Building Stronger Bridges Between Equity and Evidence in Higher Education

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Abstract

Innovation and evidence are two pillars of progress in higher education, particularly as institutions and policymakers strive for equitable outcomes. Recent policy shifts in Australia, such as the Australian Universities Accord, have intensified the focus on equity. However, without sufficient evidence, the pursuit towards improvement can lead to inefficiencies and compound existing shortcomings. This article examines the challenges and opportunities to understanding the impact of equity-focused initiatives in higher education. It discusses the role of experimental and theory-based approaches in impact evaluation, the importance of integrating evaluation practices into innovation, and the potential for broader collaboration to build an evidence base that supports effective change.

Keywords

Universities Accord, Innovation, Higher education, Equity, Impact evaluation, Evidence-based practice, Evaluation, Policy, Experiments, Initiatives, Trials, Non-experimental methods, Collaboration

Innovation and change in higher education

Learning and improvement are fundamental to education. While students navigate their pathway towards success, academics and student support services adapt or adopt techniques to better support them. Concurrently, institutions assess and adjust their organisational and support structures, while policymakers review and reform policy settings to improve outcomes across the system.

Innovation and change are central to these efforts. Unfortunately, evidence does not always feature in innovation. Practitioners, institutions, and policymakers are not always able to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of their activities. Still less frequently is evidence shared with others, leaving those facing the same challenges to recreate the same lessons independently. Numerous valuable lessons are lost in the relentless pursuit of improvement.

Recent policy shifts have resulted in a sector under increasing pressure to achieve equitable outcomes for student groups historically under-represented in higher education. For instance, the Australian Universities Accord (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024) sets ambitious targets for increasing attainment rates across Australia, particularly for equity groups. Initiatives such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) incentivise innovation to enable our most at-risk groups to achieve success in higher education.

These laudable goals and incentives will undoubtably drive innovation, but they also increase vulnerability to fads and design inefficiencies. Some may work towards “creative destruction”, developing innovations to replace older practices without knowing what worked, for whom, and under what circumstances. Others may add new services, activities, or formal programs to existing systems, further straining limited resources without understanding the broader available options and the relative effectiveness of these options. While innovation is important, collating and sharing evidence will be key to success.

Addressing the insufficient evidence

Initiatives seeking to achieve equitable outcomes are increasingly common in the Australian higher education sector, but there remains insufficient evidence regarding their effectiveness. Evidence,

more broadly, certainly exists. In the United Kingdom, for example, two agencies summarise the available evidence for those wanting to make evidence-based decisions when identifying or designing initiatives to support educational outcomes, namely the Education Endowment Foundation[1] and Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)[2]. Similarly, in the USA, the What Works Clearinghouse[3] reviews and summarises research to broaden accessibility. These repositories help education practitioners use evidence to determine potential efficacy when designing or identifying initiatives.

No equivalent synthesis yet exists in Australia. There also remains relatively few published impact evaluations examining Australian equity-focused initiatives. Integrating evaluation into existing practice and innovation provides an opportunity to build on collective experience and strengthen the national evidence base.

Challenges of evaluation

Experimentation in education is not new. As noted by Oakley (2000) and cited in Connolly et al. (2017), early education researchers were formalising experimental methods as early as 1900. In 1901, Thorndike and Woodworth suggested a control group be included in experiments to examine the effects of a training program. The researchers argued adding a control group would help them understand what would have happened without the initiative. They created a counterfactual to infer causation. Although impact evaluation techniques have multiplied since the early 20th century, many of these techniques continue to adopt control groups to assess impact.

However, there are divided views about how to best understand impact. Some believe controlled experiments are the only way to accurately measure impact, quantifying outcomes across control and treated groups to understand impact on populations. Others suggest impact cannot be quantified but rather interpreted only according to individuals' experiences within the given, socially constructed contexts. They may focus on learning about the mechanisms of causation, for instance, generating evidence to infer attribution without using a control group as a counterfactual. These distinct positions have led to philosophical tribalism among some, sometimes at the expense of progressing the collection and use of evidence.

There are common criticisms aimed at both approaches. While the criticisms help underscore the weaknesses inevitable in any method, they are sometimes misattributed to the whole of the approach and then perpetuate flawed beliefs. For example, some believe controlled experiments, such as randomised controlled trials, as inherently "unethical" due to the nature of withholding support from individuals within the control group. This assertion often comes from misguided assumptions that any support can only be advantageous to all individuals, or that there is no other support available and equally equipped to help these individuals within their context. The overgeneralised assertion also ignores the variety of trial designs that do not withhold support but rather encourage take-up, and other trial designs that provide support to everyone in phases or as unique modifications of the support. On the other side of this philosophical divide, non-experimental or theory-based evaluation approaches are criticised for not managing inherent biases or confounders when explaining impact. This claim is often situated within an individual's evidence values, in that human experience and response is better managed than observed and explored. Both sides further criticise the other for producing results that cannot be used in any other context, thereby rendering the resultant evidence moot. When done well, experimental evaluations can and

[1] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit
[2] https://taso.org.uk/evidence/
[3] https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/WhatWeDo

are designed for ethical application, individual experience and response provide valuable evidence to understand impact, and both quantitative and qualitative impact approaches produce results useful for other contexts.

Impact evaluations should be valued for the lessons they can impart. Each different approach can answer valuable questions. When different impact evaluation approaches are used in a complementary fashion, practitioners, institutions, and policymakers may learn "what works" with different populations as well as "why it works" to understand contexts and conditions for success and generalisability. The challenge remains in understanding the strengths and limitations inherent in any approach, without deference to philosophical tribalism.

Opportunities for evidence-based practice

Evaluation designs require content and contextual specialists, alongside specialist evaluation expertise. These skills *may* lie in different individuals and, when they do, the process of generating evidence provides a further opportunity to build capacity across the sector.

Practitioners can serve as active members of the evaluation team. Initiative teams and key stakeholders are ideally involved in the governance and design of the evaluation approach and, in some cases, involved in the delivery of the research process and interpretation of the resultant evidence. As an example, an evaluation was conducted of a New Zealand government-funded, regionally-led initiative that aimed to support young people at risk of long-term unemployment into sustainable employment. The initiative focused on a sub-group of young people that were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) who faced the greatest challenges in gaining sustained employment. These young people were identified through community groups, who then provided relevant support. The evaluation was designed by the evaluation team, government officials, community groups, and young people, all of whom determined the initiative focus, the success criteria, and the subsequent evaluation approach and activities. The evaluation team designed the data system and measures largely based on the initial conversations with the community, while the community groups delivered the assessments locally, identifying the specific needs of the young person at the beginning of the initiative and monitoring progress. The data were shared throughout delivery, while the evaluation team tested and refined the measures using these data. The impact evaluation, undertaken several years later, was only possible given the young person's permissions granted through the community groups using the process agreed across all those involved. While potential bias required management, participation built a useful data system around the initiative while it opened opportunities for assessing impact.

In this example, the community groups shared information about the local needs and equity practices. This provided a vital learning opportunity for the evaluation team and government officials who could then further action activities and support for these young people in an appropriate way. Similar learning opportunities are also available when undertaking impact evaluations. Randomised trials, for example, are designed around the initiative focus and delivery. This requires practitioners to share the current practices around the initiative and goals, and their deep understanding of the populations being supported and the expected barriers to their success. The subsequent trial design hinges on such information to determine how the initiative can be allocated, monitored, measured, and assessed. Given interdependence, trials often require academics and evaluators to work *with* practitioners, coordinating the evaluation methods and initiative activities throughout the delivery process. These integrated practices create opportunities to build a broader understanding of equity groups and contexts, as well as equity practices and innovation. This empowers the higher education system to achieve equitable outcomes and further enables the different players to better address the structural factors that limit equity groups.

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