and guidance (where appropriate) on expectations from business or external organisations on what constitutes 'professional behaviour' during preparation for internships and placements. This can be important to ensure that internships and placements are able to meet the needs of both students and external organisations.

... partner engagement and participation

- There should be clear engagement pathways for business partners and clarity of intended outcomes from KE from the outset. In this context, any new partnerships have to be carefully nurtured, with substantial time and investment devoted to marketing, networking, information sharing and joint explorations of the needs, objectives and preferred ways of working of the respective parties.
- Partnership working between different organisations can be enhanced by staff members joining activities run by the other institution(s) (e.g. speed networking sessions).
- Partnerships between universities can be productive and provide opportunities for learning. However, relationships and expectations need to be aligned, with an understanding that different institutions operate differently and may have different priorities and objectives from engagement in projects.
- Offering structured support (such as drop-in sessions or the production of welcome and introductory materials) to business partners offering placements or internships can be important, ensuring their inputs are proportionate and they are fully sighted on the aims and objectives of the KE activity.

... academic engagement and participation

- Consulting with academics in the development of toolkits or other resources to inform KE activity is important where they are expected to be involved and/or support delivery, including where KE is integrated within the curriculum.
- Working with early career researchers can give them the confidence and motivation to become more involved in KE activities during their future academic career.
- Academics value the opportunity to work, and build relationships, with like-minded colleagues who value student KE.
- Unexpected benefits can be realised for academic staff within institutions as a result of KE activities, such as exchange of knowledge and working practice. These benefits to academics (and their institutions) should be recognised in consideration of the overall effects and benefits of student-focused KE.

Source: SQW review of third project reports

Looking across the feedback, one theme emerging from the evaluation is the **importance of considering the delivery mechanism of projects**, and specifically whether KE activity is delivered in-curricula or extra-curricula (or potentially both), which informs approaches to engagement, activity, and outcomes, and the learning on ‘what works’ and in what context.

On-going evaluation perspectives

Each Formative Report looks in detail at specific themes and issues for the evaluation. In the Second Formative Report we focussed on how projects define under-represented groups, effective practice in engaging these student groups, and any issues in accessing robust and reliable data on students’ profiles. This matters, as a key priority for the Competition is to generate evidence on how issues of equality of opportunity and diversity and inclusion within student KE are being addressed, and what works (and does not work) in this context. Projects were asked to provide a written narrative about how they were engaging with different student groups – considering both ‘student type’ (e.g. degree level, mode of study, disadvantage), and ‘protected characteristics’ (e.g. age, sex, disability).

The Evaluation Reporting Templates identified 15 different (not mutually exclusive) student groups engaged so far. The most cited ‘student type’ engaged was students from low income/low participation backgrounds, identified by around two-thirds of the projects. Other ‘student types’ mentioned were students with caring responsibility, mature students, and care leavers, each mentioned by around one-quarter of the projects; these groups were often associated with the focus on students from low income/low participation backgrounds. The feedback from projects indicates that there is not generally a specific focus or emphasis on particular student types in terms of level of study or mode of study.

In terms of ‘protected characteristics’, projects commonly reported engaging students from minority ethnic backgrounds (identified in around one-half of cases) and/or students with disabilities (identified in just over half of cases).

Examples of effective practice in engaging these student groups included:

- engaging with internal and external experts to ensure that programmes are inclusive and accessible to a range of groups;
- targeted and inclusive promotion and awareness-raising activities;
- providing extended application windows and strategic timing of application deadlines (e.g. to avoid exam periods); and
- working with university Careers Services to ensure that application processes are transparent.

In relation to any issues in accessing robust and reliable data on students’ profiles, 15 of the 20 projects supported their written narratives with data pertaining to student characteristics.

However, examples of challenges to obtaining and sharing this data included:

- data on protected characteristics not being widely captured;
- varied data collection within institutions with regards to KE;
- misunderstandings arising when communicating the relevance of recording and reporting knowledge exchange activities; and
- delays in establishing internal data sharing permissions across project partners.

Taken together, the feedback provides a mixed picture in relation to how projects define and collect data on under-represented groups and protected characteristics. Positively, it is evident that most projects have considered and defined the profile of under-represented groups or other groups of students they intend to target, and have engaged with in practice. This said, projects have also confirmed there are recurring issues that pose a barrier to obtaining robust, consistent and accurate data on student profiles. This poses a risk to achieving the objective of the Competition in relation to generating evidence on how issues of equality of opportunity and diversity and inclusion within KE activities are being addressed. Project leads should be encouraged to seek to gather robust and comprehensive data where this is possible and proportionate, maximising the existing systems and sources of data in place within their (and partner) institutions.