NERUPI *network*

Evaluating & Researching University Participation Interventions

QAA

A QAA-FUNDED COLLABORATIVE ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

NERUPI Peer Evaluation Pilot Project

Final Report

December 2023

Final Report, December 2023

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

This report describes the delivery and evaluation of a Pilot Peer Evaluation Course designed and delivered by NERUPI (Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions), based at the University of Bath. The aim of the course was to develop Peer Review guidelines and a CPD curriculum for use in the higher education (HE) sector, with the aim of strengthening evaluation practice within organisations to support the planning and delivery of initiatives to improve equity in student access, participation and success.

ADVISORY GROUP

Dave Thomas, Associate Professor, Solent University

Charles Wiffen, Head of Academic Portfolio Development, Bath Spa University

Jessica Bond, Head of Widening Participation, London School of Economics

Mark Walmsley, Associate Professor, University of East Anglia

Dan West, Policy Lead, University of Derby

Wendy Fowle, APP Lead, Oxford Brookes University

Julian Crockford, Senior Lecturer, Sheffield Hallam University

Anna Anthony, Senior Analyst, HEAT

John Rainford, NERUPI Researcher, Visiting Fellow University of Bath

Becky Bull, QAA

COURSE TEAM

Annette Hayton, Senior Research Fellow, NERUPI Convenor, University of Bath

Joanne Moore, NERUPI Research and Development Office, University of Bath

Andrew Bengry, Senior Lecturer, Bath Spa University

NERUPI

The Network for Researching and Evaluating University Participation Interventions www.nerupi.co.uk, based at the University of Bath, is a community of practice for those seeking to reduce inequalities in higher education through evaluation. With over 80 member organisations, we share our expertise and explore new approaches to embedding findings into HE practice and culture to support continuous institutional improvement and enhance student experience.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

The call for greater rigour and transparency in evaluation to improve practice and demonstrate value for money in equity and widening participation initiatives is increasing across the UK, with very particular requirements from the Office for Students (OfS) in England related to access and participation plans (APPs). While regulation and transparency are important aspects of achieving greater equality, external scrutiny does not automatically translate into better practice or improved quality of provision. Capacity-building is also needed to develop an evaluative practice that supports higher education institutions (HEIs) in providing the best offer to students in addition to meeting regulatory requirements. Drawing inspiration from the external examiner system, this Peer Evaluation Pilot course set out to explore the potential to develop evaluation expertise while introducing an additional level of external objectivity and perspective to the design, delivery and evaluation of equity and widening participation interventions.

Currently, provision for evaluation varies greatly across the higher education sector. It is often the case that a single post-holder is charged with the responsibility for planning and undertaking evaluations of access, success and progression initiatives across an HEI. Evaluators are generally well qualified in some aspect of evaluation, research or data analysis but their role calls for some measure of expertise across all of these areas. An understanding of equity and widening participation issues in the context of HE is also essential to support meaningful evaluation design. In addition, there is the requirement to produce evaluations within the specific reporting requirements of regulators such as the OfS.

Some colleagues enjoy the support of managers with an active interest in evaluation, and some may have assistants to record and analyse data, but practice varies across the sector. A range of interesting and creative solutions have emerged to meet internal and external requirements for increased evaluation. These include embedding evaluations into interventions or training colleagues and students to undertake various aspects of the evaluation process. This strategy lends itself well to a realist, action-research approach and can effectively support active learning strategies and co-creation of resources and activities. However, the solution further extends the role of the evaluator requiring a range of skills, such as dissemination and staff development for colleagues engaged in planning and delivering activities.

While this level of activity broadens the capacity of evaluators, it limits the possibilities for them to develop their own expertise and sectoral understanding in this emerging professional area. Peer evaluation provides opportunities for collaborative learning, reciprocal feedback, and mutual appraisal with their peers. Supporting both formative and summative evaluation, it can enable practitioners to improve their understanding of the sector as well as building confidence in applying robust and appropriate evaluation methods that support positive change within their own organisations and the sector more widely.

This report describes the delivery and evaluation of a Pilot Peer Evaluation course funded through the QAA Collaborative Enhancement fund and designed and delivered by NERUPI. The aim of the course was to develop Peer Review Guidelines and a CPD curriculum for the HE sector, with the aim of strengthening evaluation practice, and the planning and delivery of initiatives to improve equity in student access, participation and success.

2. THE PILOT COURSE

2.1 Learning outcomes

The Pilot Peer Evaluation course was designed to give participants the opportunity to develop:

- experience of working with colleagues to identify strengths and areas for improvement in current practice
- expertise in evaluation planning, design and methods
- understanding of strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to evaluation and evidence
- strategies for gathering data and using evidence effectively
- capacity to support continuous improvement and regulatory compliance in their own institution
- reflexivity and criticality in own practice
- co-creation practice by evaluating and using evidence across the sector
- knowledge and understanding of the challenges to greater equality in the HE sector
- opportunities for collaborative evaluation projects
- dissemination strategies for use within and beyond their own organisations.

2.2 Organisation and delivery of the pilot course

The pilot course incorporated a strong element of co-creation, including the production of materials and guidelines for future use.

Recruitment and take-up

An initial group of fourteen participants was selected to provide a sufficiently diverse range of experience while maintaining a small group learning environment. The co-creation aspect meant that it was important to have a well-balanced group in terms of gender, ethnicity and class in addition to reflecting the varying roles and professional experience of those with responsibility for evaluation in HEIs. This included quantitative data analysis, qualitative research, standard evaluation expertise, understanding of OfS APP requirements and management of equity initiative delivery. All members of the group were working within OfS regulations in English HEIs.

QAA funding enabled participants to engage free of charge in recognition that they would contribute to the course development as well as learning from the sessions. Attendance and engagement were excellent with only one selected participant unable to participate due to serious illness. One researcher felt unable to engage with some aspects but contributed to the evaluation process.

Development and delivery of the training and guidance

The course team, Annette Hayton, Joanne Moore and Andrew Bengry, developed an outline course which was shared and discussed with the Advisory Group. The pilot course comprised:

- **Online training sessions.** Four three-hour sessions were held online in April, May, June and July. These sessions included a mix of presentations and group discussions. As part of Session 1, participants began the process of collating contextual information about their own HEIs which was used as a basis for the final Peer Review. Some sessions included pre-readings (for example, Session 4 involved distribution of texts on evaluation examples which were then critiqued and discussed during the session).

- **Residential experience.** A two-day residential took place in Bath in July 2023. As well as building on the online training sessions, the residential was used to co-create and review a series of templates which underpinned the peer evaluation process, and to initiate the review section of the course with pairs meeting and having initial discussions.

- **Peer evaluation pair work.** Having been allocated to their pairs, participants met independently from the course team (see below), leading to the production of peer evaluation reports during July and August and submitted them to the course team for feedback in September 2023.

- **Review meeting.** A final meeting to review the course and the materials and consider next steps was held in person in early November 2023.

The series of online sessions, residential and review sessions, were designed to give participants training and guidance in collecting and analysing information and also to ensure an appropriate tone. The key for successful peer feedback was creation of a constructive, open environment in which peer evaluators felt safe to share honest, yet constructive, criticism of other members' evaluation plans. Ground rules were discussed and agreed as part of Session 1. These included seeking agreement from participants to respect the opinions of others; listen to a range of viewpoints; maintain confidentiality under 'Chatham House rules'; support everyone's right to be heard; challenge respectfully; respect differences; and be supportive rather than judgemental. Additional suggestions from the group were: openness to being scrutinised and welcoming comment; willingness to share recommendations; attentive listening and appreciation of colleagues' efforts.

The course was underpinned by Moodle, the University of Bath virtual learning environment. This platform was chosen as it is designed to support focused group discussions which were required to co-create the Peer Review templates and guidelines.

2.3 Overview of the curriculum

The course involved the stages and content summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the curriculum

PEER EVALUATION PILOT COURSE OUTLINE
SESSION 1: NATIONAL & INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT
Develop trust within the group
Understand the benefits and challenges of peer evaluation
Recognise needs within the group
Understand power relations between HEIs
Identify key organisational issues for investigation
SESSION 2: CHANGE STRATEGY
Understand different approaches to research and evaluation
Introduction to praxis and Theory of Change (ToC) – including submission of ToC examples
SESSION 3: EVALUATION STRATEGY
Increase understanding and expertise in application of Theory of Change in the evaluation process
Experience the process of peer review using examples presented and reflect on this
Understand different approaches to research and evaluation
Understand aims, activities, measures and indicators
SESSION 4: OPERATIONALISING EVALUATIONS: METHODS & DATA STRATEGIES
Understand different research methods – qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods
SESSION 5: RESIDENTIAL – in-person session
Understand major equity and WP issues in HE sector and role of evaluation to inform practice
Understand different approaches to research and evaluation
Understand the difference between research and evaluation
Identify appropriate research and evaluation methods to use in particular contexts
Begin the process of undertaking a peer review
SESSION 6: PEER REVIEW
Undertake Peer Review pair work and submit to course team
SESSION 7: REFLECT – in-person session
Final in-person reflection session

2.4 Peer evaluation reviews

The 12 participants in the core group were allocated into pairs (2x6) in order to engage in peer evaluation of each other's approach to WP evaluation. Each person played the role of both institutional contacts to receive a Peer Review from their partner, as well as being the peer evaluator for the other person.

Peer evaluation pair work began during the residential experience but mainly relied on the researchers liaising directly with their partners as part of a process of exchanging information, reflecting on what they had received, engaging in a discussion of the materials, and preparing a peer evaluation report.

As well as guidance on the process, the peer evaluators used three templates as part of the process, which had been developed by the team in collaboration with the participants during the online sessions and residential, as described in Table 2.

Table 2: Templates underpinning the peer evaluation pair work

	Purpose	Content (Headings)
Template 1: Contextual Information	To collect and structure information on the organisation/HEI and the context for the delivery of evaluation of access and participation activities.	Local content; Student body; Access, participation and progression (APP) (strategies and programmes); widening participation evaluation (structure and approaches); Programme planning and Theory of Change; Evaluation methods; Evaluation evidence (examples); Supporting information
Template 2: Peer Evaluator Checklist	Prompts to guide the thought process of the peer evaluator in reviewing the information submitted for the Peer Review. The checklist was designed to be used to make notes to structure the feedback and discussion with the peer evaluation (after the evaluator had first read and assimilated the information).	Organisation's context and equity priorities; Programme planning and use of Theory of Change; Evaluation context and methods; Evaluation examples; Theory of Change prompts (in annex)
Template 3: SWOT Format	A thinking tool which could be used to organise ideas and reflections on the materials.	Strengths; Weaknesses; Opportunities; Threats

The course team considered several options for the final reporting format. The SWOT approach was chosen as it is well-suited to improving quality through the continuous improvement and support model of institutional review rather than inspection and regulation approach. The prompts in Template 2 (the evaluator checklist) were designed to support the completion of a SWOT analysis (and the prompts were colour coded according to which of the four aspects of the SWOT the information was relevant to). The 'SWOT' format was used as the basis for reporting the conclusions of the review, in order to focus attention on the 'strengths', 'weaknesses', 'opportunities' and 'threats', expressed as follows:

- Strengths – describe what the institution is good at – such as coherent planning processes, embedded evaluations, use of variety of methods and data, areas of expertise, and so on.

- Weaknesses – what stops the evaluations from being optimum, such as poorly thought-out measures/indicators, data difficulties, inappropriate analytical strategy, and so on.

- Opportunities – internal and external factors that could give a boost: new data sources, chances to embed evaluation, additional expertise, unused resources, and so on.

- Threats – factors that have potential for harm if not mitigated: competing priorities, difficulties engaging others, lack of resources/expertise, and so on.

The SWOT was considered helpful in the context of peer evaluation for a number of reasons. It is relatively value free, avoids pre-conceptions, and puts the focus on a fact-based assessment of the situation. It generates ideas which can be explored further as part of the development of joint conclusions. It also has potential for use in making recommendations and strategic planning. The approach taken to the SWOT differed slightly from traditional approaches to using this tool in that the focus was on aspects within the scope and remit of the institution (traditionally 'SW' aspects are

internal factors, and 'OT' aspects are external to the organisation). The rationale for this approach was to enable consideration of the opportunities and threats related to the internal circumstances within these large and complex organisations.

2.5 Assessment

The pair work process in each case was subject to an assessment undertaken by the course team. The team reviewed the peer evaluation report, and, where possible, the contextual information underpinning the review, and then prepared feedback to each evaluator in the form of a short (one page) narrative. The feedback to the evaluators included commentary on the materials submitted for review and the review report. The narrative aimed to highlight any positive aspects identified by the assessors (such as evidence of engagement with the materials, depth of understanding, and creative thinking in relation to suggestions for change). The feedback also highlighted any aspects identified as being in need of further attention or development (for example, gaps in the information, missed opportunities). Comments were also fed back about the learning for the course team on the process (for example, where more guidance might be needed, or where promising practice was identified within the materials submitted).

3. PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK ON THE TRAINING & GUIDANCE

Participants' reactions to the training and guidance were collected through questionnaire surveys at three points during the course: following Session 4 in June 2023 (mid-course review); at the end of the residential experience in July 2023; and following completion of the pair work in October 2023 (end-point review). The evaluation focused on the extent to which the process has enabled the development of effective peer relationships, and the extent to which participants have developed their skills and understanding of the requirements of peer evaluation.

3.1 Mid-course review

Of the thirteen respondents to the mid-course review questionnaire, more than half (53.8%) said their experience of the Peer Evaluation pilot was what they'd expected, around a third (30.8%) said it had been different to what they'd expected, and the remainder weren't sure. Comments suggested that the course was meeting expectations in terms of providing opportunities to connect, opportunities for reflection, and joint learning with others:

> I went into the workshop looking to connect with other evaluators, and be able to reflect on personal experiences in evaluation. The course has delivered that.

> I expected a really valuable learning experience which would give plenty of opportunity for collaborative group work, with rigour applied to the development of the course. My expectations are based on the quality of NERUPI events/CPD activities more generally.

The main areas of difference with expectations related to the course being less developed than expected.

> Slightly different in that I thought the course was going to be a bit more fully-formed with readings and established Moodle page.

Some respondents said using Theory of Change as an underpinning aspect had been unexpected, for example:

Although I was familiar with peer evaluation, we mostly used to do it without proper structure and prompt sheet. Most importantly, the 'Theory of Change' makes it unique and shows commitment to improvement, with specific objectives and activities.

Eleven respondents (84.6%) said that the main ideas were communicated clearly, and ten people (76.9%) said the level was 'about right'. The remainder were unsure. Comments suggested some participants would like wider and deeper consideration of the issues from a theoretical perspective at an earlier stage:

Considering the time we have, the level of the material is about right. However, it is also good to recommend additional relevant articles.

I think a stronger link to evaluation theory or examples could be helpful. Both in the presentations and breakout rooms, we touched on big questions around the purpose of evaluation, the nature of evidence and truth, or approaches to ToCs. However, I found that we sometimes struggled to situate our own practice in response to these big questions and learn from others' perspectives, not going much beyond a 'well, I do it differently'.

Having one or two examples or theories included in the presentations might address this. It might provide a starting point to position our own practices in terms of similarity and difference, and give a common vocabulary to discuss *why* we want to pick one approach over another.

Suggestions for areas that could be improved included better use of Moodle and clarification of tasks outside of Moodle (which several people said they found hard to navigate). There were also suggestions about changes to the timing of sessions (there were various views, but longer breaks were popular).

3.2 Residential experience

All twelve core participants of the residential said they were 'extremely satisfied'. There were high scores given on average to the facilitation of the sessions (4.9 out of 5), content of the sessions (4.9) and the group activities (4.9). The venue, a hotel in central Bath with conference facilities, was rated 4.8 and the accommodation (University of Bath Halls of Residence) was rated 3.7 out of 5. Positive aspects highlighted in comments focused on the opportunity for working and thinking with others. Quotes included:

The discussion and opportunities to think deeply about our work with others who do similar work

The group activities, opportunities to meet peers and learn about their professional and personal contexts within the sessions and outside of them (e.g. evening teas)

Sessions were really interesting - good level of teaching vs interactivity within each session and across the 2 days. Good group size.

Meeting people in my situation and people who love to discuss the deeper ideas behind evaluation and impact like me

The opportunity to collaborate and reflect with others. The mix of session facilitators/different perspectives

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/session

Opportunity to network, share ideas, test out knowledge and contribute to discussion

Negative aspects of the sessions mentioned by participants included the length of time feeding back to the room on one particular activity, the amount of content (some people said it felt rushed in parts), plus one person felt there wasn't always time to ask questions and have big group discussions. There were a few suggestions for improvements to delivery which included more mixing between groups/ensuring working with different members. Suggestions for additional content focused on inclusion of more advanced research methods, different types of quasi experimental design and more

'creative' qualitative processes. One person said they would have liked to have understood more about how the peer evaluation worked in advance.

Comments from participants confirmed their support for in-person sessions:

Break down what evaluation is about and the context we're operating in. Get to know the group better, better support for working together

See people in-person & opportunity to network and to talk about our roles and responsibilities

Definitely has been a much better experience in person. Even though it could be tiring a little bit, it's very beneficial to collaborate in person

I have got a lot out of this residential. It has really helped to bring previous sessions together in person!

This was an enormously valuable experience and I personally feel as though it should be continued and included in the final peer evaluation course if it isn't being considered already. Thank you so much for this residential! Every session was fantastic!

3.3 End-point review

The end-point review was used to collect feedback on the pilot course and the participants' experience of the peer evaluation process and learning from it. This section reports feedback related to the training and guidance aspects of the course. Suggestions in relation to the peer evaluation pair work process are reported in section 4 below.

Comments suggested that the session had been successful in setting the tone for honesty and collegiality:

I believe the information I received was very honest and reliable, which was likely due to the good relationships cultivated from the course/residential.

I feel like my peer was open and willing to learn. They put forward a genuine array of information, as opposed to trying to showcase perfection.

I think my partner was being honest about the state of play.

As far as I could tell, my reviewer used reputable and reliable sources. There was also an understanding that leaving out facts or misleading the reviewer would be counter-intuitive. There was sufficient trust that I felt I could be open about the shortcomings of my institution.

I felt we were both open…I think we were both quite honest about the strengths and weaknesses and are on the same page. But I can see if you don't have a good rapport with the partner, it could be a bit awkward or even challenging.

During the residential, the pilot group had set up a WhatsApp communication group in order to keep in touch with each other. Very positive attitudes were expressed by participants in relation to maintaining contact with their peer evaluation partner, and with the other members of the pilot group, as part of an ongoing community of practice.

Three-quarters of participants (12 responses) indicated that the peer review sessions and guidance had given them sufficient information and tools needed to be a peer reviewer. The remainder responded 'not sure'. Comments included:

I think the training was good preparation for the 'real thing'. I feel my general peer review skills were already sound but this gave me a subject-specific framework to work within.

The following areas of the training and guidance were highlighted as needing more guidance or clearer instructions:

- *Pair work process and SWOT analysis*. Suggestions included a guide to conducting the Peer Review meeting or an indicative agenda, and refinements to the guidance on the SWOT framework to

distinguish how use in this context differs from the textbook definition of a SWOT. During the review session it was clear that some pairs had focused on critiquing and feeding back on a specific evaluation example, while in other discussions consideration of the contextual and organisational factors was more prominent. The SWOT was described as a 'kind tool' – that is, dealing holistically with the general approach rather than focusing the feedback on specific aspects. In feedback, one person suggested there was a need for more focus in advance on pulling out specific objectives for each pair, as discussed further in section 4.3 below.

- *Reporting on the peer evaluations*. Suggestions included having a standard template for the report, and a worked example to illustrate the level of detail and criticality, or guidance on reporting standards.

- *Process for reviewing context information*. Suggestions included allowing more time in the process for the consideration of contextual information, and more guidance on this (for example, expected level of detail).

There were also calls for some additional guidance to focus on the sharing of peer evaluation findings and working with colleagues following the review:

> …*the review process and specifically the evaluation strategy review needs understanding and buy-in from other people in your department, to see it as a worthwhile thing to do… So maybe something about how to share and work with colleagues would be helpful.*

4. FEEDBACK ON THE PEER EVALUATION REVIEW PROCESS

4.1 Benefits of peer evaluation

> *"Fantastic learning experience. Thanks for the opportunity.*
> *This will benefit me and our institution"*

Peer evaluation was anticipated to have a number of benefits for evaluators and institutions:

- *Collaborative learning*: peer evaluation will promote effective collaborative learning between colleagues who reflect on their own and others' contributions to understanding about effective evaluations which inform WP policy and practice.

- *Quality improvement*: peer evaluation will be based on a clear set of expectations that could reasonably be fulfilled, and where that was not the case, feedback could point to resources and approaches that could support future improvement.

- *Quality assurance*: peer evaluation will raise the quality standard of evaluation to a desired level and maximise the relevance and useability of evaluation as part of APP decision making.

- *Professional development:* through peer evaluation, local evaluators will ultimately learn to better self-assess their own evaluations, which will pay dividends for future evaluation plans.

- *Learning about good practice in evaluation*: the group of accredited peer evaluators would critically examine the work of peers and reflect on the meaning of quality evaluation work in general.

- *Disseminating what works in evaluation:* the peer evaluation process will enable identification of the strengths and weaknesses of different evaluation approaches at the ground level in an environment where evaluators share solutions with each other.

- *Compliance* with regulators such as the Office for Student requirements for rigorous evaluation of activities to support national targets and local access and participation plans.

Participant feedback

The feedback from the participants on their experience of the peer evaluation review process emphasised the benefits of having insights from someone from another institution:

> *A very useful sounding board to hear from an outside perspective.*

> *I think it was useful to speak to someone from a different kind of institution, possibly coming from different perspectives.*

Participants comments on the benefits of being able to draw on a colleague's expertise and experience also came out in the feedback:

> *It was great to have an external perspective, somebody with more experience than I had in certain areas who was able to give constructive feedback that I have already been able to make use of.*

The comments also highlighted the part played by self-reflection in the peer evaluation, as well as hearing the views of external colleagues:

> *The process of undertaking the Peer Review was tremendously helpful as the peer reviewer acted almost like a coach to facilitate self-reflection. The completion of the Peer Review reports seemed somewhat useful but the process of working with a peer reviewer was by far the most helpful aspect of the process.*

> *It's not only a review of the evaluation but also a good reflection of how we ran the programme in the previous period and the distance that we have travelled from then to now.*

> *It was insightful to learn about the evaluation example that the contact shared, as I conducted an evaluation on a similar intervention in the past (this was not the example I shared). We both used the same toolkit but the way that I applied it was more prescribed, whereas the contact went further by setting additional outcomes that were relevant to their own context and in developing a logic model. This inspired me to revisit the evaluation I conducted, as well as the evidence base, and reflect on what I would now do differently.*

These comments suggest that the peer evaluation process had been successful in stimulating reflection and criticality.

When asked to reflect on what they had learnt that they wouldn't otherwise have known, the responses indicated learning in three main areas:

- Knowledge to inform thinking about **internal** institutional context, systems and processes. Comments mainly pointed to things like *'learning on where our strengths are'* and *'the areas we need to improve on'*. A couple of newer members of staff highlighted learning about their own programmes, the institutional context and wider strategies.

- Knowledge about the **external** environment, which can be used to reflect on performance in context. Comments pointed to using such intelligence to help in terms of *'benchmarking our practice'*, understanding of similarities/differences between HEIs, and insight into how other organisations' structure and resource their evaluation work. At the time, as well as making comparisons, it was clear that finding similarities in approaches between institutions was also useful, having the benefit of giving reassurance. The comments suggested that the activity encouraged participants to consider how contextual factors and people affect practices and what is possible in different circumstances.
- Learning about **methodologies and approaches** to evaluation that can be applied in future. Aspects highlighted in the comments included: how to use longitudinal quantitative data; how to approach using an evaluation toolkit; the Theory of Change model; and understanding about *'methodological blind spots and missed opportunities'*.

Comments included:

> *Having the opportunity to ask why certain approaches and implementation had been taken is really important and helpful. This helped to decide whether those approaches were something that should be adopted for my context or not. Also just the opportunity to discuss evaluation and effective processes with someone else sparked lots of new ideas for implementation and organisational development.*

> *Some great insights from my peer reviewer in terms of the evaluation process at my institution. Some great examples of best practice from their institution. Great just to chat to like-minded people and find out we're all in the same boat!*

It was clear that some participants had used some of the tools and materials from the training sessions as part of their day-to-day work (as well as benefiting from the Peer Review process). For example, one participant said that the Theory of Change model had been adapted for use by their team to review their TOC models. Another said that following the review and based on insights from the review partner, work had begun with engagement colleagues on how to collect robust short-term outcome evidence in order to determine the progress of interventions.

The feedback received from participants also highlighted benefits of building collegiality and development of an evaluation community. For example:

> *The opportunities to learn about my peers and the staff who designed and delivered the course, particularly during the in-person July retreat but also online, enabled me to become aware of a range of different perspectives, which was helpful for my learning, and helped to build a sense of community.*

4.2 Use of peer evaluation

In terms of using the peer evaluation information going forward, all participants said they would use it to support the planning of evaluations (Figure 1). One person said the information had already been shared with their Access and Participation Steering Group and will be discussed as part of preparation to rewrite the APP. Another said they were using it as part of internal discussions to reflect on evaluation processes in the light of how others work (to see if there are opportunities to try something different that has been used elsewhere). Others stressed using information when thinking about evaluation strategy: '…*incorporating the findings into our evaluation strategy*' and '…*as a reflection feeding into other work on strategy, e.g. the "Self-Assessment Toolkit"*'.

Two-thirds of the participants said that the information would be used to inform evaluation practice. For example, one person indicated they had already used findings from the review to influence colleagues' use of Theory of Change. Another person said the review would enable feedback to the 'project owner' to improve evaluation practice. A third said the information would support changes in practice – where issues found align with existing concerns, and '…*to spot gaps and easy efficiency wins in our evaluation practice*'.

Most participants said that the information could be used to support the 'evaluation culture' internally. More than half said that the information would be used to make changes to evaluation management and resourcing.

Figure 1: Do you think the Peer Review process and report will be useful in any of the following ways?

Source: End-point survey

There were differences amongst participants in terms of the audience(s) for peer evaluation findings within their institutions (Figure 2). Overall, the audience appears to be more operational than strategic within institutions, which probably reflects the level at which evaluators tend to be working within HEIs and the context in which equity and WP activities are managed within institutions. On the one hand, some comments emphasised the individual professional development aspects for those undertaking WP evaluations:

I see it as more a professional development report rather than useful institutionally. This is because the report focused on one specific evaluation rather than an evaluation framework or set-up.

On the other hand, some participants indicated that the findings would be shared with practitioner colleagues who support evaluation internally.

I plan on sharing the Peer Review report with my colleagues at my university and with an internal evaluation group to share the learning I gained from the Peer Review process. I will also share the reflections about the evaluation example with the other staff who were involved, such as those responsible for the intervention design and delivery.

Revisiting the evidence base also allowed me to provide suggestions for the contact to consider, with the aim of them complementing the existing evaluation plans. The peer evaluation process provided many opportunities for knowledge exchange and mutual learning which have and will continue to influence my practices.

For a minority of participants, the audience also included external audiences/stakeholders such as partner organisations, schools/colleges.

Figure 2: Who do you see as the audience for the Peer Review report internally (please tick all that apply)?
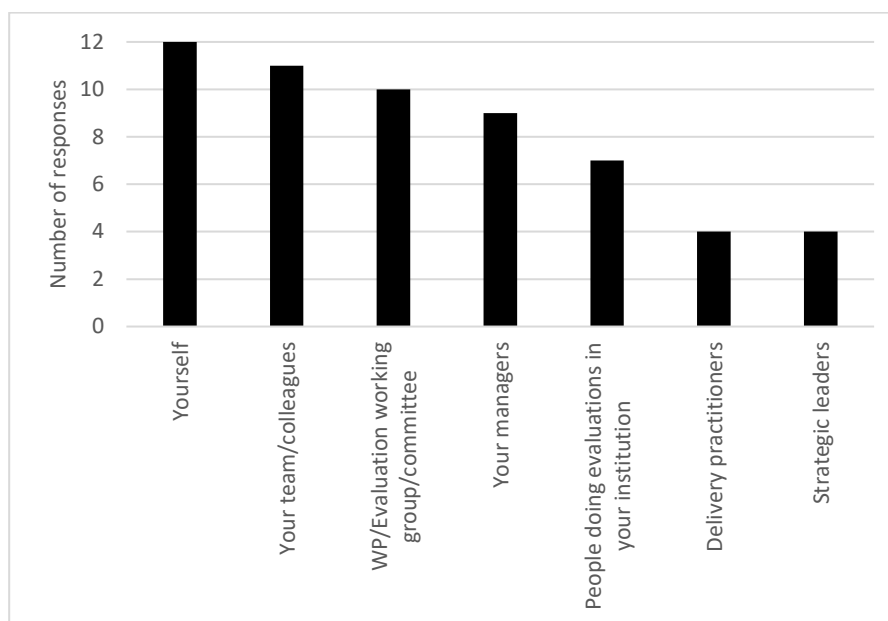
Source: End-point survey

4.3 Reflections on the peer evaluation pair work process

The course team was mindful that the peer evaluation pair work process should not be overly onerous, in order to be realistic and take account of the time that the researchers had made available for this work. Feedback after the process suggested that most people found the process relatively easy (Table 3). Difficulties faced in the process included:

- Challenges completing Template 1 (contextual information) for researchers who were relatively new in post, or in institutions where data about the university were not always readily available, or were not directly connected to wider institutional structures. For example, comments were made to the effect that data collection was not necessarily difficult, but time consuming, as it was not information the person worked with on a day-to-day basis. In one case, some of the information was uncertain because the HEI was in the process of restructuring which implied changes to how evaluation was going to be organised and delivered in future.

- Difficulties identifying evaluation practices and examples for review. One participant said that this had entailed speaking to multiple people in the department in order to first confirm the example, then to get the actual information and data about the programme involved. This had been made trickier by the timing of the review over a very busy period.

- Reviewing the information received from the institutional contact was felt to be time consuming, which was compounded by difficulties in preparing for the review where information was missing. For example, one researcher said lack of information on some aspects of institutional context made it harder to comment (although there was sufficient information on evaluation to review this aspect). Comments were also made to the effect that the contextual information could be hard to interpret without the discussion. For example: *"…it's not possible to capture everything (particularly the nuance) on the template, so the discussion was supremely helpful."*

Most people said the time spent collating institutional information for Template 1 was worth spending and there were suggestions for more information items (see below). The material was being used by some in other areas of their work, for example as information for new starters. This information could also inform framing narratives, for example in evaluation reports.

Table 3: Views on the experience of undertaking different stages in the Peer Review pair work

Stage in the process	Number of responses			
	Pretty difficult	Neither easy nor difficult	Pretty easy	Very easy
Collating information and data for peer review (your institution)	5	4	2	1
Reviewing the information you received for peer review (their institution)	2	2	8	
The peer review discussion you had about your institution		1	11	
The peer review discussion you had about their institution		3	9	
Preparation of a peer review report	2	4	6	

Source: End-point survey

Most people rated the completion of the peer evaluation report as 'pretty easy' but there were caveats (and calls for further guidance on this part of the process as discussed in section 3.3 above):

…knowing that reports may be shared with SLT (Senior Leaderships Team) meant that careful wording was required to describe concerns or issues found.

I found the discussion very useful but capturing the conversation in a helpful way afterwards was harder. I think we both took away the notes we wanted about our own institutions but working to a template was more constrained, possibly because our conversation did not strictly follow the course of the template, it moved in different directions and circled around a few times, focusing on areas we found to be particularly interesting or useful.

Worth noting that the SWOT as the basis of the report was not able to capture everything we discussed - our discussions were much deeper and more detailed than what could be captured in the SWOT. I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing though - the discussion was a great learning process and I don't think everything necessarily needed to be written down to be shared wider.

Most participants said that they had gained a benefit from the different stages of the pair work process, although (as expected) the Peer Review discussion meeting comes out as the most useful part (Figure 3). Comments included:

The discussion we had was the most useful part, as it gave both of us a really in-depth understanding of how each other's institutions worked - far more than can be captured in a document. The discussion also prompted further reflection.

The structured discussion of own and other data was great and helpful to reflect on things that we consider 'normal' about our institutions.

The best part of the process was the discussion - it was a great opportunity to talk to someone in a similar role with similar but varying experience to me and discuss best practice.

At the same time, there was potential for participants to take something away from each part of the process: learning about their own institution and having time for self-reflection as well as learning about other institutions and reflecting on the evaluation approaches used by others in similar circumstances.

Figure 3: Would you say the following were useful in terms of generating new insights which you can use in your work in the future?
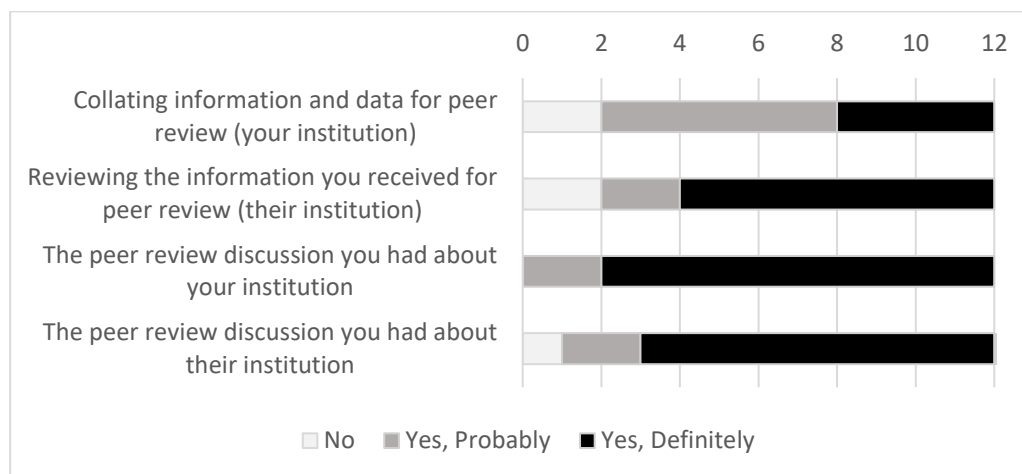
Source: End-point survey

The usefulness of undertaking a SWOT analysis as part of the peer evaluation was rated 4.3 out of 5 on average. Three-quarters said the format was fit for purpose (the remainder weren't sure). The comments suggested the SWOT format was used to underpin the outputs:

> *It was useful for writing the report, but we didn't stick to this for the actual discussion. Our discussion was more free-form, and more led by our curiosity on different aspects of the information given.*

> *We talked through all our responses to the Context Document - it was a really great process. Then we wrote up our SWOTs independently after the meetings.*

> *We discussed the review template section by section, and used conclusions of the discussion to populate the SWOT template, which worked well.*

It was notable that the responses indicated that different approaches were taken to using the materials underpinning the peer review process as part of the peer evaluation discussion focused on institutions. One person said:

> *In my pair, we agreed a way of doing the peer review, that worked well and felt easy. However, I don't know if we should've made it harder and be more thorough, for example?*

Some respondents said that Template 1 (the contextual information) was the main focus in their pair work discussions, rather than Template 2 (probing questions). On the other hand, other pairs put the focus on reviewing an evaluation plan. A third approach appeared to be to use the contextual information in Template 1 to inform the discussion, and to base the report on Template 2 (the benefit of this appeared to be to help to manage the flow and content using the prompts). At least one respondent would like to see more discussion around the specific objectives of each pair in order to tailor the approach to the needs of the particular institutional contact:

> *Perhaps more discussion around the specific objectives of each pair for undertaking the peer review process. Although there were sufficient forms and tools to use, I don't think they are all appropriate in all contexts. Some evaluations may just require the contextual review, some the SWOT analysis. Objectives of each pair could be established at the outset to ensure usefulness.*

Suggestions on potential improvement to the pair work process included:

▪ *Inclusion of additional information in Template 1.* A range of additional aspects was identified that could usefully inform the peer evaluation review, such as: gathering alternative viewpoints about evaluation internally (that is, survey for internal evaluators); information from the practitioners involved in the initiatives that are being evaluated and how useful it was for their practice. A couple of people called for questions/considerations on how data is accessed and used/controlled, and how ethical considerations affected the evaluation process. One person said that a useful

addition to the report would be a question about the position of the contact within their provider (these details may provide insight into how much contextual information the contact has about the provider). Another person would like to include some of the history of how evaluation processes have been set up which can determine how the institution approaches evaluation:

> …*It seems that a key element is whether evaluation practice is introduced by academics already working in that area or professional services trying to meet the OfS' requirements. The two approaches can lead to very different cultures around evaluation.*

- *Changes to the course timetable to include phasing of template completion and review throughout the course.* For example, it was suggested that the review should be split into two parts - one session focusing on the context analysis and the second session focusing specifically on one evaluation strategy you want reviewed (this comment was made by a participant who indicated they ran out of time in both the review sessions to discuss the evaluation strategies in much detail). Another colleague felt that there should be greater flexibility on timing throughout the year. It was notable that the timing affected which evaluation examples were shared by participants. For example, one person said, because of the timing, they chose to share an example of an evaluation report that was already completed, rather than a project that was being planned for the 2023/24 academic year – because this was only in the early stages of development – even though sharing information about the nascent project may have been more useful in terms of gaining the most constructive advice.

- *The formulation of agreed recommendations for action as a result of the review.* Several participants commented about this, including one person who said they'd like to see '…*the addition of some kind of action log or perhaps a traffic light system for recommended actions'.* At least one person would like to see a follow-up activity or 'annual MOT/evaluation health-check' process.

4.4 Peer evaluation requirements

To support the running of the courses, participants were asked to agree to actively engage in online and in-person sessions, share their experiences and examples of in-house evaluations, and complete activities in a timely manner. The pilot course required considerable commitment from participants.

The participants were selected to include colleagues with several years' experience in an evaluation role (often gained in more than one institution), and with a range of expertise in evaluation methods and management. Nine out of the twelve participants said they felt they had the skills and characteristics to do high-quality peer review (the rest said 'not sure'). Eleven out of twelve said they felt their partner in the peer review process had the skills and qualities to do high-quality peer review. Box 1 sets out the qualities which participants identified as essential for peer evaluators during a group discussion.

Box 1: Views on qualities needed of peer evaluators
Honesty and candour Experienced (2 years+) Institutional buy-in
Solid contextual knowledge Reflective Willing to learn Position to influence
Open to learn/share Committed to the process Criticality

Some participants said they would like to see even greater focus on the coaching aspect used in the process, for example:

> *Having a greater focus on the coaching implicit in the peer review process. This was by far the most valuable aspect as it encouraged self-reflection for the future but guided by someone who has similar knowledge but not specific to your context.*

Another participant suggested that the review process should be more of a pool or group process (rather than pairs).

Every grouping of peers will likely result in different dynamics and takeaway lessons. A pool or group process might be good to try out.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary conclusions

- The level of take-up and ongoing participation in the course, coupled with positive feedback from participants, suggests the pilot was well organised and successful. The feedback from participants suggests it met its objectives in terms of providing participants with experience of working with colleagues to identify strengths and areas for improvement in current practice, understanding of strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to evaluation and evidence, and strategies for gathering data and using evidence effectively.

- Participants spoke about benefits in terms of developing expertise in evaluation planning, design and methods (and there were examples of how learning from the course was already being applied in practice). Reflexivity stands out as a key aspect of the peer evaluation process, and the course appears to support criticality of evaluators when thinking about their own practices.

- Feedback on the use of peer review information suggests that it has the capacity to support continuous improvement and regulatory compliance within institutions.

- While the pilot led participants to share information on their evaluation approaches, and the results of these evaluations amongst themselves, the expectation for a more in-depth engagement with evaluation design and practice should be made more explicit. More attention needs to be given within the course to generating improvements through the wider dissemination of evaluation results.

- The co-creation approach worked well. There was good engagement from the participants. The downside was that the materials and guidance to inform and underpin the peer evaluation pair work were not finalised until relatively late in the process. There is also scope to make better use of Moodle.

- Participants in the course seemed to value the mix of presentations, group activities, and opportunities for reflection on practice. Some people would like wider and deeper discussion of the evaluation theory underpinning practice. Face-to-face activities were favoured by the participants.

- The pair work process as conceived appears to have achieved its aims of facilitating peer evaluation and the development of learning (particularly in relation to the internal context, external benchmarks and evaluation methodologies). However, participants took different approaches to organising the peer evaluation discussion and the preparation of outputs. 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, would be useful to help to standardise the approach.

- It is unclear so far whether the pilot was successful in providing the opportunity for collaborative evaluation projects, although more information on this should emerge over time. Certainly, positive attitudes were expressed by participants in relation to maintaining contact with each other as part of an ongoing community of practice.

5.2 Recommendations

As a facilitated collaborative learning experience, this course was greatly appreciated and very successful in creating opportunities for collaborative learning, broadening understanding of equity and widening participation initiatives, developing evaluation expertise, and thus improving capacity and

quality and their own institutional context and in the HE sector more generally. However, this aspect of the course relies on participants having a certain level of expertise and understanding. In future, an application form process is recommended to provide reassurance regarding the level and breadth of experience of the participants.

Although clear templates were provided there was considerable variation in the quality and quantity of information submitted, limiting the effectiveness of the Peer Evaluation in institutional learning and wider dissemination. To address these issues it is recommended that changes are made to delivery of the course curriculum, along with further developments of the guidance and Peer Review templates along with implementation of a coursework process to enable submission and feedback to start earlier in the course and throughout (rather than at the end of the sessions).

Recommendation 1: Use of an application form process
An application form should be developed for use by participants. This would not be a competitive process. The benefits of using an application form will include drawing out the experience and skills the person is bringing to the group to support group coherence and bonding, and collaborative learning. The criteria will be based on the reflections of the participants and the course team.

Recommendation 2: Dividing the course into four stages
This will provide a clearer focus for each aspect and provide greater structure.

Recommendation 3: Course work submitted throughout the course
.
Stage 1: Institutional Context
This first stage of the course would consider the institutional context within a broader discussion about equity and widening participation issues in the HE sector. This would be based on a modified Template 1, Institutional Context, to include additional factors identified by the participants at the Peer Review stage. Rather than submitting this at the end of the course, Template 1 would be presented for feedback earlier in the course to ensure that sufficient detail had been included to enable an effective Peer Review. Stage 1 should include:

- Development of specific learning outcomes related to collation of the information.
- Discussions about how organisational information can be obtained.
- Making the link between the institutional context document, the evaluation examples and the Peer Review explicit.
- Provision of exemplars of completed templates to illustrate the format and indicate content.
- Provision of an expected word count.
- More explanation on how to interpret organisational structures, processes and constraints.

Stage 2: Evaluation
There was also considerable variation in the evaluation examples submitted. The requirements were not entirely prescriptive to allow for differences between organisations and participants' roles and also to facilitate the co-creation process. Where the requirements were more explicit, for example in sharing Theories of Change, the collaborative process was very successful. This indicates that requirements around evaluation examples and how to assess them should be made clearer. Stage 2 should include:

- Creation of a separate template for evaluation examples and Theories of Change
- Development of specific aims and learning outcomes related to selection of the examples
- Provision of opportunities for formative feedback within the group on activity evaluations being planned
- Requirements for an overall evaluation strategy along with examples of completed activity evaluation(s) that demonstrate how the approach has been applied in practice.

Stage 3: Peer Review

Although the SWOT concept was useful, use of the standard SWOT grid format was quite reductive in some cases. Use of the SWOT grid alone would also limit its usefulness with some internal and external stakeholders as, for many, it would appear too slight and superficial to be taken seriously. The most successful submissions combined the SWOT grid with a more extensive commentary and an additional Recommendations section. The reviewer's comments were quite general in some cases and the evaluation revealed that the Peer Review conversations were considerably more detailed and helpful in pinpointing specific areas for improvement – indicating that more specificity is required to capture the breadth and depth of the discussion. Stage 3 should include:

- Requirement for submission of a simplified checklist as part of the process.
- Provision of a clearer template for the Peer Review and include an exemplar.
- Indications of which elements of the Peer Review checklist could be considered under the SWOT headings.
- Inclusion of a section for more general reflections on the Peer Review conversations.

Stage 4: Dissemination

Greater consideration of the uses and wider dissemination of the Peer Evaluation at an earlier stage would be helpful. This would increase the efficacy for raising awareness of the potential for evaluation to support HEIs to a range of internal stakeholders. Stage 4 should include:

- Identification of the benefits of the Peer Evaluation for a range of internal (and external) stakeholders along with consideration of appropriate reporting formats
- Requirements for participants to submit examples of a range of dissemination outputs, for example, a committee report suitable for an APP team, a PowerPoint that could be used with practitioners, or another output appropriate to an internal audience.

5.3 Conclusion

As a result of the pilot project, the course structure has been revised to include additional in-person sessions, new templates and streamlined submission and assessment arrangements to better support participants through the process. The course now commences with an in-person session to build trust between participants and facilitate engagement with complex issues around equity and widening participation. The subsequent four sessions are designed for online learning and focus on various aspects of research and evaluation. The residential continues to explore evaluation approaches and methods as well as commencing the process of Peer Review. The final in-person session focuses on dissemination and making best use of the Peer Review to improve practice within participants' organisations. Submission of the templates throughout the course rather than at the end will allow for feedback from the course team to support the process and build towards and effective Peer Review.

A Course Curriculum and set of Guidelines has been produced to inform and support individuals and organisations who wish to engage with the process of Peer Review to improve the effectiveness and impact of their widening participation and equity evaluations.