

HEIF evaluation expert advisory group

Minutes of group meeting; 25 October 2022

Attendees

Group:

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

In attendance:

- Rosie Lavis (Project officer)
- 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:

- Tina Salih (PA Consulting)

Item 1: Welcome by the chair and introductions

1. The chair welcomed all attendees and noted that the group would be invited to present feedback on the proposed bid PA Consulting/IP Pragmatics. Phil Clare updated the group he has now taken up a position as Chief Executive Officer at Queen Mary Innovation Ltd QMUL. Though he remained a member of RE Council and attended the group in that role. Gemma Derrick has taken up a role as Associate Professor (Research Policy and Culture) at University of Bristol.

Item 2: Minutes from previous meeting

2. The minutes from the previous meeting (held on 28 September 2021) were agreed.

Item 3: HEIF evaluation interview panel to share key feedback on PA consulting and IP pragmatics written bid and interview with the group

3. The HEIF evaluation interview panel (comprising AF, TCU, RL, and MC) gave their reflections on the four suppliers that had been interviewed. It was noted that approaches generally were not that innovative and tended to focus strongly on activity level logic models with a narrow perspective. Less attention was given to issues such as how HEIF achieves institutional strategic development, delivers against government priorities and overall value for money related specifically to flexible formula funding, noting the importance of emphasising these as central aims of the evaluation to the suppliers. The conclusion the panel came to was that IP/PA appeared to have the strongest understanding of the overall system of how HEIF operates, including different stakeholders and drivers within HEPs, with the caveat that PA/IPP will need to work closely with RE and stakeholders to co-create a programme theory needed for a successful evaluation.
4. The interview panel re-iterated to the group that the most important outcomes we are seeking are a high-level programme theory which includes an explanation of how flexible formula funding used at HEP discretion delivers value for money, including alignment with government priorities, and then a conclusion on overall value for money delivered from the programme.
5. The group discussed the inclusion of Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) by PA/IPP in their proposed list of key stakeholders, and it was noted that HEIF is not funded by that department and, as set out in the tender, HEIF does not have place objectives. The tender set out that place might be an important contextual factor to be explored in testing in phase 2 and the group agreed that place was an important consideration for HEPs, though this might vary across the sector, and hence was likely an important factor to be considered in identifying research questions and phase 2 work.
6. AF noted for RE that the intention was that the evaluation may come to results that could be used in the next spending review. Key questions in the spending review are likely to include how a flexible formula funding programme such as HEIF can address Government priorities (compared as example against more targeted project programmes), as well as that the programme achieves the priorities representing value for money.

Item 4: PA consulting and IP pragmatics presentation; approach to evaluation of HEIF programme

8. PA/IPP joined the meeting and provided a presentation detailing their approach. It was reiterated to PA/IPP that initial development of the programme theory should start with understanding of the agreed Government priorities where BEIS were the lead department. The group noted that the testing phase is likely to yield evidence of important place dimensions on the ground, and hence further exploration on place is likely to be appropriate. HE sector differentiation was noted here, both that there may be different factors for different KEF clusters, but also for HEPs in different parts of England.
9. The group also described that one of the key challenges of the evaluation for the suppliers would be understanding how HEIF works in universities, and the complexity of that. TCU noted the different institutional, academic and KE professional dimensions

and drivers which were very apparent in the 2008 evaluation. A thorough evaluation could not gloss over these, as claims about different drivers (such as by academics) were part of the policy debate and where results of evaluation needed to be well evidenced.

10. A key clarification given from the Research England team emphasised that SQW (2019 report) work on 'HEIF logic models' looked at the key outputs from activity level KE. These activity level models might be helpful as basis of describing/measuring value for money beyond current ROI. However, there was a need for a programme level theory, which includes how HEIF supports universities to evolve and adapt to internal/external pressures, and enables them to improve setting strategic goals, better targeting funds and hence achieving better value for money and delivery of government priorities. The group discussed that Government priorities were often high level and there were other government signals that HEPs were alert to. It was also discussed that HEPs have defined capabilities (such as discipline strengths) and hence strategic goals and plans may not change radically over years. RE team noted that over the period of the evaluation, Government priorities had been quite consistent in terms of an economic and national focus.

Item 5: HEIF evaluation steering group to ask questions and provide feedback on approach

11. Another challenge relayed to PA/IPP was how to attribute achievement of outcomes to HEIF despite the evolution of the funding mechanisms due to changing government and external environments. As examples, winding down of regional structures and budgets, age of austerity and the 2008 credit crunch crisis.
12. It was noted by the group that there is a need to ensure that the evaluation is historically accurate, not a "retrofit" of themes now on to past activities. If benefits/impacts are incidental and not intentionally pursued, this needs to be acknowledged. The Tender had set out a clear picture of main drivers and priorities of different past phases of HEIF.
13. Another question posed was how HEIF is balanced against other resources that institutions receive and how they create an enabling environment for KE; for example, funding from Local Enterprise Partnerships, use of European Research Development Funding. HEIF would be used by universities in conjunction with other funding sources with different priorities and different aims, which would have implications for what HEIF delivered. Over the period of the evaluation, drivers from science/research had become increasingly prominent.
14. It was stressed that the beneficiaries of HEIF are the external partners, not HEPs, and hence evaluation results needed to be founded on good evidence of these external impacts, though there were challenges given diversity of external partners. It may be appropriate to look at external partner benefits through the lens of HEPs/KEF clusters,

rather than summatively at national level.

15. The group advised PA/IPP to consider the following questions:

- Does HEIF add value by supporting universities to be more adaptive to changing challenges and opportunities, responding to external partners and impacts on them, as well as government priorities?
- To what extent has HEIF allowed universities to sharpen their strategic decision making and use of funds, including HEIF?

It was acknowledged that answers to these questions might be difficult, as there are now additional funding mechanisms. Additionally, there are significant drivers on knowledge exchange from changes in research policy and funding, such as inclusion of impact in REF and introduction of impact measures following the Warray report in research councils. So changes in strategy and planning in HEPs may be the result of these wider drivers, rather than all attributed to HEIF as was the case in the 2008 evaluation. Additionally, the group discussed the possibility of bringing out comparisons and complementarities with other forms of KE support, including those from UKRI. It was noted that this may help to understand the effect of HEIF on institutional strategies and bring out better its distinctive nature. There are potential synergetic benefits and potential duplications to look for.

16. The group asked PA/IPP about the granularity of their stakeholder mapping. PA/IPP agreed that there is potential for this to be too detailed and would like to get advice from the group on this, so that time and resource is not invested into a map that becomes too granular and unwieldy.

17. It was suggested by the group that PA/IPP may need to source more qualitative information than they included in their initial proposal. Research England colleagues noted that they do not have HEIF KPIs, there is no monitoring and evaluation framework for HEIF because it is flexible.

18. Tomas Coates Ulrichsen agreed to work with PA/IPP to discuss existing data, and how best to analyse that, as well as limitations in the data. It was noted that there may be consequences from issues around quantitative evidence availability for scale of qualitative evidence needed.

Item 6: Finalising key adjustments needed to HEIF evaluation workplan

19. PA/IPP left the meeting at this stage, and the group provided their feedback on the initial proposals set out.

20. Group members gave detailed methodological insights that should be factored into RE's management of the work:

1. There were not clear linkages between milestones mentioned in the proposal, and that it might be helpful to have a clear diagram detailing this, to indicate critical points for development of the work programme.
2. The programme theory did not necessarily need to take the form of a logic frame, and that an innovative approach should be pursued.
3. It was queried whether PA/IPP could meet the provisional timescales they proposed.
4. Also queried were the structure and number of case studies which PA/IPP intend to carry out. The group noted that it was unclear from the proposal what level of qualitative data would be collected from case studies, what type of activity this would include, how many stakeholders this would comprise; and how a broad representation of HEPs/stakeholders would be achieved. It was agreed that this was a critical issue, to ensure that sufficient and relevant evidence would be available to draw conclusions against the challenging research questions in the brief. It was anticipated that following discussion between TCU and PA/IPP there might be revisions to proposals on quantitative/qualitative evidence balance, and this would be a key area for discussion at the next meeting.

21. AF, RL and MC thanked the group for their advice.