



The Greater Opportunity of Access and Learning with Schools (GOALS) Project & Focus on College & University Study in the West of Scotland (FOCUS West)

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This case study highlights the necessity of establishing good practice in research and evaluation with regard to programmes that are designed to widen access to Higher Education for those from areas of traditionally low participation.

Historically, there has tended to be a lack of good research and evaluation in this area and several reports have drawn attention to how difficult it is to identify and build on good practice in the implementation of programmes in the face of such scarcity of rigorous research and evaluative data.

The most common reason for this is probably financial, with research involving an extra expense in an area where funding for programmes is limited. This has led to a failure of programmes, in many cases, to establish a 'culture' of rigorous research with evaluation tending to focus on individual programmes in individual institutions and lacking wider comparative analysis. Without such wider analysis, it becomes very difficult to draw conclusions about effective practice in Widening Access programmes.

The FOCUS West case study offers an example of good evaluative and research practice with regard to using longitudinal studies, comparator groups and analysis of national and regional data. This has allowed greater understanding of what constitutes effective practice in the running of widening participation programmes and, importantly, underlines the need for stakeholders and policy makers to accept the need for proper research to be embedded in such programmes.

Abstract

The GOALS/FOCUS West programme is a widening access programme working with the schools with the lowest progression rates to Higher Education in the West of Scotland. While there are problematic issues around the quality of research in the area of widening access, the programme acts as a good model with regard to the use of comparator groups, data-gathering and longitudinal studies in order to measure the effectiveness of its programmes. Research from the project has shown the impact of its continuum of activities in raising knowledge of and aspiration to attend Higher Education; progression rates from 4th to 5th year in school; progression rates to Higher Education; and completion rates of students once they are at University.



General background

The GOALS Project

The Greater Opportunity of Access and Learning with Schools (GOALS) Project ran in the West of Scotland from 2000 to 2008. It was funded by the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum (West Forum) and run by partner Higher Education institutions. The West Forum funded GOALS on behalf of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council between 2000 and 2005, and the Scottish Funding Council from 2005.

A total of 46 secondary schools participated in GOALS over the lifetime of the project, along with more than 250 associated primary schools. These schools, from 11 local authorities in the west of Scotland, were chosen to participate in the programme due to their low rates of pupil progression to Higher Education.

A continuum of activity was developed encompassing school pupils from Primary 6 through to 6th year in secondary school. This continuum is comprised of a number of separate elements which sought to introduce and reinforce the project's key messages throughout the school history of each participating pupil. GOALS elements were delivered by staff from each of the project's partner Higher Education Institutions, covering such activities as university campus visits, art portfolio preparation and Higher Education study skills courses.

Objectives and Purpose

The GOALS project aimed "to increase the number of pupils from participating schools applying and being accepted into Higher Education courses in colleges and universities".

With this in mind, project activities were devised according to the following 'first principles':

- Raising awareness of the benefits of Higher Education
- Demystifying Higher Education
- Raising aspirations and increasing motivation
- Developing skills necessary for study in Higher Education

In addition, the project produced a more detailed list of aims that it intended to meet over the lifetime of the project. Those aims were as follows:

- Improving higher education awareness levels and participation rates for school pupils aged 10 to 18 in schools with under-represented groups and low participation rates
- Stimulating school pupils towards greater academic achievement
- Giving relevant advice and information at key stages on routes to Higher Education
- Providing a continuum of support for under-represented socio-economic groups through a comprehensive and collaborative approach to schools in the West of Scotland
- Co-ordinating and enhancing existing activity by avoiding duplication of effort and developing new collaborative initiatives



FOCUS West (Focus On College and University Study in the West of Scotland)

With the end of the GOALS programme in 2008, the West Forum adapted and modified its schools programme. Now known as FOCUS West, the programme delivers activities to targeted pupils from S3 to S6 in 30 secondary schools. These activities consist of day-long events on University and College campuses, a two-day Study Skills programme and longer programmes for senior school pupils designed to enhance learning and develop critical and conceptual thinking. There are also targeted programmes for those pupils interested in studying art and design or follow a career in the Creative Industries.

The 30 schools with the lowest rates of progression to Higher Education within nine local authorities in the West of Scotland take part in the programme. A link teacher in each school selects the target pupils in S3 who will follow the programme to completion in S5 or S6. These teachers are provided with criteria to guide pupil selection in order to ensure consistency of selection across schools. These criteria take into account a variety of factors pertaining to academic potential and family and social circumstances.

The programme is delivered by staff in six Higher Education institutions in the west of Scotland with support from all member institutions and trained undergraduate and postgraduate student mentors. The FOCUS West immediate membership comprises 19 colleges and seven higher education institutions (including of the Open University in Scotland).

FOCUS West places a focus on engaging Colleges in the programme, highlighting their Higher Education courses and the fact that, In Scotland, 25% of Higher Education is done in College.

FOCUS West also has a Families and Schools Partnership Officer who works with schools, pupils and parents/carers in order to help families encourage and support pupils' aspirations and applications to Higher Education.

Objectives and Purpose

The key strategic objective of FOCUS West is to improve the recruitment of students to Higher Education programmes in colleges and universities in the West of Scotland from those areas and groups where there is low participation in Higher Education.

FOCUS West recognises that this key strategic objective is quantifiable. It therefore seeks to:

- establish baselines in this area
- set timed targets for quantified improvements in this area
- evaluate the achievement of those targets

A further aim of FOCUS West is to promote collaborative activity between universities, colleges and their partners to widen participation in higher education in their area. This includes raising pupil aspirations for learning, raising attainment, and promoting achievement, retention and progression. FOCUS West aims to provide for the exchange of



information on these activities in the West of Scotland. It provides opportunities for member organisations across the school and higher education sectors to learn from one another and to identify good practice.

Links between Research and Practice

It is worth noting that there are issues around the area of research and evaluation within the field of widening access. Many of these issues are concerned with a lack of good evaluative practice. Much evaluation also tends to be of individual programmes within individual institutions while lacking wider comparative analysis.

The 2006 report 'Review of Widening Participation Research: Addressing the Barriers to Participation in Higher Education' highlights the problems found in much of the research in the area of widening participation, in particular a lack of experimental design in the evaluation of programmes. Without this, the report states it is 'extremely difficult to draw conclusions about what actually causes or hinders changes in patterns of participation over time, and so about how to widen participation'. The report recommends that, if we genuinely want to know how to effectively widen access to Higher Education, 'then a series of controlled trials and design experiments each based on only one intervention should be conducted.'

The report also highlights the lack, in most widening access research, of comparator groups and longitudinal studies. Instead, a typical study in the area 'would involve only a consideration of current participants usually in the institution of the researcher'. The reasons for this lack is, the report acknowledges, probably most often financial; more rigorous research would involve greater expense, in an area where funding for programmes is not in abundance.

This limit in funding means that institutions involved in the delivery of the programmes are being asked to focus much more on the administration and delivery of programmes, rather than gathering longitudinal and comparative data which would help to determine whether programmes are effective. The HEFCE report underlines the flaws in this approach; "If the project was too brief to allow follow-up data to be analysed then it was a waste of money as research (and therefore, of course, we have no way of knowing whether it was also a waste of money as action)."

The 2005 study 'From the Margins to the Mainstream' reviewed case studies of 23 Higher Education access initiatives in Colleges and Universities in the UK and highlighted similar issues with regard to monitoring, evaluation and research. Some of the barriers to robust research that the report mentions include problems with tracking and impact measurement (and that staff do not have the knowledge or skills to implement these properly) and that short-term projects have very limited funding for monitoring and evaluation. The report suggests that both time and money need to be invested in these areas;

'Tracking students into, and through, Higher Education remains challenging. This is hampered by the lack of national data to allow tracking and comparison with non-



participants. A second challenge is measuring the impact of widening participation. Effective techniques need to be developed, staff capacity needs to be built and funding made available for impact evaluation.'

It should be noted that, despite being under budgetary and time restrictions, both the GOALS and FOCUS West programmes have attempted to be rigorous in the tracking of participants and the evaluation of the impact of the programmes. A greater culture of proper research and evaluation exists around these programmes than perhaps many other widening access programmes and some valuable research using longitudinal studies, comparator groups and analysis of national and regional data.

Examples of some of this research are detailed below:

1) Research into the Impact of Top-Up

Walker, Matthew and Black (2004) used comparator groups in order to investigate the effectiveness of the Top-Up Programme, an element of both the GOALS and FOCUS West programmes. Top-Up is a preparation course for 5th and 6th year pupils in order to help them make the transition from school into University.

Premise

The study set out to explore the links between socio-economic disadvantage, non-completion in Higher Education and preparation initiatives, examining the hypothesis that students who undertake programmes such as the Top-Up Programme can counteract the effects of disadvantage through being prepared academically.

Methodology

Data for the study was taken from students who progressed on to Higher Education from the 44 schools involved in the Top-Up programme. Data was also analysed from 44 similar comparative schools.

Students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Top-Up programme in preparing them for Higher Education was also assessed through interviews and questionnaires conducted with Top-Up students and other groups of students. Analysis was also done of the pass/fail rates of the first-year students who had undertaken Top-Up compared with those who had come from the comparative groups.

Findings

The study revealed that schools with the lowest Higher Education participation levels have higher non-completion rates at University than less disadvantaged schools. However, it also showed that the Top-Up students were progressing at better rates than the other groups even though many more of the Top-Up students came from 'at risk' schools with very low Higher Education participation rates.

While the study showed the positive impact of the Top-Up programme, its main finding was the link between attending a school with a very low participation rate and non-completion



of a University course, even when pupils from these schools had similar pre-entry qualifications to other students. The report's authors argue that this 'indicates that disadvantage continues to impact on students' achievements throughout their educational careers' and that this has implications for future wider access policies and non-completion research.

2) GOALS Achieved?

On completion of the GOALS programme in 2007, FOCUS West employed a full-time researcher to analyse the impact of the project from 1999 to 2007.

Methodology

Data was analysed from young people from the schools who had enjoyed unbroken participation in the GOALS Project between 2000-01 and 2006-07. 38 schools were in this category. Data was also taken from a comparator group of 34 schools over the same period.

Destinations of Leavers from Scottish Schools data was analysed for all 38 GOALS schools and 34 Comparator schools from the baseline year (1999-2000) to the most recent year for which data was available (2006-07).

Further analysis was undertaken of the GOALS schools' UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) application and acceptance data for the period 2002-03 to 2006-07. UCAS figures relating to GOALS and Comparator group schools over the 2004-05 to 2006-07 period were also contrasted.

Premise

It was argued that a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for GOALS to demonstrate impact would be met if the GOALS schools recorded school leaver destination patterns that were in some way (a) different from, and (b) better than wider destination patterns, not least the destination patterns recorded by the Comparator group of schools.

Findings

The GOALS 'target' group performed significantly better than the Comparator group in terms of improved Higher Education progression rates.

The UCAS application and acceptance rates for the GOALS group as a whole remained largely unchanged over the final three years of the study (for which comparable Comparator group data was available). The Comparator group of schools recorded successive, and significant, decreases to its UCAS application and acceptance rates.

The tendency to progress to University had risen most significantly among the GOALS schools from which fewer pupils have traditionally progressed to Higher Education. These schools were predominantly located within Glasgow City.



3) Current FOCUS West Data Gathering Procedures

All pupils, and their parents/guardians, who participate in the FOCUS West programme are asked to fill in 'Consent to Data' forms in which they consent to FOCUS West tracking their educational achievements in school and their post-school destination.

Longitudinal data on the young people's progression is then analysed with a focus on two main areas;

1) The staying on rates from S4 to S5 i.e. how many pupils decide to continue from 4th year of secondary school into 5th year, an age where compulsory schooling ends. The figures for whole year groups (not just the target group of 30 pupils) in target schools is measured against the average figure for the region as a whole. For the period 2006 to 2010, the increase in the staying on rates for the 25 schools who were part of both the GOALS and Focus West programmes during this period averages at 9.3%, compared with a 7.8% increase in the region as a whole.

2) The progression rate to Higher Education is measured for all target schools each year. An average progression rate across the target schools is calculated and is measured against the average figure for the region as a whole. For the period 2006 to 2010, the increase in the Higher Education progression rate for the 25 schools who were part of both the GOALS and Focus West programmes during this period averages at 6.9%, compared with a 5.6% increase in the region as a whole.

It should be stressed that this data is for the **whole** year group from FOCUS West schools rather than just the target group of 30 pupils who take part in FOCUS West activities. It could be argued therefore that these increases in progression rates which outperform the regional average show an even more impressive impact of the programme.

Other FOCUS West Evaluation

As well as gathering data on the overall impact of the programme with regard to the goal of increasing participation rates in Higher Education, it is recognised that different elements of the FOCUS West continuum of activities have different aims and therefore the impact and success of these programmes need to be measured against these aims.

The 3rd and 4th year elements of the programme, for example, are primarily designed to raise participants' awareness of and aspiration to attend Higher Education. Pupils are therefore asked to complete questionnaires before beginning the programme in 3rd year and upon finishing the 4th year element. These questionnaires are designed to measure educational aspiration, how participants feel about Higher Education and participants' objective knowledge of Higher Education.

Results from participants completing the 4th year element of the programme in 2010-11 show that the programme had a significant impact on pupils' knowledge of Higher Education and on their confidence and aspiration to attend Higher Education courses. There are significant rises, pre to post, in the percentage of pupils who intend to stay on to 5th year



at school and the percentage of pupils who intend to leave school with more qualifications. There is also a considerable increase in the percentage of pupils who intend to go to University after school.

Linking Researchers and Practitioners

As with many widening access programmes, the fact that project partners in GOALS and FOCUS West are part of academic institutions should, in some respects, allow the programme access to knowledge and expertise that will enable rigorous evaluation and research.

There is, however, as with many other projects, a tension between the demands of running programmes on an operational level and carrying out research, particularly during times when funding for programmes is being cut. At various times, GOALS and FOCUS West have employed full-time researchers. Currently however, the Scottish Funding Council have stated their desire that the programme focuses on the operational, not research and evaluation, aspects of the programme.

It could be argued that too often in widening access programmes the researcher/evaluator is also the practitioner and that objective evaluation should be done from the outside, by those with no vested interest in the programme. At the same time, it could be said that, in general, there is a lack of outside interest in researching widening participation programmes due, perhaps, to difficulties in drawing firm conclusions from the research.

There remains a sense among widening access practitioners that large banks of data are being generated which are not being properly researched due to the demands of the operational, administrative side of programmes. Such time constraints leave institutions unable to build capacity around their data. There is also a sense that a greater understanding is needed from all stakeholders and policy makers of how research and evaluation is a necessary element in order to maximise the effectiveness of a programme.

Transferability of the Case

There are many elements of the GOALS/FOCUS West programme that the research suggests are effective. Many of these elements are shared by other widening access programmes. Having participants work with undergraduate and postgraduate student mentors and allowing them to spend time on University and College campuses are aspects that seem particularly effective and are easily transferable to other programmes and institutions.

Perhaps the aspect of GOALS/FOCUS West that would be of most benefit to similar programmes, however, is the programme's use of robust evaluative and data-gathering techniques and its awareness that the effectiveness of a programme cannot be measured without these. It could be suggested that rigor of this kind would have a positive impact if adopted across other widening access programmes.



Recommendations from the Case Study

- A wider understanding is needed from all stakeholders and policy makers of the necessity of rigorous research and evaluation in widening access programmes. Staff capacity should be increased to allow this.
- The use of longitudinal data and comparator groups is important in effectively measuring the impact of a programme.
- Programmes should have as much clarity in their aims as possible and these aims should be clear to all stakeholders in the programme.
- For programmes offering a continuum of activities, it should be acknowledged that each element of the programme has distinct aims and that elements should be evaluated against their individual aims.
- The criteria for choosing target groups should be clear and consistent across different schools.

Further Reading

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