

HEIF evaluation expert advisory group

Minutes of group meeting; 12 December 2022

Attendees

Group:

- George Bramley
- Tomas Coates Ulrichsen
- Professor Luke Georghiou
- Dr Phil Clare
- Dr Gemma Derrick
- Dr Effie Amanatidou

In attendance:

- Alice Frost
- Michael Clark (Project officer)
- Ellen Bamford (Head of Data and Evidence, Research England)
- Conrad Thompson (PA Consulting)
- Alastair Hall (PA Consulting)
- Hannah Colyer (PA Consulting)
- Mike Boxall (PA Consulting)
- Elaine Eggington (IP Pragmatics)

Apologies:

- Rosie Lavis (Project officer)

Item 1: Welcome by the chair and update/review of Terms of Reference

1. TCU introduced himself as the new chair of the advisory group, given his background in evaluation methods, following discussions with the Research England project team. AF noted a change in governance arrangements, with an internal steering group now set up to provide policy steers, before reinforcing the importance of the advisory group to provide specific methodological advice to the project. MC provided a brief update on project timescales and provided an overview to the group of the key research questions listed in the specification to help focus the upcoming discussion.

Item 2: Minutes from previous meeting

2. The minutes from the previous meeting (held on 25 October 2022) were agreed. Before the group moved on to item 3, it was emphasised that the programme theory may need to adapt as the project progresses.

Item 3: Discussion item 1: HEIF evaluation research questions

3. Colleagues from PA Consulting/IP Pragmatics joined the meeting at this stage and discussed the evaluation questions which had been circulated to the group in advance. These were broken into three categories of questions; process, impact, and value for money (VfM), noting their approach was based on Magenta Book guidance and evaluation best practice.

4. Process questions:

- The group discussed the balance between burden and benefit, particularly when focusing on the complexities of HEIF as a formula based fund .
- AF noted the importance of developing a mechanism which can test attribution.
- As part of the rapid evidence assessment, PA Consulting described how they considered government priorities, looking at what HEIF contributes to, and investigating explicit links between programmes.
- LG suggested that it may be valuable to focus on broad aims of knowledge exchange from the research system, and to shift focus away from government priorities. However, AF stated that Research England need to find a way of assuring HM Treasury that we communicate government priorities to HEPs.
- LG also noted that within institutions, HEIF can complement different strategies.
- GB suggested that governance could be a separate group of questions.
- TCU noted the difference between process in terms of how Research England administer the programme, versus the programme of what a HEP does internally with funding a strategic decision.
- PC picked up on bullet point 4 of EQ1, which reads *“is there evidence that the use of HEIF funding has changed over the evaluation period from capacity building to more innovative use of funds?”* PC stated that it was important not to place a value judgement on which is better: capacity building or innovative use of funds.
- TCU suggested that it might be worth studying the notion of quasi-guaranteed funding whereby allocations can change to some extent year-on-year, which happened roughly during the middle of the evaluation period, and what implications this has had on university decision-making.

5. Impact questions:

- LG noted that the notion of ‘flexible funding’ was linked to the agility of institutions, but also to the nature of HEIF compared to funding with rigid spending criteria.
- AF reaffirmed that Research England have high level priorities but do not tell HEPs how to spend their allocation.
- PC stated that KE funding streams are often bundled together by HEPs, which allows for flexibility. He suggested that the ability to HEIF so flexibly alongside other funding schemes can make both funding schemes more effective and valuable
- TCU asked how additionality was feeding into the programme theory. He also noted that the impacts that are realised are conditioned by the ability of the system to absorb knowledge which comes out of universities.

- GD noted that in order for this study to be considered a realist evaluation, PA Consulting need to be more specific on what kind of beneficiary groups are being focused on and why. She noted that this has implications for how the research questions are constructed.
 - PC noted that government departments could be considered a beneficiary group, because universities provide useful data. PC also stressed the importance of the policy engagement side of KE.
 - EE agreed that the section on beneficiaries and how PA/IPP link through to them needs to be worked on as they progress their work.
 - EA commented that some of the sub questions were very specific and should allow for flexibility.
6. Value for Money (VfM) questions:
- TCU noted that PA/IPP should be clear about what they mean by leveraged funding.
 - EE stated that different universities will have different funding opportunities available to them.
 - PC picked up on bullet point 3 of EQ11: *“What is the proportion of HEIF funding spent on different types of KE-related activities (eg staffing, proof-of-concept funding, academic entrepreneurship, etc)”* PC emphasised the importance of staffing here, noting that staffing is often the way in which you deliver KE programmes e.g. around academic entrepreneurship. He suggested this question should possibly be reworded.
 - EA noted that it may be useful to compare impacts from other relevant initiatives in the absence of HEIF.

Item 4: Discussion item 2: Evaluation approach – methodological advice and expertise on next steps

7. PA/IPP talked through the key findings from the rapid evidence assessment (REA). PA/IPP explained how they think the conclusions they have drawn from this document will inform how they deliver an approach to the evaluation.
8. HC provided an overview of the methodology used in the REA, and the data sources. HC claimed that the main risk is possibly attribution.
9. TCU questioned whether there was a decent level of evidence of how HEIF operates at the strategic level, and advised PA/IPP not to rely too heavily on certain data sources, stating that HE-BCI captures information on a wide range of activities but not everything KE-related. TCU also argued that PA Consulting should not rely on what is written in HEIF strategy documents, and claims from these documents need to be validated or tested in the fieldwork.
10. PC stated that HEIF allows HEPS to experiment and be innovative. He also stated that HEIF is never considered in isolation and needs to be considered in that context.

11. AH reflected briefly on VfM, stating that RoI figures would be extended to cover the period of the evaluation. AH also discussed the '4E' framework (economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity), and stated that PA Consulting may struggle with the efficiency element: particularly looking at how efficiently have HEPs converted resources into outputs which are attributable to HEIF. AH finally commented that the key data gaps are at the output level of the programme theory.
12. TCU asked PA/IPP what level of resource they were dedicating to this study, to which AH responded that the resource profile will be broadly consistent with what has been committed in phase one.
13. AH discussed phasing or sequencing delivery options for the evaluation. PA/IPP had initially intended to split the evaluation into three phases, and considered looking at the evaluation on a year-by-year basis. Their current proposal is to treat the whole timeframe under review as one period, with a lens on observed changes at key points.
14. TCU noted that it was important for the evaluation to consider the ability of universities to respond to big external changes. TCU also noted that the focus on performance from 2010 onwards meant that some HEPs lost funding and asked whether that offered opportunities to explore growth/loss trajectories and how HEPs responded to this.
15. LG stressed from an HEP perspective, there has always been a need to make a case for HEIF, and from his perspective, these intense lobbying periods often leads to HEIF evolving to ensure survival.
16. The group were then asked to consider and feedback comments on the proposed programme theory diagram.
17. TCU suggested to focus on the programme theory, then examine whether indicators are available to support these. TCU advised strongly against relying too heavily on HE-BCI data.
18. AH stated that PA/IPP see the programme theory as a robust M&E framework for the project. AH also noted that HE-BCI is a source of indicator data but not the only one.
19. LG advised that an inductive approach from HE-BCI data can be dangerous, as the data is not always reliable. Some of the data is purely self-reported whilst others are properly auditable.
20. AF noted that we need to distinguish what HEIF does against what universities do. AF noted that there is a danger that we 'overclaim' HEIF attribution.
21. PC noted that policy engagement does not come out in the diagram as an explicit mechanism and asked the group to consider whether there were any other KE mechanisms that were not being considered.
22. TCU agreed with the point above and noted that the language in the programme theory was focused on the economic agenda. He also stated that the importance of the

external context could be included in the programme theory. Finally, he stated that the model would benefit from better capturing the enabling nature of HEIF.

23. EA noted that if the programme theory was built on existing programme recommendations, the diagram may not reflect the side effects or essence of HEIF.
24. GD echoed the comment above and noted that the diagram should be altered as the evaluation goes through data analysis.
25. AH confirmed that the diagram and accompanying narrative will be living documents, and will be adjusted accordingly.

Item 5: AOB and closing remarks

26. MC noted that it would be prudent for the group to meet in late January to discuss PA Consulting's HEIF Programme Evaluation Approach Paper. The group agreed to this, and dates will be circulated.