HEIF evaluation expert advisory group
Minutes of group meeting; 26 January 2022

Attendees

Group:

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

In attendance:

- Alice Frost
- 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)
- Elaine Eggington (IP Pragmatics)

Apologies:

- Gemma Derrick

Item 1: Welcome by the chair

1. TCU welcomed the group and opened the meeting by commenting that the evaluation team are now at a critical juncture between phase 1 and phase 2 of the evaluation. The group was asked to provide advice to Research England on key elements as set out in PA consulting/IP pragmatics evaluation approach paper, as circulated to the group, where Research England were specifically looking for suggestions to ensure the proposed approach is one that is robust to enable a degree of confidence that conclusions can be drawn for the basis of the next spending review.

2. Prior to PA consulting and IP pragmatics joining the meeting, members commented on whether the magenta book should be used to structure the research questions, suggesting that it would possibly be better for them to address the research questions directly from the ITT. Further to this they commented that the magenta book is rather positioned as a guide for best practice when designing and commissioning evaluations. While evaluations should be consistent with government guidance on evaluations (for example as set out in the Magenta and Green Books), they benefit from explicitly responding to the specific questions of the commissioning group.

Item 2: Minutes from previous meeting

3. The minutes from the previous meeting (held on 12 December 2022) were agreed, with no additional comments from the group.

Item 3: Discussion item 1: Evaluation research questions and case study approach

4. Prior to IP pragmatics and PA consulting joining the meeting, the group considered a number of points they wanted to receive further clarity on, including what was going to guide how they selected specific interview questions to ask HEPs and potential beneficiaries. This included further details on how they were specifically going to approach universities to participate as part of their suite of cases study and other secondary data collection activities. The group also reflected that different knowledge exchange sectors hadn't been considered in the approach paper, where innovation surveys have demonstrated a variety of means and propensities of knowledge exchange taking place within a university.

5. Colleagues from PA Consulting and IP Pragmatics joined the meeting at this stage and presented a five minute overview on key elements of their approach, which initially focussed on their plans for selecting and prioritising the key research questions.

6. PA Consulting and IP Pragmatics noted the magenta book had been used to develop twelve research questions as a structure to ensure best practice approaches were capture and applied through the course of the evaluation, which they had then mapped to the six ITT questions. All questions had then been grouped into the following evaluation themes; 'process evaluation', 'value for money evaluation' and 'impact evaluation'. Although the team noted that the sub-questions would map to each of these different themes, the group was not shown how.

7. In terms of how the evaluation questions had been prioritised, EE from IP pragmatics noted that at this stage of the evaluation they wanted to keep all of the questions, however had gone through a process of marking which questions were deprioritised on the basis of not yet having good supporting evidence to be able to address these.

8. In terms of how the questions link to the programme theory, PA consulting noted that they had mapped these onto the diagram and will seek to gather evidence against these after agreeing a selection of priority pathways that the programme theory would look to test.

9. The advisory group shared their reflections with regard to the research questions with PA consulting and IP pragmatics:

    1. GB noted it would be helpful to have clear criteria as an annex on how questions were prioritised/deprioritised e.g. did this relate to the strategic imperative of the questions? Was it an issue to do with the data quality?
    2. LG noted that addressing some of the sub-questions would simply be a case of using existing quantitative data and for others, it would be a case of processing secondary data for example, responses received. However, there is a third component to qualitative data which will need some consideration that concerns how judgements are being made. LG asked how they were going to carry out all these judgments? Would

they do this themselves? How visible will the criteria be in regard to how judgements are being made? How do they plan to present their judgements/recommendations to audiences/stakeholders?

3. LG noted that some of the evaluation questions, for example, evaluation question 6 had no red heading or priority questions, what would this mean? EE noted that they wouldn't be omitted completely, just the questions that were italicised.
4. EE noted that it was important that clarity regarding these judgements were made, noting that the NESTA framework offers a scoring structure to form a quantitative judgement against qualitative evidence presented.
5. As an overarching comment, GB noted that it would be helpful to see what sections would be included on their approach in a final report, including how they planned to report case study data.
6. TCU noted the difficulties presented by the approach paper in finding the connections between multiple sets of evaluation questions against a single ITT question. Is the main key impact question related to the strategic development of HEIF? TCU also reflected on whether the magenta book was being positioned as a helpful structure for the evaluation, or in practice was providing an additional layer of complexity and impeding clarity on the general approach and methodology.
7. TCU noted the differences between 'process' evaluation in terms of how Research England administer the programme, versus the programme of what a HEP does internally with funding a strategic decision.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. GB commented whether there would be internal analysis calibration workshops during the collection of case study data as this would provide additional confidence in findings produced from the activities. He commented that it would be helpful for members of the group to have the opportunity to sit in on these sessions to oversee and have assurance on the quality of these findings.
11. GB noted the importance of drafting a report structure at a high level as this will help shape how data is used, shaped and stored, and as an activity it was described as being 'critical' in terms of time optimisation.
12. LG noted that some clarity and consistency regarding the process of how questions and sub-question had been prioritised would be welcomed.

10. PA consulting presented an update on their approach to coordinating case studies, activities that will form part of the of the second phase of the evaluation. They noted that they had deliberately kept the sample size for case studies small to accommodate a deep evidence gathering approach although noted that the sample had increased from an initial proposed sample of 9 to 12. They noted there would be flexibility to make slight changes to the sample should it be identified key beneficiaries were not sufficiently covered within the sample.

11. PA commented that they had selected HEPs across a range of criteria, including:

    1. Selecting HEPs in the top quartile of at least one KEF perspective to address previous concerns of results regressing to a mean value.
    2. The sample also included a range of HEPs from every KE cluster, this included 3 from cluster V and 2 from KE clusters X, E and the Arts. 1 HEP each was selected from the remaining KE clusters STEM, J & M.
    3. Geography was also considered when sampling for a group of HEPs to ensure regional influences could be captured, commenting that at least one HEP was from each of the 9 regions in England. As London and the SE have highest proportion of HEPs the sample include more than one HEP from a mix of KE clusters.

12. PA consulting noted their 'positive selection' approach of sampling HEPs would help to ensure that the 12 case studies delivered evidence requirements as needed for the evaluation. They noted that the case study findings would provide evidence against the priority causal pathways in the programme theory as well as yielding additional evidence that will contribute to the evaluation for example, the non-transactional forms of KE that are not captured via the HE-BCI survey.

13. The advisory group shared their reflections with regard to the PA consulting's approach to the case study methodology:

    1. TCU questioned why the criteria for selection HEPs included those in the top quartiles in KE, as opposed to exploring those simply in receipt of HEIF? EE noted this was on the assumption that these HEPs had better supporting infrastructure and were therefore more likely to provide good evidence against the questions asked.
    2. LG queried whether the PA consulting had backup HEP samples in case of any logistical issues faced with the current selection? PA consulting noted they did.
    3. TCU queried whether PA consulting planned to link case study findings to any counterfactual analysis and if so, how? TCU commented on the need of additional clarity to understand how the component pieces of the evaluation fit together. PA consulting plan to consider this aspect of the evaluation in more depth.
    4. TCU queried aspects of the case study approach, such as who at a university would be approached, acknowledging that there is often not a single point of contact who can talk about all aspects of knowledge exchange, therefore how will interviewees be selected for interview? The same question was posed to PA consulting regarding university partners, given that universities undertake partnerships with many different types of organisation. PA noted that they would provide more clarity around how to confront these selection issues meaningfully.
    5. PC emphasised the disparate nature of KE operating at an institution and emphasised that careful thought was needed on how people were approached for conversations.
    6. LG noted that conflicts of interest would have to be managed should an institution be selected that employs a member of the advisory group
    7. GB echoed previous points raised by the advisory group members regarding issues around interviewee selection. He further added that individuals and partners may not have recognised they or particular projects were supported by HEIF, querying how will this challenge be mitigated?

8. EA asked whether there was value in exploring scenario-based questions through workshops to encourage sharing of examples from individuals

9. LG reflected on how responses to interview questions would be scored and/or judged, noting that different answers and attitudes could be given to the same question depending on who was being asked. LG also noted that some effort to anonymise institutions at an aggregate level should be considered.

Item 4: Discussion item 2: Evaluation design framework, approaches to data collection and counterfactual methods

14. PA presented four potential approaches that could be selected for conducting a counterfactual analysis, whilst noting a perfect counterfactual is difficult as a result of no formal HEP control group during the evaluation period (2008-2020). This included:

    1. Assessing the impact of an equivalent knowledge exchange fund in Wales (Innovation and engagement fund), when this was withdrawn in 2013/24 and drawing comparisons between what implications this could have for a similar fund like HEIF
    2. Conducting a before/after analysis of KE income and performance for the HEPs who lost HEIF funding as a result of the formula 'cut off' in 2011
    3. Conducting a limited counterfactual analysis using a 'quasi-control group' of HEPs not in receipt of HEIF
    4. To conduct a qualitative exploration of the counterfactual through case study interviews with HEP leadership teams and other beneficiaries of HEIF

15. TCU commented that it would be helpful to understand how this 'piece' of the evaluation would fit with the case study selection activities. TCU queried whether 12 case studies was considered a broad enough sample to produce reliable insights and being able to draw robust conclusions to answer the research questions.

Item 5: Discussion item 3: Evaluation design matrix

16. PA asked for the advisory groups comments in relation to the evaluation matrix. TCU commented that the evaluation needed to present insights that relate to the attribution of HEIF and questioned, how would they assess the quality of evidence collected and how would they determine whether this information was robust? TCU added that if value for money is determined by only interviewing one group of stakeholders, this could lead to certain biases and therefore skew the data, so how will PA mitigate this so the data can be trusted?

17. CT commented that a score card could be developed to track their level of confidence for the evidence they are collating across the evaluation.

Item 6: Discussion item 4: Methodology limitations and risks

18. PA consulting asked the advisory group whether any members had any concerns or comments on their approach to using the NESTA standards of evidence. TCU commented that although

they were using the NESTA standards of evidence (levels 1-5), (where lower levels on this scale signal to limited evidence existing to be available, compared to the higher levels shown that suggests more evidence are available), how you design a method will also present how certain levels of evidence are produced. He suggested it would be helpful to start mapping the research questions to what levels of evidence they predict they will be able to acquire.

19. LG commented on challenges of attribution for evaluating a scheme that almost looks to exist to be complementary to other activities

20. GB noted that it would be helpful for PA to consider the OECD 6 criteria, which explicitly looks to handle challenges presented by synergies that could be utilised within the evaluation to support high quality and useful evaluation, for example 'impact' (what difference is the intervention making?) is defined very tightly in the guidance which GB noted might provide some helpful tools for PA.

21. EA commented that the approach paper doesn't touch on how HEIF might be positioned to complement existing schemes and questioned whether this would still be explored, commenting further that contribution analysis and realist evaluation could be used to explore this.

22. PA consulting and IP pragmatics left the meeting.

Item 7: AOB and closing remarks

23. TCU invited closing remarks from the group.

24. GB commented that the document presented to the group for feedback was quite complex and difficult to understand how the evaluation fit together. He noted that it was important that the approach paper needs to be able to make sense and is useful for all project team members to understand and work with. He noted a short executive summary (2-3 pages) would complement the document and enable the project team to understand quickly and clearly what is planned before going into additional detail. He also commented the case study sample was too small to be able to draw out robust conclusions and suggested that 18-20 case studies would more reliably capture the breadth of evidence available across the sector.

25. GB also commented that a simple but clearer and sharper summary on PA consulting's approach to conducting the case studies would benefit the document.

26. TCU also commented on the annex that presented some suggested pathways for testing the programme theory to note that it was not clear what level these were being measured at (e.g. locally, nationally). He emphasised that it is important to be clear about this, as it could create mismanaged expectations around the scale of how HEIF is being used and the impacts it is having. He also commented that HEIF is an enabling fund that is responsive and adaptive to producing a range of impacts and so the evaluation will need to deliver some good examples of how institutions have used the funding to generate impacts that can be measured.

27. LG commented that it would be helpful for PA to include some inflection points in their work planning for decision making, for example, to reflect on whether their case study sample and approach is adequate (either through reviewing the outcomes of a pilot exercise or having to consider a reserve list of HEPs).

28. TCU commented that mapping the research questions to the questions outlined in the specification would help to make the document less complicated and maintain clarity on outcomes anticipated.

29. GB agreed that the ITT questions need to be the key focus and the magenta book mapping of the questions could be moved to an annex. Much of the introductory prose can be moved to the annex, but the approach paper needs to set out from the start a clear plan of how all the various components will come together to deliver robust outcomes for the evaluation. Additional work is needed to enhance the clarity of their approach.

30. TCU thanked the group for their comments and reflections.