

## A QAA-FUNDED COLLABORATIVE ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

# NERUPI Peer Evaluation Pilot Project

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

This Executive Summary is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project was led by the University of Bath in partnership with Bath Spa University, University of Derby, University of East Anglia, London School of Economics and Sheffield Hallam University. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

The summary describes the delivery of a Pilot Peer Evaluation course designed to strengthen evaluation practice and support higher education institutions (HEIs) in the planning and evaluation of initiatives to improve equity in student access, participation and success. The course combined peer learning with a process of peer review and peer feedback on institutional approaches, methods and delivery of evaluation of access and participation initiatives to increase rigour and improve evaluation practice.

### Organisation and delivery of the pilot course

The pilot course incorporated co-creation of materials and guidelines for future use, including a course curriculum and a set of guidelines for organisations participating in the peer review process. The pilot took place between April and November 2023 and comprised four three-hour online sessions, a two-day residential experience, peer evaluation pair work, and a final review meeting. The peer evaluators used a series of templates as part of the process to collate and exchange information. The review element was based on discussion of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), issues emerging, and agreement of implications for evaluation strengthening. The course team reviewed the outputs and fed back comments individually and collectively.

### Evaluation of the professional development

An initial group of twelve participants took part in the peer evaluation process, representing a diverse range of experience and institutional contexts. Feedback on the online sessions was generally positive: eleven respondents said that the main ideas were communicated clearly, and ten people said the level was 'about right'. Comments suggested some participants would like wider and deeper consideration of the issues from a theoretical perspective at an earlier stage in the course.

The residential experience was particularly well received and described by one participant as: *'Genuinely one of the best workshops/sessions I've attended with work. The sessions were incredibly well thought out and planned and I learnt a lot from every activity'*. Suggestions for additional content focused on inclusion of advanced research methods, including different types of quasi-experimental evaluation designs and more 'creative' qualitative processes.

Comments suggested that the session had been successful in setting the tone for honesty and collegiality. Three-quarters indicated that the sessions and guidance had given them sufficient information and tools needed to be a peer reviewer. Some participants would like to see more guidance or clearer instructions on the process for peer review meetings and reporting the results.

## Evaluation of the peer review process

Feedback from the participants on their experience of the process emphasised the benefits of having insights from someone from another institution and being able to draw on a colleague's expertise. The comments also highlighted the part played by self-reflection in the peer evaluation, as well as hearing the views of well-informed external colleagues. Learning was identified in three main areas: understanding of systems and processes; knowledge about the external environment, to inform reflection of performance in context; and learning about methodologies and approaches to evaluation.

Two-thirds of the participants said that the information would be used to inform evaluation practice, and more than half said that the information would be used to make changes to evaluation management and resourcing. Suggestions on potential improvement to the pair work process included the formulation of agreed recommendations for action as a result of the review. Recommendations for future courses included further development of the guidance materials, particularly in relation to the proposed output of the peer evaluation, and expectations of how they might be shared and used internally.

## Conclusions

As a facilitated collaborative learning experience, this pilot course was greatly appreciated and very successful. It created opportunities for collaborative learning; broadening understanding of equity and widening participation issues; developing evaluation expertise; and identifying areas for evaluation strengthening. The pilot also achieved its aims of producing:

- Standardised templates to support the peer review process
- Guidelines for organisations participating in a peer review
- A revised course curriculum for future use recommending additional in-person sessions and streamlined submission and assessment arrangements.

## Benefits of peer review

### For organisations

- External feedback and objectivity
- Recommendations for evaluation-strengthening internally
- Benchmarking evaluation practice against others in the sector
- Collaborative learning from colleagues with similar challenges and expertise
- Building evaluation capability through staff continuing professional development (CPD)

### For individuals

- Greater understanding of equity and widening participation issues and how to negotiate sector challenges, giving their work greater impact
- Understanding of evaluation theories and ways to approach theoretically grounded evaluations
- Improvements in their own practice in evaluation planning, design and methods, implementing and reporting
- Ability to effectively demonstrate the impact of interventions and generate stronger evidence
- Improved skills in communicating to different audiences and tailoring findings effectively
- Increased reflexivity and criticality in own practice
- Experience of working collaboratively with sector colleagues
- Capacity to disseminate peer evaluation findings persuasively
- Better able to support continuous improvement and regulatory compliance in their own and other institutions