



Research
England

HEIF evaluation expert advisory group Minutes of group meeting; 16 June 2021

Attendees

Group:

- Alice Frost (Chair)
- George Bramley
- Tomas Coates Ulrichsen
- Professor Luke Georghiou
- Dr Phil Clare
- Dr Gemma Derrick
- Dr Efthymia Amanatidou

In attendance:

- Rosie Lavis (project officer)
- Michael Clark (project officer)
- Hamish McAlpine (observer)

Item 1: Welcome by the chair and introductions

1. The chair welcomed all attendees, noting the purpose of these meetings would be to seek advice and insight from the members for the programme of work ahead.

Item 2: Membership and terms of reference

2. The terms of reference were agreed by the group, noting the usefulness of being able to review the terms periodically should advice be needed across other areas of the evaluation programme at later stages.

Item 3: Introduction to the programme

3. An introduction to the HEIF programme was presented by Research England colleagues and Tomas Ulrichsen. Key characteristics of the programme were highlighted and the 2008 HEIF evaluation programme was discussed to present to the group wider challenges associated with evaluating the fund. The challenges outlined alluded to the difficulties of evaluating the fund against its broad objectives. The challenges also considered the diversity of higher education providers in receipt of a HEIF allocation and thus, great heterogeneity in activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Issues of attributing investments from the HEIF fund to final impacts achieved were noted, recognising the importance of complementary investments required for

success. Finally, the typically long-time scales needed to see impacts come into fruition was considered a common challenge typical of R&D/ early-stage innovation funding programmes.

4. The Chair noted that discussions with Government in the past have not undermined the quantitative approaches taken to previous evaluations. However, the narrative to support how funding drives impact is of great interest to the Government and would help to further contextualise ROI figures.

Item 4: Discussion of issues

5. The group discussed key issues relating on how to best focus the evaluation to inform the development of the tender which will be shared with group prior to the next meeting in September. The group made the following key points:
6. Key focus areas for evaluation: The high level aims and objectives of the programme were noted as particularly challenging to evaluate against, although the value of this was recognised to enable the necessary flexibility to most effectively support a diverse range of HEPs and external partners to generate a broad range of outputs. The group discussed that conclusions should look to comment on the overall value of the evaluation programme, efficiency and effectiveness (including appropriate scale of funds, allocation/distribution methods and other value for money activities e.g. collaboration. The group proposed that the evaluation should look to capture the value HEIF provides to HEPs to build strategic capacity, enabling innovation in knowledge exchange and an adaptability to the emergence of new sectors. HEIF was described an 'infrastructural investment', enabling flexibility in the strategic leadership within a HEP. The group discussed the importance of understanding the intrinsic/external factors related to HEIF, where viewing universities as learning organisations that build on success and failure might be another valuable lens for the evaluation. Exploratory questions for the evaluation might therefore look to examine: The value of having HEIF resource available; the value of having flexibility of funds to invest and achieve associated impacts. The group discussed that a way to approach the evaluation might be to examine HEIF's role in the journey of a university. This could encourage narrative around 'additionality' that HEIF brings to their internal schemes, taking a more explorative approach to impact assessment. The group discussed a key finding of the 2008 evaluation describing how HEIF allowed universities to take risks and to pilot new initiatives.
7. Focus on economic outputs: With regard to outputs the group discussed the Government's interest in economic outputs and considered how this might be weighted in the forthcoming evaluation. The chair noted that HEIF funds have been linked to more specific government priorities over particular time periods, such as the uplift made available in 2017-18 from the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF), therefore the potential for the evaluation to give

rise to variety of 'classes' of impact was noted.

8. Case study selection and additional evidence: The group discussed the importance of achieving the right balance of 'specificity of evidence', noting that substantial evidence brought to Government is important to ensure that ROI figures are contextualised and therefore meaningful, without providing too little/too much detail which could risk undermining the outcomes and the value of the evaluation programme's broad aims. The group agreed that there needed to be a strong focus on additionality, and evaluators would be expected to explore different ways of approaching this question, i.e. through counterfactuals and/or control groups. The group noted that the choice and variety of case studies would be useful to ensure that representative samples are included, and that the KEF clusters are the predominant characteristic in selecting a representative set of case studies. The group considered sensible approaches to case study evidence for the evaluation.
9. Case study evidence collection: The group noted that the tender should look to present very clearly the need for the evaluation and what core evaluation question the project should look to answer. The group discussed that the tender would have to be clear on what additional data would be needed. They debated whether external testimonies from beneficiaries would be helpful or too burdensome. The group noted that the issue of 'burden' needed to be placed in the context of 13 years of HEIF funding that the evaluation would look to examine. They discussed the potential for bidders to have a role in collating information and data from partners, whilst noting that care would have to be exercised to protect university stakeholder relationships. Research England can also make available qualitative monitoring data to feed into the evaluation exercise. The group suggested that Research England should ensure that bidders responding to the evaluation tender address how they would capture a variety of external benefits, whilst minimising burden and ensure that a diverse range of HEPs were represented. The group noted that a relatively small number of institutions receive the proportionate majority of HEIF funds, noting that it might be useful to understand whether a higher academic FTE biases the allocation. Potential issues of data quality were discussed e.g. do institutions in receipt of the full HEIF cap commit to recording their data accurately?
10. Significance of leverage – as an input and as proxy for impact: and expressed that the relationship between HEIF and other funding streams should be captured; both complementary investments and income as a proxy for impact. The group described the central, critical role played by HEIF as a 'foundation stone', providing expertise and capacity for other sources of funding to build on. Again, difficulties in terms of approaching the issue of causality and intentionality of effects were touched upon.
11. Place: Research England reflected on the intricacies of providing insights on the place relevance of knowledge exchange activities in a commissioned project coordinated by Technopolis, noting that a level of practicality should be exercised in selecting key variables to ensure that meaningful findings are concluded to ensure that burden is commensurate. Research England noted that the Technopolis consultants will present their key findings from the project at the

next steering group meeting. It was noted that HEIF has never had an explicit place based objective, where the difficulties associated with measuring spill-over vs. intent of place based effects were described. The group also discussed the potential impact of place on efficiency and effectiveness, and hence the need to consider whether the issue was relevant to selection of case studies. Research England noted that any points of relevance from the study have potential to influence the evaluation design.

12. Time period of evaluation: The group agreed that this evaluation should focus across a set time period and suggested that this should be 'backward looking' to the last evaluation (2008-2020), which was considered a sufficient time window to observe impacts by the group. The group noted that there have been considerable disruptive events over this time to universities (e.g. financial crisis, Brexit, Covid-19), which would allow the evaluation to examine how universities have evolved and adapted to new challenges and opportunities.
13. Timing the evaluation: In terms of project planning, the group noted that it would be helpful to consider when might be optimal for universities to contribute to the evaluation.
14. Summing up: In summary, the evaluation could look to explore evidence and provide additional description of HEPs improvement as 'KE actors' between 2008 and 2020. Themes may include how HEIF have enabled:
 - a. Identifying and responding to demand
 - b. Enhanced innovation in knowledge exchange
 - c. Improved strategic direction and agility
 - d. Improved targeting of funding to achieve best outcomes (including the delivery of government priorities)
 - e. More risk taking and experimentation that other funding streams don't support
 - f. A leadership resource for universities to implement and build strategic capacity to become more agile.
15. Additional commentary may include:
 - a. Narrative around evaluation programme coherence
 - b. Sufficient alignment with/delivery of Government priorities
 - c. Additional contributions and impacts not currently well measured/understood to date
 - d. External verification (case studies from users/beneficiaries)
 - e. Controls/additionality
16. The group queried how the Government evaluation task force applied to Research England. The chair noted that Research England follow the advice given by BEIS to seek UKRI input as they have responsibility for setting the standards for evaluation. Research England project officers



have lines of communication open with the UKRI evaluation team where they will be kept up to date with the progress of the evaluation programme and ensure any good practice/useful advice can be utilised. UKRI evaluation team will also be provided with papers and minutes from all advisory group meetings. The steering group also noted that the OECD provide 'good practice' evaluation guidance that may assist with developing the evaluation tender.