Peer Evaluation
Guidelines for organisations

Strengthening evaluation practice
and evidence-based decision making
in higher education

March 2024

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These Guidelines were co-created through 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. Working with experienced evaluators and researchers, the aim of the course was to develop Peer Review guidelines and a CPD curriculum for use in the higher education (HE) sector in order to strengthen evaluation practice and improve equity in student access, participation and success.

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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, a set of resources has been created to support an additional level of external objectivity to evaluation practice, and strengthen evaluation practice within HEIs seeking to improve equity in student access, participation and progression.

Supported and funded by QAA Membership, these Guidelines and a CPD curriculum were co-created with experienced evaluators and researchers participating in a pilot peer evaluation course and designed and delivered by NERUPI (Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions), based at the University of Bath.

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 can limit 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.

Benefits of Peer Review

Higher education institutions seeking to improve equity in student access, participation and success as well as meeting regulatory requirements face a challenge in developing capacity. While HEIs may have expertise in research and evaluation, this emerging area requires a specific skill set. Organisational learning is an essential aspect of equity work but an external perspective is also important to foster innovation and for quality

assurance. Peer Review provides a vehicle for both increasing evaluation expertise and receiving objective feedback. The following benefits were identified by participants and the course team during the pilot course.

Benefits 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)

Benefits 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

Commissioning a Peer Review

Engaging in a Peer Review provides an opportunity for an organisation to take stock of current evaluation practice and develop future strategy so ideally it should be part of a wider process of reflection for those involved in widening participation and equity work. To be effective, it would represent a time commitment on the part of the commissioning organisation, although participants on the pilot course felt that the time was well spent, stating that:

> 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 peer evaluation process provided many opportunities for knowledge exchange and mutual learning which have and will continue to influence my practices.*

A successful Peer Review would need:

- Wider support within the commissioning organisation
- Identification of an institutional contact to liaise with the peer reviewer
- Provision of time to prepare for and participate in the process
- Preparation of appropriate information for the peer reviewer
- Clarification of your requirements, e.g. key areas you would like explored
- Information about the ways you envisage using the Peer Review
- An experienced evaluator, ideally with experience of undertaking a Peer Review
- Agreement on the terms of the Peer Review, i.e reciprocal or consultancy.

An effective Peer Review should:
- Demonstrate understanding of your context
- Provide an assessment of your overall approach to evaluation
- Undertake an in-depth analysis of at least one evaluation
- Incorporate a reflexive discussion exploring areas for development
- Identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats along with recommendations
- Be presented in a format to support organisational learning and development.

Qualities of a Peer Evaluator

Peer Review sits somewhere between informal information sharing between colleagues and 'inspection' or 'regulation'. The process of Peer Review was likened to coaching by some participants as discussion and reflection is a key element of the process. However, Peer Review does differ from the more neutral coaching approach as it should identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats along with recommendations for improvement. While participation in a peer evaluation course is not essential, experience from the pilot course indicates that it is to be recommended, even for those with experience of consultancy and research, as undertaking a successful Peer Review is a complex process requiring the following skills and experience:

- Previous experience of research and evaluation in a widening participation context
- Experience of undertaking and participating in a Peer Review and/or peer evaluation course
- Knowledge of equity and widening participation issues
- Capacity to critically analyse and comment on organisational information and strategies
- Evaluation expertise with understanding of a range of approaches and methods
- Ability to work collaboratively with peers in a similar role maintaining an environment of honesty and candour
- A commitment to professional working practices, discretion and confidentiality.

Resources

In order to support the Peer Review process, four templates were co-created during the pilot course as part of an iterative process. Draft templates were created by the course team in advance of the course with adaptation and amendment taking place throughout. Submission of the Peer Reviews resulted in further changes to improve consistency, enhance clarity and ensure quality. Course participants found the templates useful:

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

> *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.*

Template 1 is concerned with clarifying the institutional context and is an important foundation for understanding the distinctive features and challenges related to the organisation. It is recommended that the commissioning organisation completes this themselves to ensure accuracy, reduce any consultancy fees that may be involved and to improve organisational learning. Course participants found completion of Template 1

to be a valuable exercise in collating relevant information into one document and improving organisational intelligence. The outputs were used in various ways, not always directly connected to the Peer Review, including briefing documents for new staff and as the basis for a presentation to an access and participation plan (APP) committee.

Template 2 is concerned with evaluation and is designed to collect information on how evaluation of access, participation and progression activities is being taken forward in practice and should also be collated by the institutional contact. Template 2 is an essential aspect of the Peer Review, enabling the Evaluator to understand and consider current practices.

Template 3 should be used by the Peer Evaluator to analyse the information submitted by the commissioning organisation. The checklist will be used to structure the feedback and discussion arising from the Peer Review. It can be used to capture key points for the Peer Review meeting and identification of evaluation strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). The opportunities and threats can be internal and/or external to the organisation.

Template 4 provides a standard format for producing the Peer Review that includes a summary of key issues to be addressed, an overview of the structures and processes for delivery, and evaluation and reflections from the discussion between the reviewer and the institutional contact. Participants on the pilot course found the use of a SWOT approach underpinning the process provided a usefully exploratory framework for assessing practice and identifying areas for improvement. However, some additional issues arose through discussion that were not covered and the template was amended to reflect this. The review addresses the evaluation context, programme planning and Theory of Change (ToC), evaluation delivery and methods, and evaluation examples. Conclusions and recommendations include a summary of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats along with recommendations for evaluation strengthening at both operational and strategic level.

The Peer Review Process

The Peer Review process is intended to improve delivery and outcomes in the sector through a collegiate approach, although an element of criticality is essential. The term 'critical friend', frequently used by participants in the pilot course, effectively captures the nature of the relationship.

Following agreement to embark on a Peer Review, realistic deadlines should be set for each stage of the process. If a reciprocal arrangement is to be undertaken, the schedule should take account of this and timings should be adjusted accordingly. It is expected that the Peer Review will take place alongside normal work and, as an iterative process, is unlikely to be speedy. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain momentum and not extend it beyond six months.

Actions	Suggested Timing	Weeks
Decision to participate in a Peer Review is made		
Terms of the Peer Review are negotiated and agreed, including: whether it is a reciprocal arrangement or on a consultancy basis; identification of the		

institutional contact(s) is made; agreement and identification of responsible manager is secured		
Institutional contact(s) peer reviewers meet		
Template 1 is completed	3-4 weeks	4
Review of Template 1 undertaken to resolve queries and clarifications	2-3 weeks	7
Template 2 is completed	3-4 weeks	11
Review of Template 2 undertaken to resolve queries and clarifications	2-3 weeks	14
Peer Review meetings take place, ideally in person on site	3-4 weeks	18
Information is reviewed with first draft of Template 4 submitted/exchanged	2-3 weeks	21
Responses are submitted/exchanged and a realistic action plan agreed	2-3 weeks	24
The final Peer Review is submitted/exchanged	2 weeks	26
The results are shared within the organisations	ongoing	

There may be occasions when partners fail to reach agreement, for example if a peer reviewer does not consider that sufficient adaptation has been made to a plan or the commissioning organisation does not find the recommendations acceptable. In this case, the final report should not be signed off and should remain confidential.

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TEMPLATE 1 – ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT & STRUCTURES

This template should be completed by the institutional contact to collect and structure information on the organisation and the context for the delivery of evaluation of access, participation and progression activities. The use of references and links to other sources (e.g. Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Documentation, university webpages, Athena Swan) is encouraged.

1.   THE ORGANISATION
1.1   Name:
1.2   Location(s):
        Region:
1.4   Mission Group:
        Brief description (e.g. Is there a specialism e.g. Arts, STEM, Professional Accreditation. Mainly part-time or mature students?) Has this changed significantly over the last 30-40 years?

2.   LOCAL CONTEXT
2.1   What's the profile of the local area in terms of deprivation (e.g. deprived, mixed, affluent). Has this changed significantly over the last 30-40 years?
2.2   How do you assess local education system performance, i.e. educational attainment at Level 2 and Level 3 in schools and colleges?
2.3   What are the levels of education in the local area e.g. participation in HE, qualification level of adult population? Has this changed significantly over the last 30-40 years?
2.4   How would you describe the local labour market (e.g. depressed, expanding, booming)? Has this changed significantly over the last 30-40 years?
2.5   What are the key strategic priorities for the institution (strategic plans)?
2.6   Any important strategic partners, e.g. further and higher education colleges? Businesses?

3.   STUDENT BODY
3.1   Please provide student numbers

	Full-Time	Part-Time
Foundation level		
Undergraduate		
Postgraduate		
Domestic students		
International students		

3.3   What's the geographical reach for UK student recruitment?
3.4   Please describe the demographics of UK student intake focusing on key characteristics, e.g. diversity, low participation neighbourhoods, class, income, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, etc. Has this changed significantly over the last 30-40 years?
3.5   How would you describe the needs of students and what they want from the institution?

4.   ACCESS, PARTICIPATION AND PROGRESSION
4.1   What are your main organisational access, participation and progression priorities/targets to address inequalities? Refer to your regulatory system, e.g. access and participation plan (APP) in England.
4.2   What are the characteristics of your target groups? Why have they been chosen?
4.3   What types of activities/interventions/strategies does your organisation offer to support target groups and address these inequalities?
4.4   How are access, participation and progression activities managed and coordinated (e.g. is there a formal committee or cross-institutional strategy group that has oversight? If so, who chairs it?)?
4.5   How are access, participation and progression activities organised and delivered?

5. PROGRAMME PLANNING AND EVALUATION

5.1 Who's involved in planning access, participation and progression activities?

5.2 How is information on activities captured and stored (e.g. project proposals/applications, activity plans, etc)?

5.3 How is evaluation of access, participation and progression activities organised and managed?

5.2 Where does evaluation sit in the organisation structure?

5.3 How many staff are involved in the evaluation team? Who's responsible for what?

5.4 Please note any differences, if any, in the approach to evaluation between access, participation and progression activities.

6. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Please append any other relevant reports or materials which help to describe the context and structures. These could include, for example, organisational structure charts/reporting lines, local assessments, strategy documents.

List here materials appended with file name(s):

<u>Completed by:</u>

Name:

Position:

Email:

Date:

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TEMPLATE 2 – EVALUATION APPROACHES & EXAMPLES

This template is designed to collect information on how evaluation of access, participation and progression activities is being taken forward in practice and should be completed by the institutional contact. Please include references and links to other sources (e.g. Theory of Change, evaluation plans, evaluation reports, evaluation self-assessment documents).

1.   EVALUATION PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE
1.1   What is the process for agreeing evaluation, for example are there any formal structures for agreeing evaluation plans, e.g. as part of project approval processes?
1.2   Is the evaluation team involved at programme and project planning stages and if so, how?
1.3   Who oversees the evaluations?
1.4   Who receives evaluation reports internally?
1.5   How does evaluation feed into decisions about projects and programmes?
1.6   Have you collected any feedback internally on how evaluation is working and/or completed the OfS Evaluation Self-Assessment? If so, what were the conclusions?

2.   EVALUATION DELIVERY
2.1   Who takes the lead on delivering evaluations? What role(s) do evaluation staff play?
2.2   Are delivery practitioners involved in supporting evaluations? How?
2.3   Are academics involved in supporting evaluation? How?
2.4   Who else is involved?

3.   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
3.1   What is the process for ensuring ethical evaluations?
3.2   What are the implications for the implementation of evaluations?

4.   ACCESS TO INSTITUTIONAL STUDENT & OTHER INSTITUTIONAL DATA
4.1   What sort of institutional data is used to inform evaluation (e.g. admissions, student records, financial, attainment, destinations)?
4.2   How is data to support evaluation usually controlled?
4.3   Who has access to data?

5.   THEORY OF CHANGE
5.1   Do staff use Logical Framework approaches or Theory of Change to plan outreach, participation and progression interventions?
5.2   Please provide one to two examples:
         List here material appended and file name(s)

6.   EVALUATION METHODS

	Very Frequently Used (standard practice)	**Often Used** (common in most evaluation studies)	**Occasionally Used** (used ad hoc for a few studies)	**Never Used**
1. Methods for collecting information from individuals (participants, stakeholders and others)				
Questionnaires/surveys				
Logs and diaries				
Interviews				
Photo-elicitation				
Personal stories				
Creative expression activities				
Other (please specify)				

	Very Frequently Used (standard practice)	**Often Used** (common in most evaluation studies)	**Occasionally Used** (used ad hoc for a few studies)	**Never Used**
2. Information from groups				
Focus groups				
Voting/Polls				
Other (please specify)				
3. Methods for evaluating delivery				
Structured observation (experts)				
Participant observation				
Participant feedback				
Practitioner feedback				
Other (please specify)				
4. Administrative data				
Project records				
National Pupil Database (NPD, HEAT, EMWREP, etc.)				
Exam results (schools/colleges)				
HE applications data (e.g. UCAS)				
Student enrolment data				
On-course attainment (university)				
Continuation/completion data (university)				
Degree attainment data				
Graduate progression data				
Student satisfaction (e.g. NSS data)				
Other (please specify)				
5. Secondary sources				
Literature review				
Other (please specify)				

7. **EVALUATION APPROACH**

    Please describe your general evaluation approach making use of the information in this template where appropriate and include brief illustrative examples where applicable.

8. **EVALUATION EVIDENCE (COMPLETED EXAMPLE)**

    Please provide at least one example evaluation of a completed access, participation and progression project or programme. This should be chosen to illustrate your institution's general evaluation approach. If possible, the information provided should include the aims of the evaluation, detail on the methods used, detail on the analysis/results, and the findings/conclusions. Evidence should be in the form of **two** of the following:

    - full final report or report on interim findings

    - committee paper

    - internal briefing paper

- presentation

- other.

List here materials appended with file name(s):

9. EVALUATION EVIDENCE (PLAN)
Please provide at least one example of a current evaluation plan. This could include ongoing work and should be chosen to illustrate how your organisations will meet the OfS evaluation requirements for APP work or regulatory requirements in Scotland and Wales.

List here materials appended with file name(s):

10. SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Please append any other relevant reports or materials which help to describe the context for evaluation. These could include, for example: copy of OfS self-assessment review (if appropriate); organisational structure charts/reporting lines; minutes of steering group meetings; operational review documents.

List here materials appended with file name(s):

Completed by:
Name:
Position:
Email:
Date:

TEMPLATE 3 – PEER EVALUATOR CHECKLIST

The aim of the template is to guide the thought process of the peer evaluator in reviewing the information submitted for the Peer Review. However, we suggest that reviewers read and assimilate the information and make their own conclusions in the first instance. The checklist can then be used to make notes to structure the feedback and discussion with the peer evaluation. It does not have to be followed systematically but could be used to capture key points for the meeting and identification of evaluation strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT). The opportunities and threats can be internal and/or external to the organisation.

A. REVIEWING THE ORGANISATION, CONTEXT & EQUITY PRIORITIES
Refer to Template 1, sections 1-5.

What aspects stand out as being most important for the access, participation and progression work of the organisation?
Do you identify any potential barriers or limitations to achieving the access, participation and progression objectives?

B. REVIEWING EVALUATION PLANNING AND DELIVERY
Refer to Template 2, sections 1-4.

How would you summarise the evaluation context (e.g. centralised/de-centralised, expert-led/practitioner-led, etc.). What might the implications be for evaluators?
Can you identify any notable features in how evaluation is organised? Can you identify any notable features in how evaluation is delivered?
Any factors that could be a block to progressing evaluations? How could these be mitigated?

C. USE OF THEORY OF CHANGE
Refer to Template 1, section 5.

How well does the organisation identify and specify outcomes and impacts for its activities?
Is Theory of Changed used?

If yes, can you identify any strong points or good practices? Note, this could be in relation to various aspects such as rationale for the intervention, relevance, completeness, logic chain, assumptions, mechanisms, outcome and impact measures, involvement of stakeholders, etc.
What do you expect might be the weaknesses/limitations of the approach? How critical are these?

D. METHODS
Refer to Template 2, section 6.

How would you summarise the use of different evaluation methods and data (e.g. narrow or varied, mainly quantitative or mainly qualitative, etc.)?
Can you identify any strong points or good practices?
What do you expect might be the weaknesses/limitations? How critical are these?
Can you identify any areas for change/doing things differently?

E. REVIEWING THE EVALUATION EVIDENCE – COMPLETED EXAMPLE
Refer to Template 2, section 7.

Is it clear why the evaluation was needed?
Are the research questions clear?

What evidence is presented and how strong is it?
Any concerns about the reliability of the data?
What other methods might have been used (and why)?
Can you identify any strong points or good practices?
In your opinion, did the method generate the most appropriate type(s) of information? Why/why not?
How well does the evaluation evidence capture and communicate the results?

F. REVIEWING EVALUATION EVIDENCE – PLAN
Refer to Template 2, section 8.

Is there a clear Theory of Change for the intervention, or, if not, do they explain the project process clearly?
Are the measures proposed and indicators to inform them valid? Why/why not?
Are the reasons for using the method(s) for collecting the evaluation information clear?
Are the reasons for choosing the approach to analysing the evidence clear (e.g. within an appropriate research design)?
What are the limitations of the evaluation approach?
Can you identify any areas for change/doing things differently/additional evaluation? What might be the blocks to strengthening this evaluation?
Do you need any more information/points of clarification?

TEMPLATE 4 - PEER EVALUATION REVIEW REPORT

1. **REVIEW DETAILS**
   Institution name:
   Institutional commissioner:
   Institutional contact:
   Peer reviewer:
   Overview of Peer Review activities completed:
   Date of Review:

2. **INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**
   Key issues to be addressed (summary of key contextual factors underpinning the approach).
   Overview of the structures and processes for delivery and evaluation.

3. **ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS**
   Reflections from the discussion between the reviewer and the institutional contact.

4. **REVIEW FINDINGS** (identifying strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats)

   Evaluation context
   Programme planning and Theory of Change
   Evaluation delivery and methods
   Evaluation examples

5. **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

   Summary diagram: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT)
   Recommendations for evaluation strengthening (operational and strategic)