

How Fair is the Framework for Fair Access? Exploring what evidence counts in decision-making in policy and practice

Dr Stephanie Mckendry, Researcher/Implementation Advisor (Scottish Government) and Head of Access, Equality and Inclusion (University of Strathclyde)

Background to the Framework

The [Scottish Framework for Fair Access](#) was published in May 2019, fulfilling one of the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access. Comprising an online toolkit to assess the effectiveness of interventions to support fair access and a professional network for access practitioners (Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners: SCAPP), the Framework aims to support those involved in access to understand and contribute to the evidence base on what works.

As has been noted by the [Commission on Widening Access](#) (2016), Sir Peter Scott, the Commissioner for Fair Access (2019) in his introduction to the Framework and, most recently, by [Robinson and Salvestrini](#) (2020), there is a plethora of interventions designed to support learners from under-represented or disadvantaged groups into and through higher education. It is not clear which activities have impact, however. As I wrote at the time of the Framework's launch:

The Commission highlighted and commended the array of innovative access interventions across Scotland, pointing in particular to the success of bridging programmes. It noted the considerable amount of public funding that was invested in such activities but expressed frustration that it was near impossible to determine which programmes deliver meaningful impact due to a dearth of robust evaluative evidence. A Scottish Framework for Fair Access was intended to help bridge that gap. ([McKendry, 2019](#))

The two pillars of the Framework

With funding from the Scottish Funding Council, the online toolkit was developed by [CFE Research](#) with two broad objectives: to provide summaries of the evidence of impact of different interventions, written in an accessible form, to allow funders and practitioners to select the most appropriate activities for their specific aims. Secondly, to support practitioners in choosing and implementing appropriate evaluation methods so that the volume and robustness of Scottish evidence increases, facilitating a stronger evidence base and a better understanding of what works to improve access to higher education within a Scottish context.

The first iteration of the toolkit was developed by way of a rapid review of UK and international literature on selected access, retention and success interventions and a call for evidence of impact from the Scottish higher education and widening access sector. For each intervention, an assessment was made of the strength of evidence, the relative cost of the intervention and whether the evidence suggests a positive or negative impact on outcomes. These assessments are displayed alongside Scottish case studies, information about outcomes and target audiences. The toolkit also provides information on conducting evaluations with links to guides and resources.

Alongside the online resource, the second pillar of the Framework is [SCAPP](#), a community of practice and professional development network. Open to all involved in access, SCAPP aims to provide a

forum for practitioners to share and develop best practice in access and to support the development and professionalisation of a strong access community.

Privileging particular forms of evidence?

Whilst there is no intention to privilege one form of evidence over another within the Framework, the criteria for inclusion in the toolkit may be more easily met by larger, more quantitative studies. Three standards of evidence are used to assess the strength of individual studies:

- Level 1: there is evidence of impact upon participants in an intervention based on qualitative/quantitative data, though there is no comparator;
- Level 2: there is evidence of comparative impact;
- Level 3: there is evidence of comparative, causal impact.

Although the number order suggests a hierarchy, with Level 3 studies 'worth' more than Level 1, this is not necessarily the case. All levels are included and not every evaluation of a project or intervention requires the scale of a level 3 study. Nevertheless, there may be a perceived risk that some forms of evidence are overlooked and the depth of understanding provided by qualitative methods could be lost. There are several ways in which those involved in the Framework hope to overcome such concerns or pitfalls.

Firstly, it is essential for the Framework to engage with the sector to consider how other forms of evidence can be included and to develop best practice in evaluation. As the Commissioner noted in his 2019 Annual Report, two conditions are necessary if the Framework is to be successful: one is the provision of adequate and sustainable funding; the other is that *'the Framework must be 'owned' by access practitioners and other stakeholders. My role, and that of the SFC and other organisations and of institutions, is to facilitate not to direct'* ([Commissioner for Fair Access, Annual Report, 2019](#)).

It has been necessary to focus on robust evaluation as this has been widely recognised as lacking within the sector, but the widening access community is best placed to guide and participate in that evaluation and in any discussion of what defines robustness. Of SCAPP's five strategic objectives, two are concerned with evaluation and the toolkit. Specifically, the organisation aims to ensure practitioners have access to current research to inform their practice and to play a key role in building further iterations of the toolkit and championing its use. In bringing together both pillars of the Framework, we hope to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners and to explore what evidence counts and when, within context.

Secondly, to support practitioners to use the toolkit and to undertake effective evaluation, CFE Research are producing a series of webinars for publication on the Framework website over the coming months. The five sessions will cover use of the toolkit, the standards of evidence used; planning an evaluation; selecting appropriate evaluation methods and sharing your evaluation findings. Our hope is that by the end of the series, practitioners feel empowered to use the toolkit to inform their activities and understand how to undertake evaluation to demonstrate the impact of their work, using a range of methods.

Thirdly, we are acutely conscious that the Framework joins an already rich landscape. The work of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland's current Enhancement Theme, [Evidence for Enhancement](#), for example, covers invaluable related work. Equally, the QAA's [Transitions Map](#) provides a wealth of evidence across similar territory. These sources are currently highlighted on the

Framework website but we will be undertaking further work over summer to explore where we can draw content together more effectively.

The Framework Governance Group, chaired by the Commissioner for Fair Access, is responsible for the ongoing development of the Framework. The Group is currently considering the most effective process by which access practitioners and researchers can contribute their evidence. Clearly, for all robust evidence to count, there should be regular opportunities for new studies to be incorporated – substantiating or altering judgements on current interventions and adding evidence to allow for the inclusion of other interventions. We hope to ensure a wide variety of evidence ‘counts’ and helps us, as a community, identify the most effective activities to improve access to higher education for under-represented and disadvantaged people.