

Understanding the Impact of the Access Covenant: The Access and Participation Plan Evaluation Project 2018/19

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Report

All universities in England which charge higher tuition fees for Home/EU undergraduates must have an Access and Participation Plan (APP) which it submits for approval and monitoring to the independent regulator of Higher Education (HE) in England, the Office for Students (OfS). APPs are a formal document setting out each university's commitment to widening participation (WP), detailing how they will support students who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education (HE). The plans used to run across an annual cycle (and were known as Access Agreements), but with the change in regulator from the Office for Fair Access to the OfS they now run over a five-year cycle and include very ambitious targets. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the University of Lincoln's (UoL) APP is undertaken by the APP Evaluation Team based in the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI). The Team report regularly to the institutional Access and Participation Oversight Group (APPOG) chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Development and Engagement.

In 2018, the Evaluation Team were asked to evaluate the Access Covenant (AC), an intervention first detailed in the University of Lincoln's *Access Agreement 2017/18* (UoL, 2016) to support students experiencing disadvantage including individuals from Lincolnshire, identified as a social mobility cold spot in recent years (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Although named the Access Covenant, it cuts across the student lifecycle, supporting access, success and progression via investment in professional services with fixed term posts in Careers and Employability (CE), the Student Wellbeing Centre (SWC), the Student Support Centre (SSC) and in the Library in Maths and Statistics Help (MASH) and Academic Writing Support (AWS) as well as University of Lincoln Financial Assistance Funds (ULFAFs) administered by the Student Funding Team (SFT). In relation to access, for example, SWC staff contact students who disclose a disability to make sure they are supported pre- and post-enrolment. To aid retention and progression onto further study or employment, students can make use of academic support services based in the Library and careers support.

A formal literature review was not undertaken for this specific evaluation but had been undertaken for a similar evaluation of an APP intervention in 2017/18. The Evaluation Team used the Lincoln Impact Evaluation Framework (LIEF) developed 'in-house' (LHERI, 2019) to align the evaluation to the guidance issued by the regulator. At the heart of LIEF is a logic model which "*describes how and why a desired change is expected to happen in your particular context*" (OfS 2019, p.5). LIEF itself is "*rooted in critical and pragmatic realism*" (LHERI 2019, p.3) and whilst the evaluation did not explicitly draw on a critical realist framework for evaluation, the team was mindful of the advice of widening participation evaluators at the University of Sheffield who recommend "*[r]eposition[ing] widening participation practitioners, recognising them as experts who possess a wide range of practical, experiential and tacit knowledge, which can go unrecognised and unacknowledged in other forms of evaluation*" (Crockford et al. 2018, p.57). The Team also drew on their own tacit knowledge of the literature in widening participation/student experience research more widely as well as the OfS regulatory notes, guidance and commissioned research.

Through the application of LIEF, the Team were able to identify the inputs, outputs, and anticipated outcomes and impacts of the Access Covenant (AC). To help understand the changes the AC was expected to bring about and to acknowledge the tacit knowledge of professional services staff, data collection included semi-structured interviews with 12 staff all of whom were in posts related to, or directly funded through, the AC. An online questionnaire was created and a link to the survey was emailed to the entire undergraduate student population. Survey responses totalled 406, reduced to 378 following data cleansing. Participants were asked several questions to establish if they were AC students such as age, postcode (to establish if they were from a low participation in HE neighbourhood - POLAR), disability, or if they were first in family to attend HE. They were asked if they used the services detailed in the AC and to consider whether accessing the service had made any difference to starting at university and/or to their overall student experience. Participants were also asked how they found out about the services and their awareness of targeting and campaigns. Biographical life-grid interviews with students who identified with at least one characteristic of disadvantage and who had indicated a willingness to volunteer when completing the survey were undertaken. Qualitative life-grids incorporate a timeline and participants are asked to reflect on their experience of education over the life course. This approach was used to make the interviews more collaborative in nature and for the interviewer and participant to co-create a personal timeline through completion of the life-grid which also helps to enhance the depth and richness of the narratives. Some students' circumstances and

experiences were very complex and emotionally loaded and affected the way in which they related to the services offered to them at university. The life grid supports dialogue and building a relationship between researcher and participant and is useful when discussing sensitive issues (Abbas et al. 2013). It is also less intense than a traditional interview – with less eye contact and more agency for the participants. Ten interviews were undertaken with undergraduate students one of which was a pilot and nine interviews which were used in the analysis. The interviews with staff and students were transcribed and analysed thematically by the researchers using the qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo, whilst the data from the survey was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

The outputs of the AC included one-to-one support in the form of AWS appointments (in person, telephone, email or Skype), MASH appointments, drop-in or workshops, appointments with the Wellbeing Advisor in the SWC, appointments with the SSC Advisor and appointments with SFT colleagues. Students also accessed the webpages of AWS, MASH, SWC, SSC, SFT and CE as well as the Library website in order to read the study skills e-books which accompany AWS. Other outputs included the ULFAFs processed and administered by the SFT and the CE monies in the form of the Opportunity Fund. The expected outcomes of the AC included engagement with applicants enrolling at the UoL, participation, retention, progression, completion, placements, work experience and wellbeing throughout the student experience. Affective or emotional outcomes were anticipated to include sense of belonging and confidence whilst behavioral or personal outcomes were projected to include employability for the specific groups of students. The anticipated impact of the AC according to the AA 2017/18, is that the groups of students stipulated would *successfully complete their studies and move into employment or further study* (UoL 2016, p.7).

The evaluation demonstrated the commitment of the AC staff to delivering impactful support to students at UoL. However, due to limitations in the data available it was not always possible to demonstrate the full impact of the AC upon the target students. It was clear from the data collected that the AC was effective in the following ways:

- Having support in place, and raising awareness of the support available, was shown to reassure students, even if they chose not to access it;
- When students did access AC services, it appears that engagement outcomes such as participation, retention and completion were improved.

The evaluation found that, with some exceptions, students had a good awareness of the AC services, but did not always choose to access them, even when they showed

a need to do so – though the reasons for this were not always clear. Where students did choose to access the services, they were mostly extremely positive; linking the support they had received to improved confidence, improved participation, better assignment results and the ability to continue their studies. The AC evaluation provided an understanding of some of the impacts of the AC and identified areas for further development. In particular, the project provided a means to begin drawing on the tacit and implicit knowledge of staff and practitioners, in accordance with the critical realist framework which is increasingly being employed within widening participation evaluations (Crockford et al. 2018).

Recommendations included bringing together university employees working in support of the AC. This process began in 2019 and has helped pave the way for broadening this into a Community of Practice for access and participation, to increase opportunities for collaboration across services and create new communication channels improving provision. Furthermore, it was suggested that further work be undertaken on understanding and addressing the hidden barriers to accessing AC services and interventions which some students may experience, and this is now underway.

Using the life-grid interview approach provided an opportunity for the evaluators to explore students' lived experiences and their complexities. Although the evaluation often referred to 'AC students', implying a homogenous group, the biographical life-grid interviews demonstrated the extent to which they were in fact an extremely diverse group, with different experiences, needs, challenges and expectations. This highlights the need for ongoing dialogue between students and services, and, in particular, the need for a participatory approach at every stage of the lifecycle of an intervention which "*is built on research and action with people rather than simply for people*" (Stevenson et al. 2019, p.42).

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