

SECTION 2: USING EVIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By the end of this section you will be able to:



outline the ways evidence can be used within an institution.



Extend your learning, begin to explore these functions within your own institution.



Apply your learning, review the case study to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Why use evidence?

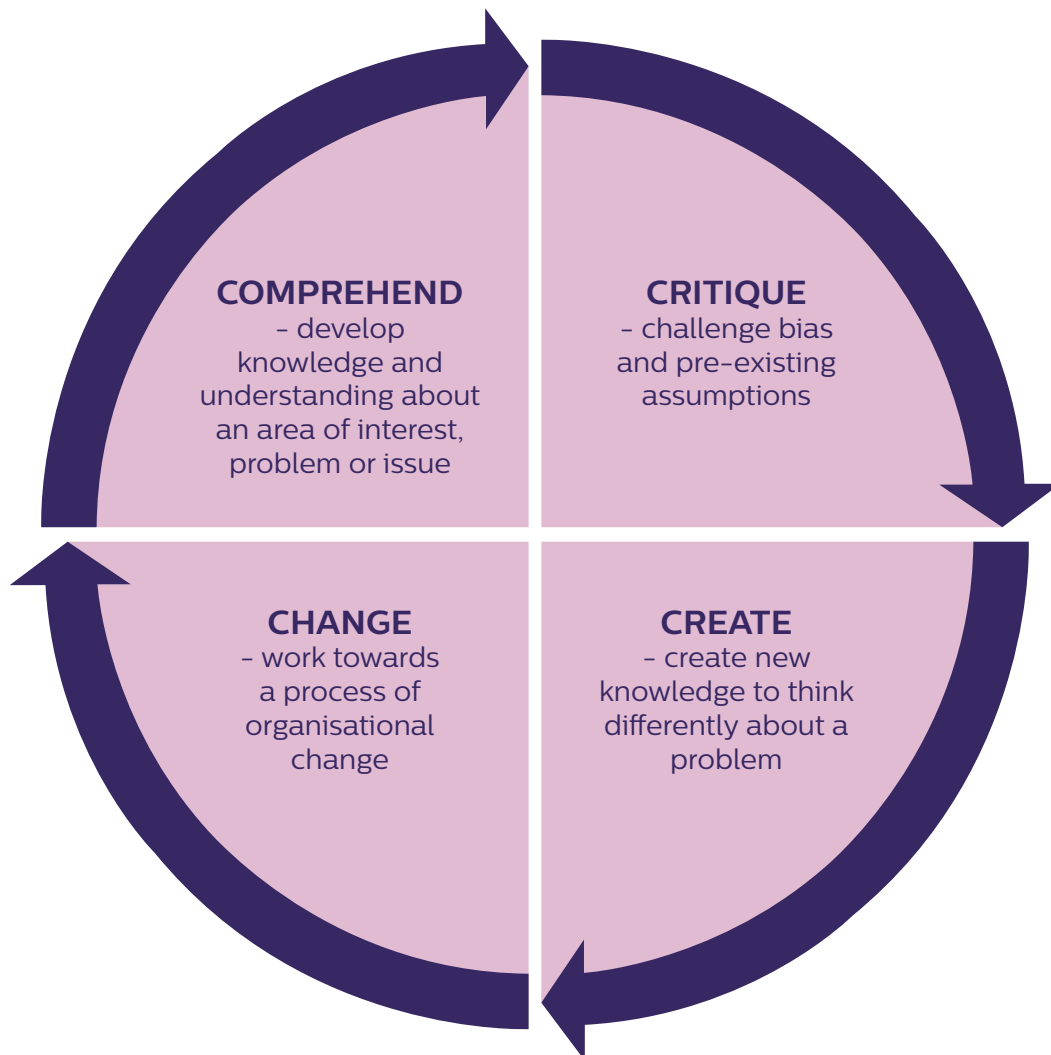
We use evidence every day to inform our thinking and to help us make decisions - consider the [data](#) gathered from customer photographs from restaurant visits, film critics' reviews and social media hashtags bringing together the views of so many on the latest television series.



We analyse these data sources and make judgements about those we value and those we might discount. We consider the views of others (your local school is judged to be outstanding, but your neighbour has sent their children elsewhere), and any limitations in the context/environment (your local school is judged to be outstanding, but it's too far to walk on foot). By doing this, we construct our [evidence base](#), form an opinion, and are able to make evidence-informed decisions.



Within a complex organisation, like a university, there will be many reasons why it is important to use evidence. Indeed, in many circumstances, you will be expected to engage with data and evidence. You could be engaging with data and evidence to:



CRITIQUE + CREATE = Research is defined as activity which seeks to contribute new insights to a body of knowledge. The research process would include the identification of a research problem and a research question and the selection of the most appropriate methodology to help answer it.

COMPREHEND + CHANGE = Evaluation is 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.



2.1 Evidence Essentials Two

It is important not to assume that evidence gathered in one context using a specific methodology will apply directly to another. Try to move from evidenced-based decisions to evidence-informed decisions to account for your own environment and limits of proportionality (Parsons, 2017).

Proportionality realistically balances best practice against any limitations in time, resource and scalability.

When can evidence help you?

Here are a few examples of the ways evidence is used by staff within higher education (adapted from NESTA, ND, 13).

Can you add in examples from your own institution? The first row has been completed as an illustration.

Use of evidence by staff	Your example
To design more effective programmes/courses to deliver positive student outcomes	<p>Evidence: qualitative student feedback via the National Student Survey comments on negative experiences of transition to university</p> <p>Project: Student Transitions Map - bringing together sector resources relating to how students enter, move through, and leave university.</p> <p>https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/completed-enhancement-themes/student-transitions/transitions-map</p>
To provide a rationale for an institutional research and evaluation/strategic enhancement project	
To develop, maintain or review institutional structures, processes, strategies and policies	
To show an assessment of need within a business case for additional functional resources	
To provide indicators of success and impact (internal and external/regulatory)	
To commission or decommission an intervention or initiative based on need and/or value for money	
To contribute an opinion within formal or ad hoc academic committees and boards	
To develop a team or working group with a specific skill set to address an identified problem	
To complete annual performance reviews, and action career progression and rewards for success	



2.2 Case Study: Using Evidence in Higher Education

To apply your learning, review the case study below and answer the questions to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Reese and Harper, Module Leaders at Algorithm University

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

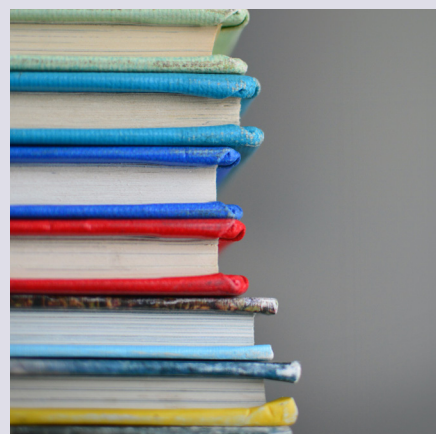
To address these concerns, the two staff members get together to design sufficiently differentiated assessments, drawn on their experiences elsewhere.

They discuss their ideas in class with students who appear to be very receptive to the proposed changes. They thank the students for their input and tell them that they will seek to make a change in time for the assessment phase. The students are delighted.

Full of enthusiasm, the two Module Leaders meet with the Programme Leader to discuss these ideas. The Leader is clearly irritated by their proposal, telling them both that they don't understand the traditions underpinning this programme and that, in any event, it is way too late to initiate changes for this academic year.

The Module Leaders leave the meeting feeling really deflated and these feelings are compounded when they go back to tell their students that they can't do anything about the assessment process in the foreseeable future. Understandably, the students are cross that the expected changes can't now occur.

Reese and Harper feel frustrated that they haven't been able to make the desired changes and, in addition, the relationship with both the Programme Leader and their respective students has been damaged. They wish they had never bothered!





Case Study Critique: Using Evidence in Higher Education

Consider the following questions and then see if you can reconstruct this case to have some improved outcomes for Reese and Harper. There is an alternative, refashioned version in Appendix A which provides one approach to providing an evidence-informed enhancement of this situation. Before accessing this alternative, see if you can do any better.

- What are your immediate thoughts about the case study situation? Why do Reese and Harper feel frustrated?
- How much knowledge did the two Module Leaders appear to have about the broader programme context in this interaction?
- Can you identify any pitfalls in their approach when discussing this matter with their students?
- What assumptions have you made about the meeting between Reese and Harper and the Programme Leader? What assumptions did Reese and Harper bring to the meeting?
- What evidence, if any, was used by the Module Leaders and Programme Leader to evaluate the proposed changes? Were any evidence sources used explicitly to aid understanding?
- How can Reese and Harper learn from the experience in order to examine ways of ensuring that further ideas are translated into effective action?

Notes



References and further Reading

JISC (2018) Code of Practice for Learning Analytics
www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/code-of-practice-for-learning-analytics

NESTA (ND) Using Research Evidence: A Practice Guide, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/using-research-evidence-practice-guide

Office for Students (OfS) (2018) Mental health and wellbeing: a priority
www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/our-news-and-blog/mental-health-and-wellbeing-a-priority

Parsons, D (2017) Demystifying Evaluation, Bristol: Policy Press

QAA Scotland (2018/9) Optimising Existing Evidence: Webinar Series, QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/current-enhancement-theme/optimising-existing-evidence/webinar-series

Sobe, N W (2018) Problematizing Comparison in a Post-Exploration Age: Big Data, Educational Knowledge, and the Art of Criss-Crossing
Comparative Education Review, 62 (3): pp325-343

Student Minds UK (2019) The University Mental Health Charter
www.studentminds.org.uk/charter.html

Universities UK (UUK) (2015) Student mental wellbeing in higher education: Good practice guide
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/student-mental-wellbeing-in-he.pdf

Digital glossary for this section

[Data](#)

[Evidence Base](#)

[Proportionality](#)