

Addressing Causal Questions in Higher Education Evaluation: How do we know that we are making the right difference?

Venue: Room 2.04, Cheng Kin Ku Building, 54 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3LJ

Online: Keynotes (10:00am – 12:30pm) are available on Zoom. The link will be circulated with all registered participants closer to the time.

09:30 – 10am	Check In & Coffee
10:00 – 10:15am	Opening Remarks <i>Jonathan Schulte, Evaluation Lead, LSE</i>
10:15 – 10:45am	RCT or bust? <i>John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students</i>
10:45 – 11:15am	Are indicators of success real? <i>Prof. Emma McCoy, Vice President and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education), LSE</i>
11:15 – 11:30am	Coffee Break
11:30 – 12:00am	Findings from Research on Standards of Evidence <i>Annette Hayton, NERUPI Convener, Senior Research Fellow, University of Bath; Dr Joanne Moore, NERUPI Teaching Fellow, University of Bath</i>
12:00 – 12:30pm	Educational Gain: Are we measuring what matters? <i>Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson, Professor of Higher Education, Imperial College London</i>
12:30 – 1:30pm	Lunch

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<p>1:30 – 3:00pm</p> <p>Methods in Action</p>	<p><i>Format: Round Robin Poster Session</i> <i>Presenters give a 1-minute elevator pitch to the whole group. Attendees then choose one poster to visit for a 17-minute presentation and discussion. After 17 min, attendees rotate to a new poster of their choice. <u>This repeats three times.</u></i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Beyond Numbers: Most Significant Change Methodology in Evaluating Academic Skills Support Across Oxford Colleges <i>Dr Joris de Henau, Evaluation Officer, Education Policy Support – Student Data Insights, University of Oxford</i> ▪ Causation AND/OR Complexity, Contribution and Change in Outreach Mentoring Programmes <i>Dr Julian Crockford, Senior Lecturer in Student Engagement Evaluation and Research (Sheffield Hallam University) / Associate Director (Specialist Evidence Evaluation and Research).</i> ▪ Evaluating the Impact of Contextual Offers in a Highly Selective Institution: A Contribution Analysis <i>Jonathan Schulte, Evaluation Lead, LSE Eden Centre</i> ▪ Evidencing the role of LSE's Education Career Track using Outcome Harvesting <i>Dr. Alex Standen, Head of Academic Development, LSE</i> ▪ Experimental Methods in Evaluation <i>Mansor Rezaian, Head of What Works, and Victor De Franceschi, Research and Evaluation Manager, King's College London</i> ▪ 'The PhD Superhero': Using visual methods to understand the impact of the Researcher Development Programme on the PhD students, at the University of Cambridge <i>Dr Amy Smail and Dr Jess Scott, Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning</i> ▪ Piloting Participatory Methodologies in Two Institutions: Creating Impactful Evidence with Students <i>Dr Elizabeth Ann Rahman, Senior Evaluation Officer, Education Policy Support – Student Data Insights; Ritika Arora, Evaluation Manager (Education), LSE Eden Centre; Jonathan Schulte, Evaluation Lead, LSE Eden Centre</i> ▪ Using Structural Equation Model to Address Causal Questions: Reflections over a Uni Connect Learning Outcomes Evaluation <i>Dr Chuanyan Zhu, Research and Evaluation Manager, University of Salford</i>
	<p>Concluding Remarks and Reflections on Methods in Action <i>Prof. Sonia Ilie, University of Cambridge</i></p>

Addressing Causal Questions in Higher Education Evaluation: How do we know that we are making the right difference?

3:00 –3:30pm	Coffee Break
3:30 –4:30pm	<p><i>Format: Provocation followed by small group discussion</i> <i>Brief provocations on evidence challenges, followed by facilitated small-group discussion towards possible solutions.</i></p>
Towards better evidence	<p>The role of micro-minorities <i>Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson, Imperial College London</i></p> <p>Evidence and Epistemic Injustice <i>Dr. Alexandra Trofimov, University of Manchester</i></p> <p>Is praxis the answer to using contextualised evidence which combine an appropriate fusion of evaluation and professional judgement? <i>Dr Joanne Moore, NERUPI Teaching Fellow, University of Bath</i></p>
4:35 –4:45pm	<p>Closing Remarks <i>Prof. Emma McCoy, Vice President and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education), LSE</i></p>



Opening Keynotes

RCT or bust?

John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students

John Blake will reflect on the importance of a well-rounded approach to evaluation to promote accountability and learning and ultimately better support student outcomes. This speech will consider how higher education intervention strategies are shaped by collaborative engagement and discuss the ways in which in all contexts, meaningful evaluation which goes beyond simple metrics contributes to sector wide progress. John will also promote the importance of information sharing to replicate or redirect efforts and will share progress on the establishment of the Higher Education Evaluation Library being formed in partnership with TASO and HEAT to advance this goal.

Are indicators of success real?


Emma McCoy, Vice President and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education), LSE

Despite the progress in theory of change in mapping out causal pathways, this does not guarantee that our intervention plans explain any observed change. When we are trying to address an issue with interventions, we need to determine what role the interventions play, among other factors, in producing a particular outcome. In many situations, including many of those related to APP targets, an effect has no single cause, but is usually a combination of factors that generates a particular outcome. If some of the factors that contribute to an outcome are either unmeasured or outside the control of the university, we may under or overestimate the role of the intervention itself. This talk will give a whistlestop tour of the causal inference end of the evaluation process, pointing out some of the dangers and pitfalls that can be addressed by bringing together theory of change and principled inference methodologies.

Findings from Research on Standards of Evidence

Annette Hayton, NERUPI Convener, Senior Research Fellow, University of Bath; Dr Joanne Moore, NERUPI Teaching Fellow, University of Bath

The presentation will focus on a current collaborative research project between a group of diverse university partners designed to contribute to evaluation capacity building and support transfer of best practice by developing recommendations and tools to inform national guidance on evaluation standards and methods. The topics were wide-ranging but included a concern to ascertain: what effects are the standards of evidence having on current approaches to evaluation? How do decision-makers in universities obtain knowledge about effective practices, what information do they need, and what role does impact evaluation play in this? How are standards of evaluation supporting evidence-based decision making within institutions and understanding of replicability and



transfer of proven and promising practice including knowledge transfer across different institutional contexts? The emerging findings have implications for how evaluation standards can be further developed to continue to support evaluation capability building and to better support access and participation evaluators and policy makers in meeting emerging challenges for evaluation in the evolving HE context.

Educational Gain: Are we measuring what matters?

Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson, Professor of Higher Education, Imperial College London

What is the purpose of higher education? What is valued—by students, staff, governments? How do we capture the outcomes of higher education? This talk explores efforts to capture student learning outcomes, and the consequences of various proxy measures.

Methods in Action

Beyond Numbers: Most Significant Change Methodology in Evaluating Academic Skills Support Across Oxford Colleges

Dr Joris de Henau, Evaluation Officer, Education Policy Support – Student Data Insights, University of Oxford

This presentation examines how Most Significant Change methodology has been adapted and integrated with quantitative methods across three Oxford college evaluations (St Peter's, Trinity, and Somerville), showcasing its flexibility and power in capturing transformational learning experiences. Drawing from completed case studies at St Peter's College and Trinity College, and our ongoing evaluation at Somerville College, I'll demonstrate how this participatory approach illuminates the mechanisms through which academic skills support impacts student development while enhancing methodological rigor through triangulation with validated survey instruments.

Causation AND/OR Complexity, Contribution and Change in Outreach Mentoring Programmes

Dr Julian Crockford, Senior Lecturer in Student Engagement Evaluation and Research (Sheffield Hallam University) / Associate Director (Specialist Evidence Evaluation and Research).

This poster explores some of the implications of my recent doctoral thesis exploring alternatives to linear casual logic in the evaluation of pre-HE mentoring programmes. By retro-engineering a series of evaluation reports, I suggest that programme outcomes depend on a series of interacting change mechanism and whole system effects. As a consequence, I argue for the importance of collaborative evaluation and the need to shift our evaluative thinking about the unit of evaluation analysis and flow of causal logic.



Evaluating the Impact of Contextual Offers in a Highly Selective Institution: A Contribution Analysis

Jonathan Schulte, Evaluation Lead, LSE Eden Centre

This poster shares insights from a contribution analysis evaluating the impact of contextual offers at LSE. Following Mayne's framework, the project set out a plausible theory of change and went to validate it through quantitative and qualitative data collection. The results identified key 'impact pathways' plausibly contributing to widening access to LSE – although the project also highlighted the nuanced role of alternate contributing factors such as outreach programmes.

Evidencing the role of LSE's Education Career Track using Outcome Harvesting

Dr. Alex Standen, Head of Academic Development, LSE

This poster presents preliminary findings from an evaluation using 'outcome harvesting' to produce evidence on the role of LSE's educational promotion track (ECT). The method involved co-creating 18 outcome vignettes with stakeholders on the concrete changes ECTs have facilitated, capturing concrete changes and ECTs contribution to them. The poster will give a general introduction into the context and foundations of the method and emerging reflections on our application in practice.

Experimental Methods in Evaluation

Mansor Rezaian, Head of What Works, and Victor De Franceschi, Research and Evaluation Manager, King's College London

The Medicine Dentistry Lecture Series (MDLS) aims to increase the proportion of underrepresented students enrolled onto Medicine and Dentistry by delivering targeted support to widening participation (WP) students. MDLS focuses on supporting students with their university applications and admissions tests (UCAT). This poster gives an overview of our randomised control trial (from 23/24) which aimed to to understand whether the lecture series had a causal impact in terms of students applying to King's and going onto studying medicine or dentistry. The final results of this are expected for 2027, however the RCT has already generated interesting insights with regards to participants' self-efficacy and subject-specific knowledge

'The PhD Superhero': Using visual methods to understand the impact of the Researcher Development Programme on the PhD students, at the University of Cambridge

Dr Amy Smail and Dr Jess Scott, Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning

We present emerging findings from *The PhD Superhero*, a creative evaluation method designed to explore the skills students aim to gain by the end of their PhD and how the University of Cambridge's Researcher Development (RD) programme can support these goals. We conducted participatory workshops with 27 students, to co-create visual representations of their PhD Superheroes. These findings informed a new Theory of Change for the RD programme, further enabling a strategic review of the programme and evaluation activities.



Piloting Participatory Methodologies in Two Collaborating Institutions: Creating Impactful Evidence with Students

Dr Elizabeth Ann Rahman, Senior Evaluation Officer, Education Policy Support – Student Data Insights; Ritika Arora, Evaluation Manager (Education), LSE Eden Centre; Jonathan Schulte, Evaluation Lead, LSE Eden Centre

This poster presents knowledge exchange between the University of Oxford and LSE. Oxford piloted participatory methods to inform its APP in 2024. LSE engaged participatory methods to aid implementation of its APP in 2025. Both institutions worked with 16 students using a variety of creative methods to better understand specific dimensions of the student experience and inform policy development. The poster reflects on the aims and approaches taken by the two institutions, and the learning from this knowledge exchange.

Using Structural Equation Model to Address Causal Questions: Reflections over a Uni Connect Learning Outcomes Evaluation

Dr Chuanyan Zhu, Research and Evaluation Manager, University of Salford

The presentation will discuss an evaluation case in which a structural equation model was used to explore the causal links between intermediate and long-term outcomes. The reflection will focus on improving the evaluation to produce strong causal evidence and applying this method in other areas, such as evaluating interventions for student experience and degree awarding gaps.

Towards better evidence

The role of micro-minorities


Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson, Imperial College London

This provocation aims to raise awareness, problematise and look for solutions to the challenge of small numbers in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion analysis. Gathering data and evaluating progress are key aspects of EDI work. However, when working with some groups of people, we run into the problem of small numbers—which can present methodological, legal, ethical and practical concerns. The biggest danger is that small numbers of individuals means that a group, a characteristic or intersectional factors get ignored as it was not clear how to account for them in the data.

Evidence and Epistemic Injustice

Dr. Alexandra Trofimov, University of Manchester

Orthodox evidence-based evaluation is characterized by evidence hierarchies and evaluation methods that focus almost exclusively on comparative studies, especially randomized controlled trials (RCTs). This has created an influential stereotype of 'good evidence', with RCTs as the 'gold standard', that results in epistemic injustice. This highlights an inherent moral wrong of



orthodox evidence-based evaluation. Addressing this wrong requires developing a more inclusive approach to evidence-based evaluation.

Is praxis the answer to using contextualised evidence which combine an appropriate fusion of evaluation and professional judgement?

Dr Joanne Moore, NERUPI Teaching Fellow, University of Bath

Given the trend to increasing complexity and whole systems approaches to meeting desired access and participation outcomes and impacts in higher education, evaluation cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. Putting in place meaningful and coherent evaluation can be practically challenging within diverse multi-stakeholder contexts and there can be difficulties in making judgements of the contribution to overall impacts of different practices, projects and programmes. In this context, what can higher education organisations do to promote better understanding and use of evaluation for decision making? A praxis team approach values insights from all stakeholders with an interest in an area and fosters collaboration on addressing inequalities and generating positive changes. Collaboration via praxis teams can help transparency and application of professional judgement alongside evaluation evidence and has the potential to enrich evaluation and embed impact.