By the end of this section you will be able to identify the major constituents for effective use of evidence.

To extend your learning, explore some of the links and checklists provided.

To apply your learning throughout this Guide, review the case study to help you consider a ‘real life’ example associated to the content of this section and others.

Has your use of evidence had an impact?

This section pulls together all previous sections and ideally should be accessed when all other associated content has been completed. In contrast to other sections, this one starts with a case study in which things go really well. See if you can identify important points in the process and the actions that might have led to success.

Morgan, Sam and Lou, Students’ Association Leadership Team, Exquisite Evidence University

The Students’ Association manifesto pledge concerned developing best practice approaches for engaging the fullest range of student voices in decision making. The three leaders set about designing an evidence-informed process to underpin the ‘All Voices Included’ campaign.

Before finalising the process, they knew it would be helpful to be informed by relevant global, national and local evidence. Sam constructed a literature search, which also included ‘grey’ areas such as local initiatives undertaken by other SA’s and within Exquisite, too. The team were helped by one of the University’s research librarians, whose role is to support such initiatives.

At the same time, Lou put together a stakeholder analysis plan which considered who might be able to help to realise All Voices Included at Exquisite and why their involvement would be useful. Morgan devised a communications strategy that recognised why different stakeholders might need information in different ways at different times. They invited colleagues to be part of a stakeholder group to advise and guide the process.
The Students’ Association already had an excellent working relationship with the University’s Evaluation and Research Team, so once they had drafted a tentative plan, they consulted with the team to explore how to evaluate intentions and achievements throughout the process.

With an outline plan in place, Morgan, Sam and Lou then met with other SA reps and University Learning and Teaching leads to define appropriate methods and to align with the Students’ Association and University strategies for effective student engagement. To initiate change effectively, an Appreciative Inquiry approach was used, which focusses upon what works well rather than what goes wrong. Having taken advice from Exquisite’s Evaluation and Research Team, the ROTUR method (Parsons, 2017) was applied to ensure that the amount of resources needed was proportionate to the scope of the initiative.

All through the process, the team were aware that the plan still needed to be analysed for criticality and for impact. A Stakeholder Group was therefore established, and their opinions and insights used as part of the evidence-base which shaped the initiative throughout.

As Exquisite’s Heads of Quality and Learning and Teaching were committed members of the Stakeholder Group, their help in advising on dissemination, governance and impact on University policy and practice was invaluable.

Consequently, key findings and recommendations emerging from All Voices Included were considered in appropriate settings and the initiative resulted in a real step change for enhancing effective and equitable student engagement. It also meant that All Voices Included moved from being a mid-term project to a mainstreamed and sustainable part of everyday practice.

Involving a variety of stakeholders from the outset also ensured that some influential and productive relationships were forged, alongside seeing this as a positive partnership between the University and the local Students’ Association.

As a postscript to the initiative, All Voices Included won several sector awards for developing effective student engagement. In gaining further recognition and impact, it had gone from being a manifesto pledge to one of the most thought-leading initiatives for student engagement, and its principles were adopted by many other universities.

Morgan, Sam and Lou were delighted: they had seen All Voices Included go from being their initial idea into a sector wide scheme that had positive influence for many students whose voices might never had been heard. The team also reflected upon the many skills that developing a well-considered evidence-informed process had yielded for them, too, that they could now demonstrate in subsequent studies and further employment.
Consider the following questions to see if you can identify why things went well and why. It might be useful to cross reference with other elements of this Guide to help you work it out.

- Why is this case study ‘successful’? What are your definitions for success when using evidence (whether generated, critiqued or both)?
- What leadership skills have Morgan, Sam and Lou displayed?
- How have they used partnership working effectively in influencing outcomes?
- What personal skills, impact and abilities have the Students’ Association team enhanced?
- What unintended outcomes were reported in the case study?

Now you have had a go at addressing these questions, see if your responses align with the factors below.
Leadership skills

This is probably the most consistently crucial factor for success. It is now widely recognised that the transformational leader model advocated many years ago by Burns (1978) is still really effective for achieving positive change. Such leaders, or indeed, leadership teams, are characterised by:

- having a clear vision of what needs to change
- being able to enthuse and stimulate others
- encouraging meaningful participation
- developing excellent communication skills
- demonstrating loyalty and commitment to both tasks and to others
- having a sense of the Bigger Picture
- working with strong personal Integrity
- being able to inspire others.

In the case study, Morgan, Sam and Lou managed to display all of these characteristics as a team rather than as a set of individuals. It might also be useful to revisit the ‘Thinking Critically Case Study’ in which Drew needed to develop informal micro-leadership skills, as advocated by Lumby (2015) to recognise the impact of the everyday interaction in enhancing personal impact.

Defining success

In purist terms, success might be viewed as whether initial aims and objectives of any evidence-based or evidence-informed initiative have been met. However, as noted in Section 4, initial assumptions underpinning aims and objectives should be revisited throughout as the original thinking can be inappropriate or misguided. A good way of ensuring that you gain a successful process and outcomes is to make sure that you use evidence to inform and challenge all stages of planning and review. Revisiting the ‘What Critical Questions Should You Ask of Evidence?’ checklist will help you to develop a clear but realistic view of what’s achievable.

Partnership working and developing effective relationships

Within any complex organisation, there will be subtle cultural differences with how things are done, alongside the range of opinions that such diversity generates. In this case, the team used partnership working very effectively to: draw on expertise across the organisation to support the All Voices Included initiative; develop a sense of identity for the initiative and to cultivate ownership by bringing together a well-considered Stakeholder Group; use situated power of themselves and others to influence and drive change at the right levels; ensure that the maximum amount of resourcing and capacity-building were in place to enable every chance for success; enlist others who can implement change, help to maximise reach of findings and dissemination and push through recommendations. You may recall that one of the problems for Alex and Taylor, the Course Rep and their Programme Leader within the Existing Data Case Study concerned the lack of an effective relationship to discuss emerging evidence before it became problematic.
In working collaboratively, Morgan, Sam and Lou have clearly developed some skills and abilities that link to those expected of graduates in 2019.

Skills they have developed include: design and planning skills for using evidence effectively; insight into how to incorporate effective evaluation into the process at the outset; a range of leadership, influencing and communications skills, applying positive and inclusive change-management principles.

To capture their own development in more detail, they could assess their impact against the following checklist: Ten types of evidence to show impact and supporting data produced below by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence of difference</th>
<th>Data to show your research has made a difference to beneficiaries or society such as:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Difference for beneficiaries, effects or outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economic difference, cost savings, profit or gain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Direct change in policy or policymaking</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Difference brought about in practice or the awareness, understanding or behaviour of practitioners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Researcher or stakeholder knowledge and skills or research capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evidence of other types of impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence of scale</th>
<th>Data to show your impact is on a significant or sizeable scale, for example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A large number and/or range of beneficiaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Targeted highly significant impact that may be small in scale or have a precise impact on an important issue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Data to show people benefit in a way that is important to them</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Defendable projections of future scale, e. g. based on new or emerging markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Data about regional, national or international reach</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Scale of interest in the research from stakeholders, research users or beneficiaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Large-scale altmetric data or impact tracking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence of attribution</th>
<th>Data that helps to elaborate the often intricate or multipart links between the research and the impact, for example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Explaining collaborations and team contributions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Documented accounts of interactions with research users</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Data about how knowledge exchange has occurred</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evidence from research users about how they have applied or used the research</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence of quality</th>
<th>Data to show that you have achieved impact through high quality research, such as:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Independent reviews of research quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Audit trail to show research questions are well considered, for example you used a robust decision-making process to reach your hypothesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Data to show a robust research design e. g. tests or scores</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Data about institutional support structures</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 5. Evidence of partnership | Data to show how partnerships contributed to impact, for example:  
| | - Data about collaborative research partnerships e.g. number of partners, contact hours or episodes of interaction  
| | - Illustrative data about the nature of the collaborative research partnership  
| | - Data about partnership with industry, public sector organisations or charities e.g. initiation, duration and growth of partnerships  
| | - Data about the international reach of the partnerships, international member organisations or contributors  
| 6. Evidence of engagement | Data to show that engagement of stakeholders, research users or the public is integral to the research, for example:  
| | - Accounts of engagement events with professionals or practice communities  
| | - Data to show knowledge exchange or knowledge transfer partnerships  
| | - Data log of stakeholder engagement  
| | - Data about research user testing or comments on the research design  
| | - Data about the contributions of members of the public involved in the research  
| 7. Evidence of experience | Data to show that the individuals involved have a strong personal track record in their area of research, for example:  
| | - Grants and other research income recognised expertise  
| | - Data about researcher impact skills, knowledge and competencies e.g. communication or implementation skills  
| | - Data to show a track record of projects and funding  
| | - Data on publications and dissemination work  
| 8. Corroborative evidence | Data from users of your research or beneficiaries to corroborate the impact you have had, for example:  
| | - Data from independent evaluation or self-evaluations of impact  
| | - Data about the impact of participation or involvement on research users  
| | - Reflexive accounts, e.g. a research impact diary or log  
| | - Research user’s own accounts of the impact of the research on them  
| 9. Evidence of accessibility | Data to show that you have made information about your research accessible, for example:  
| | - Publication figures and citation of the research by other researchers  
| | - Data about knowledge brokers, knowledge transfer partnerships or secondments  
| | - Data to show that the research has been disseminated to research users and has been taken up by them locally, nationally or internationally  
| | - Numbers of attendees at public events or distribution of lay summaries  
| | - Numbers of visitors to open access databases or data deposits to open access repositories  
| | - Access figures for videos, infographics or visual material  
| | - Viewer figures for television, radio, the press, or social media  
| 10. Evidence of recognition | Data to show that researchers and other audiences recognise and value your research, for example:  
| | - Extracts from independent reviews  
| | - Quotes from feedback  
| | - Formal awards or recognition of the importance of the research |
Understanding what works and capturing success is crucial. You will need to identify appropriate leadership skills required of a team or individuals, develop effective partnership working, learn how to influence via advocates supporting you within complex organisations and develop capacity-building so that evidence can be used sustainably for future students. Developing robust impact processes will assist your own effectiveness alongside making the most of evidence-informed policy and practice.

References and Further Reading


Lumby, J (2015) In the wings and backstage: exploring the micropolitics of leadership in higher education, London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.


QAA Scotland (2019) Focus on Graduate Skills 2018-19 www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/graduate-skills

Digital glossary for this section

Data  Evaluation  Evidence

Research
Evidence Essentials: A Summary

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.

Collating evidence is not always a logical or linear process. Data sources may not neatly corroborate and may even contrast each other. To make sense of your data landscape, spend some time reflecting on the process and the outcome. Evidence can include notes of unintended outcomes of the research/evaluation and personal reflections of the researcher/s. Once a conclusion has been reached, it is also important to state any limitations in the evidence base.

There is a vast amount of data available which could help explore an almost any area of higher education. Sometimes this data landscape can be overwhelming. Start any project with a set of clear aims and objectives and a question that you want to answer. Ask yourself “What do I want to find out about this chosen area”? Then ask critical questions of your proposed data sources.

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Critical thinking will develop alongside your confidence at navigating the data landscape. You will be required to make some tough decisions about what you can realistically achieve. You will need to scrutinise processes and defend your judgements. You will need to assess best practice and modify for your own context. Be open and honest in sharing what’s worked and what hasn’t. This will help those students who begin this journey after you.

A good grasp of the how data has been generated (either by yourself or others) will allow you to think critically about how it can be used within an evidence base. Adopting a mixed methods approach will also allow for the strengths of one method to compensate for any limitations in another.

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.

It is important to know why you need to plan and audit how evidence is used to inform decision-making (either by yourself or others). Doing so will allow you to justify your reasoning and any changes in direction. It also assists in the capture of unintended outcomes.

It is important to assess the appropriateness of each data source and challenge yourself to be innovative where possible. This is how evidence becomes inclusive of all voices and less likely to keep some voices hidden and silent. It is essential that you triangulate data sources where possible so that limitations of one can be addressed by strengths of another. Consider different types of triangulation which can strengthen your evidence base: data; methods; theory; researchers.

There is a vast amount of data available which could help explore an almost any area of higher education. Sometimes this data landscape can be overwhelming. Start any project with a set of clear aims and objectives and a question that you want to answer. Ask yourself “What do I want to find out about this chosen area”? Then ask critical questions of your proposed data sources.

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