

APPENDIX A: CASE STUDIES REVISITED

In this section, you will find more positive responses to the case studies presented in earlier sections. Read through these carefully and compare and contrast with your own responses. Remember there are no totally right answers; only ideas for enhancement that will be heavily contextualised when applied in practice.



Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Reese and Harper – Module Leaders at Algorithm University

See Section 2

Reese and Harper deliver two L5 modules on a programme at Algorithm. They are relatively new academic appointments and have noticed that students have commented that the assessment process for both modules are very similar. Several students have remarked that they are bored at having to do the same type of assessment in close proximity.

- To address these concerns, the two staff members get together with the Programme Team to discuss the students' perspectives concerning whether these are sufficiently differentiated assessments.

They discuss their ideas collectively and consider module reviews and module evaluations from the last two years across both modules, in which the assessments – minus a couple of semantic tweaks – have taken place. They find that there is nothing within the documentation suggesting boredom from previous module cohorts.

- Consequently, Reese and Harper, along with the Programme Leader, arrange to see the Student Reps informally to discuss their perspectives, especially in light of the evidence that things appear to have been fine within the last two iterations of these modules.

At the meeting, the Reps inform the staff that they have conducted a thorough discussion with other students on both modules, and it is clearly a minority view that the module assessments are too similar. They don't feel any action is needed but do say that they are pleased to be invited to discuss at this stage. They suggest it might be the way the language of assessment is used, rather than the content, that gives the appearance of similarity.

- The staff team accepts this feedback and the Programme Leader suggests revisiting the [QAA Code concerning effective assessment](#) which contains guidance and linked resources to ensure that the assessment descriptors are fit for purpose on these modules.

All leave the meeting quite satisfied that their respective views have been given thoughtful critique and that some useful evidence-informed decision-making and insights have been applied that can shape further development if needed.

- Outside of the meeting the Programme Leader draws the attention of Reese and Harper to *Use and Abuse of the Student Voice: Leaders' responsibilities for making positive use of student evaluations of teaching in higher education* (Jones-Devitt and LeBihan, 2018). This investigated the experience of academic staff as the subjects of student evaluations and the challenges this presents for academic leaders.

- Reese and Harper also explore funding for a larger evaluation of the assessment processes. This aligns with elements in the Guide to using evidence which introduced evaluation in Section 2 as structured, planned, objective and goal focused. It gathers and analyses evidence to help make decisions about things. These decisions may be about interventions, activities and initiatives and provide recommendations for action.

This process gave Reese and Harper some new insights into meaningful ways to treat single-source anecdotal evidence in gauging student satisfaction.



Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Blair - Head of Department, at the University of Enlightenment

See Section 3

Within the University of Enlightenment, all Departments undergo a Quarterly Business Evaluation (QBE) of their performance. This is undertaken by a QBE panel, comprising members of the Senior Leadership Team of the University.

In preparation for QBE, Blair met with the Planning and Intelligence (P and I) team to discuss the Department's metrics. The P and I team highlighted a specific downturn in student retention in one area of the portfolio.

Blair knew there was a further explanatory narrative in the area concerned, as several factors had culminated in a perfect storm of events occurring, including staff illness, new curriculum, amended tariff entry structure; all of which possibly influenced the retention rates in this area.

- To get the P and I team to assist in the evidencing of Blair's suppositions, they did a follow-up planning session and Blair sourced a webinar to watch entitled *Data Delving: Engaging Staff in Student Experience Data* (QAA Scotland, 2018/9 - Optimising Existing Evidence: Webinar Series).

This stressed the need for all evidence-informed institutional processes to be:

- Open, accessible and intuitive
- Positive, supportive and empowering
- Collaborative, developmental and formative

As a consequence, the P and I team examined trends in and around longer term staff illness and impact within and external to the Department. The team also undertook a brief comparative analysis of a couple of subject areas that had amended the tariff entry points in a similar manner. Blair also secured a commitment to exploring qualitative measures for the impact of the new curriculum (eg those students who had experienced both during their studies).

- The process was so revelatory that the Head of P and I arranged further training for the team. This employed principles underpinning [Data Fallacies](#) work which demonstrated how evidence could be compiled in a more nuanced way, especially in future QBEs.

In Blair's case, this meant that, rather than being pessimistic, the Department could be cautiously confident about its future trajectory. It also implied that the retention downturn was wholly unavoidable due to wider strategic factors beyond the Department's control.

At the QBE, the range of presented evidence was well received, and Blair believed that this helped to construct a Departmental plan which was sensible and achievable. The P and I team was commended too for its efforts in providing a more considered explanatory narrative which aided strategic decision-making.

It also demonstrated the power of forward planning, using interesting reusable objects (in this case, the Webinar) as effective learning tools, and considering institutional data in a more sophisticated, triangulated manner for the benefit of all.



Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Ali - PVC Partnerships at Nudge University

See Section 4

Ali is the newly-appointed PVC at Nudge and is taking a proposal for a significant strategic partnership to Academic Board, after which it should progress to Court for final approval. The proposal has already navigated the Partnerships Committee successfully - which occurred before Ali started working at Nudge - however, Ali has noticed that there has been scant scoping research undertaken, including examination of ethical issues, in addition to obvious commercial benefits undertaken within the due diligence process, and feels this is worthy of more scrutiny before the proposal goes to Academic Board.

- To address this, Ali accesses the updated [BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research](#) guidance for additional scrutiny.

On perusal of the section 'Responsibilities to sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research,' Ali uncovers a myriad of potential problems. Ali notices that the CEO of the partner organisation has wider business interests that could be directly oppositional to business interests of the Chair of Court. In addition, an email is received from a member of academic staff at Nudge (who is an ex-employee of the proposed partner organisation) which implies that the partner organisation's Senior Team 'are a nightmare to work with'. Considering this emerging evidence, Ali convenes an urgent meeting with the Nudge VC to discuss

- In preparation, Ali revisits some of the immediate assumptions and draws on work analysing so-called '[wicked problems](#)' in universities.

These are types of issue that have no obviously linear solution and when attempting to solve (or 'tame' as commonly termed) highlight further complexities. The wicked problems literature (see Rittel and Webber, 1973) indicates that a fundamental task of any potential problem-solving is to consider whether a problem really is 'wicked' per se.

Ali now reconsiders the assumptions underpinning the problematising of the partnership in light of this framing when discussing with the VC.

It transpires that a) the potential conflict between Chair of Court and CEO of the partner organisation has already been considered informally and both parties are in negotiation of a further highly amicable alliance, coincidental to this proposal b) strict [University governance processes](#) would ameliorate this risk in any event c) although noting the anecdotal evidence from the ex-staff member, Ali discovers that all the 'nightmarish' senior leaders have indeed left the partner organisation.

In further discussion, Ali and the VC agree that the original assumptions have now been dissipated and that the proposal can proceed.

The VC thanks Ali for being thorough as, despite the outcome which confirms that the proposal should go ahead, it is always better to employ cautious scepticism when considering assumptions underpinning initial evidence. Ali takes the proposal forward feeling that it has a more robust evidence-informed basis for progression.



Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Madison - Business Planning Officer at the University of Datadwelling

See Section 5

Madison has been identified as a key project worker to support data requirements underpinning the University of Datadwelling Business School review of the MA in Human Relations Management.

The School wants to move from a taught on-site delivery mode (which is struggling to recruit) to distance learning (DL) delivery in the space of an academic year. The rationale being that it will be much more financially viable to do so, especially as a corporate DL private provider is being brought in as part of a managed partnership approach. Key operational objectives have already been established. It is now turning its attention to student experience.

Madison is briefed by the Dean and School Business Review Manager and given an outline of the data processes they expect to complete, involving:

1. Examining perceptions of existing students about moving to full DL delivery.
2. Doing a comparative analysis with one other University, which they feel can be facilitated easily due to the Dean's previous employment links with the HEI concerned.
3. Obtaining perceptions of the DL private provider students, to be collated as part of evaluation materials already gathered by the provider.

Madison has already undertaken formal evaluation research training based on ROTUR principles (Parsons, 2017) and feels there are more productive ways to gather evidence to inform the Business School's strategic decision-making more robustly.

At the meeting Madison tactfully suggests:

- Applying for ethical approval to harness student data, including scrutiny of GDPR for data sharing across institutions and private providers.
- Undertaking a five-year literature analysis to determine effective DL infrastructures concerning staff development needs, level of resourcing, virtual learning environment functionality.
- Giving primacy to gathering data concerning views of students who have already experienced full DL delivery within Datadwelling. This would be in addition to gathering perceptions of existing Business School students.
- Gathering data concerning views of staff who have already designed and facilitated full DL delivery. This would be in addition to gathering perceptions of existing staff about moving to DL.
- Doing a trend analysis of a comparator group (based on similarity of cohort) and comparing various factors alongside the existing group, including retention and drop-out rates, attainment levels, student satisfactory ratings, career trajectories. (Using the Dean's previous University may be helpful but only if relatively comparable, rather than convenient.)
- Using the commercial DL provider evaluation materials cautiously, given their operating context.

The Dean and Business Review Manager are initially cautious about this approach as they are under pressure to get on with things quickly. Madison had already rehearsed this as a possible response with the Director of Business Planning and has prepared a compelling rationale.

Madison draws attention to work underpinning the [HE Data Landscape Resource](#) that Business and Planning already use, which can help to reduce mistakes at planning stage and beyond. All agree that poorly-informed decisions will be far more costly in terms of delivery and overall reputation and must be avoided.

- Because Madison has already influenced their own Director, prior to this meeting (see Lumby, 2015) it is agreed that the Business and Planning team can assist with designing and implementing process and impact evaluation once the programme commences delivery.

All parties are very pleased with this way forward and recognise the need for adopting wider [integrated thinking](#) processes. The meeting closes with agreement that Madison will coordinate a thorough evidence-gathering process to inform the work.

Madison is pleased with this result and reflects that rehearsed preparation, evidence-informed planning, and being able to influence leaders effectively has led to a positive outcome.



Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Jules - Digital Services Manager at University of Enlightenment

See Section 6

The University of Enlightenment has been approached by a Students' Association Officer to address why the University has not yet introduced lecture capture across the institution. The officer has read the [Guide to using evidence](#) and presented their thoughts at Academic Board as part of the influencing process.

Jules, the Digital Services Manager, is expected to pick this up by sourcing kit, appraising technical functionality and providing associated costs.

As lecture capture is identified as a key objective within the Students' Association manifesto, it is pushing for a tight deadline for completion of this work with the University.

Jules does the sourcing thoroughly and would then normally produce an options appraisal with key recommendations and an implementation plan appended.

- However, Jules has accessed the [HE Data Landscape Resource](#), specifically the Student Engagement element and is also representing Enlightenment as part of the [Lecture Capture Enhancement Cluster](#) and understands that there are many issues which mediate the effectiveness of lecture capture and that its usefulness is highly contested.

Jules convenes a meeting with the PVC for Student Experience, Director of Learning and Teaching and CEO of the Students' Association as a precursor piece of stakeholder expectations management prior to going ahead with releasing an options appraisal and implementation plan.

At the meeting, the PVC and Director of Learning and Teaching share that they have heard anecdotally from key contacts in other universities that those which have gone ahead with commissioning lecture capture as a technical 'recording' process have come unstruck on several grounds, but primarily relating to 'lack of any pedagogic principles and purpose' (Dir. Of L and T). The PVC also shares a belief that if not handled correctly with appropriate staff development academic staff will not buy into this process as it is far too transactional.

A discussion ensues in which all parties share a more nuanced approach to debating what they consider to be an ambition to create reusable learning objects, not lecture capture, per se.

- The Director of Learning and Teaching highlights some work by Nordmann and McGeorge (2018) concerning benefits and disbenefits of lecture capture.

As a result, the work around lecture capture is paused whilst Jules finds more evidence about the longer term impact of going ahead with roll-out of lecture capture within the next teaching period..

- This includes the option of not doing lecture capture at all, in order to build in evaluation from the beginning of the activity implementation. (This draws upon guidance from OfS about [effective evaluation frameworks](#).)

The Students' Association CEO, who assumed that Enlightenment would comply fully, does at least now acknowledge that wider critical data needs to be collated before further collective decision-making can be made about the implementation of lecture capture, or otherwise.



Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Val - Programme Leader at Nudge University

See Section 7

As Programme Leader at Nudge, Val has developed a really good relationship with students at all levels and is known for being committed to authentic student engagement.

Recently, Val undertook a snapshot audit of how students are engaging on the current programme and noticed that many of the students, who are part-time and mature learners, have not been using the University's designated virtual learning environment (VLE). Indeed, the tracking tool on the VLE demonstrated really poor uptake across all modules, at all levels, beyond using the system to submit work electronically.

Val called together members of the Programme Team who were equally perplexed. Collectively, they assessed whether the pedagogy underpinning engagement was of a sufficient standard across the modules. There was uniform agreement that opportunities to engage were of high quality.

Several members of the Team deduced that there must be a skills deficit, given the nature of the student demographic.

- However, one team member noted that they had seen relevant evidence that indicated how unhelpful it was to hold assumptions without exploring different student population requirements, especially those who are part-time and in work. This included a manifesto in which students alluded to the notion that: 'lack of engagement in the Virtual Learning Environment indicates low interest. Many in-work students are technologically adept but choose to adopt more straightforward means of supporting each other.'
- Moreover, Val had noted the 'Thinking critically about evidence in higher education' section of the Guide to using evidence, which gave key pointers for challenging assumptions constructively.

This led to Val and the Programme Team examining more evidence to check out their assumptions and they found that using co-design principles would be pivotal in finding out what works rather than guessing. Discussion with existing students did confirm that they were using other mechanisms to engage that were 'less clunky' - it had nothing to do with any skills deficit.

In light of this revelatory process, Val and the Team met up to identify next steps. They all agreed that they needed to consider evidence and its ownership much more carefully.

- They followed key principles for building an evaluative mindset in which stakeholders played pivotal roles.

As a result of asking questions about the assumptions made about existing taken-for-granted evidence, the Team is now confidently fashioning a much more inclusive evaluation process that should yield effective insights for the future rather than operating by guesswork and speculation.