

Theory of Change Case Study

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance (23–28)

Case Study

Barkat, S. (2019). Evaluating the impact of the Academic Enrichment Programme on widening access to selective universities: Application of the Theory of Change framework. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(6) 1160–1185

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3556>

(No Open Access version is currently available.)

In the table below, the ‘Case Study’ column breaks the case study evaluation down into a series of methodological steps as described by the [Methodological Guidance](#). The nature of this ‘Small *n*’ approach means that there may be no single ‘correct’ way of applying this methodology. The example given should be considered illustrative rather than a definitive model.

| Case Study |
|---|
| <p>Barkat 2019</p> <p>Outline of paper: This article outlines the process of developing and applying a Theory of Change (TOC) to support the planning and development of an academic enrichment programme (AEP).</p> <p>The programme was designed to support disadvantaged and under-represented students to increase their Level 3 attainment outcomes and gain places at highly selective universities.</p> <p>As noted in <i>Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance</i>, there is no agreed methodological approach to developing a TOC (p. 24). Consequently, it is not possible to set out a series of standard steps for developing a standard TOC. This case study, however, serves to outline how one such TOC was developed within a specific context.</p> |
| Stage 1 – Developing the TOC |

The development of the TOC was informed by a literature review of research about the decision-making processes of socio-economically disadvantaged young people in terms of HE progression, in particular when they chose not to apply for selective universities despite being suitably qualified (p. 1166).

This identified a range of relevant factors:

- This student group may have access to different forms of cultural capital from those dominant in HE. This can reduce a sense of 'fit' or 'belonging' from the students' perspective or may not match the expectations of the selecting institution.
- Socio-economically disadvantaged students may lack access to the authoritative information and knowledge about HE and the application process available to their more advantaged peers. Their limited information may inform the decisions they make and reduce the likelihood of them making a successful application.
- Social-class contexts can introduce complex factors in considering which institutions to apply for (p. 1162).

Interviews were conducted with programme delivery staff, and a review of programme documentation was undertaken.

Question 1 – What is the intervention's primary intended outcome?

The aims of the AEP are to help students to secure places at selective universities by:

- Providing support to raise attainment
- Giving students first-hand experience of the academic learning environment characteristic of selective universities
- Raising students' aspirations, motivation, knowledge and understanding of the process of applying to these institutions (pp. 1166-67).

Question 2 – Why is the primary outcome important and what short and long-term outcomes map to it?

Socio-economic disparities persist in access to English and Welsh universities, with a particularly significant gap between the most and least socio-economically disadvantaged students in accessing high-status selective universities (p. 1161).

The relationship between the primary outcome and short and long-term outcomes is discussed below in the section entitled 'What outputs are needed to deliver the short-term outcomes?'

Question 3 – Who is the intervention for?

The intervention is designed to support 'the most able' students who are currently under-represented in HE, but who have a realistic opportunity to obtain a place at selective institutions.

The selection process for the intervention requires participants to:

- Be from a non-selective state school with a high proportion of students in receipt of free school meals
- Have at least 8 GCSE grades A*-C

- Be from the first generation in their family to apply to university
- Have parents in non-professional occupations
- Live in areas of low HE participation
- Have an annual household income of less than £42,600

The selection approach includes weighting of these criteria (p. 1167).

Question 4 – Why is the intervention necessary?

Various drivers are described in the article, including:

- The requirements of HE policy and regulation
- The perceived role of HE in promoting social mobility, particularly in terms of facilitating access to professional jobs with ‘top’ employers (p. 1161)

What outputs are needed to deliver the short-term outcomes?

The programme is designed to:

- Target participants’ aspirations, attitudes and motivation
- Develop participants’ knowledge, understanding and confidence and
- Support participants’ Level 3 attainment through study skills (p. 1173)

The programme’s (short-term) outcomes are the following.

- Participants increase their aspiration and motivation to apply to selective institutions.
- Participants have greater knowledge and understanding of selective institutions and how to construct a successful application.
- Participants achieve higher Level 3 attainment outcomes than they might otherwise have done. This output interacts with output (i) by increasing participants’ confidence and motivation (p. 1170)

The programme design described by the TOC is intended to lead to a high-level outcome – that disadvantaged and under-represented young people apply to, and are successful in gaining a place at, a selective university. These programme outputs are understood to feed into, enable and create the conditions to support this long-term outcome.

The TOC also includes a broader range of contextual factors considered to support or hinder the intended programme outcomes. Some of these are framed as assumptions on which the design of the programme depends:

- That disadvantaged students lack the knowledge, aspiration and motivation to apply to selective institutions
- That academic potential is hindered by a lack of motivation (p. 1170)

What will the intervention deliver?

The intervention consists of five strands of activity:

1. A residential summer school. This is intended to give participants an authentic ‘student experience’ and targets all three key programme outputs.
2. A Facebook group. This is intended to encourage the development of an online network and facilitate peer support, particularly around university applications. It is also used to support study skill development and, thus, Level 3 attainment.
3. Two study-skills sessions. These aim to support participants in preparing for Y13 exams and HE level study and are coupled with access to online resources.
4. E-mentoring. This employs a student role-model mentoring approach to target all three programme outcomes.
5. A celebration event. This will mark the end of the programme and is designed to raise participant aspirations, attitudes and motivation (p. 1171).

What inputs are required?

This stage was not included in the case study article.

Stage 2 – Using the TOC to design the evaluation

The evaluators used the TOC framework to plan and design the evaluation through the development of a series of theoretical propositions and assumptions about the programme, which informed the design of the evaluation process.

The paper includes a framework for evaluation planning and analysis. This charts the relationship between the theoretical propositions in the TOC, the assumptions underpinning it, how these were translated into research questions and the data required to answer them.

| Theoretical proposition | Assumptions | Research questions | Data required |
|---|---|--|--|
| Supporting students around aspirations, attitudes and motivation: developing knowledge, understanding and confidence alongside study skills will increase students’ knowledge, aspirations and motivation to apply to selective universities. | A lack of knowledge, understanding and confidence is deterring disadvantaged students from applying to selective universities. Universities are best placed to raise aspirations and knowledge about higher education and motivate students to progress to university. | Did the programme have an impact on students’ knowledge, attitudes and motivation to study at selective universities? Are the right activities delivered? Are they effective? Do students apply to selective universities? | Monitoring data Extent and quality of activities delivered Extent to which participants demonstrated increased knowledge, understanding and confidence Number of applications to selective universities |
| This will motivate students to work harder to achieve the grades needed to study at a selective university | A lack of motivation prevents disadvantaged students from achieving their full academic potential | Did the programme have an impact on students’ attainment? | Extent to which participants increased their motivation to improve attainment Attainment data |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|------------------------|
| Higher attainment will lead to more disadvantaged students progressing to selective universities. | Low attainment prevents disadvantaged students from progressing to selective universities. | Did the programme have an impact on students' progression to selective universities? | Progression to HE data |
| (p. 1173) | | | |
| Stage 3 – Data collection | | | |
| <p>The evaluation design was based on a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative tracking data with qualitative experience data, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitoring and tracking data collected over several years ● Outcome data supporting the analysis of the relationship between progression to highly selective institutions and student demographics ● Attitudinal surveys used to assess changes in aspiration, knowledge and understanding of HE, administered before and after the residential ● An end-of-programme survey to gather data about HE applications ● Post-programme telephone survey (p. 1172). | | | |
| Stage 4 - Outcomes | | | |
| <p>Analysis of the evaluation data indicated that the participant cohort had:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) Greater knowledge, aspiration and motivation to apply to selective universities ii) Higher application rates to selective institutions iii) Higher academic attainment iv) Higher progression to selective universities (pp. 1180–81) | | | |
| Conclusion | | | |
| <p>Noting that 'the chain of expected results occurred' (p. 1181), the evaluators suggested that the evaluation outcomes verified their TOC and the assumptions underpinning it.</p> <p>They argued that a TOC provides a useful framework to guide the evaluation process, from defining the focus of the evaluation to devising research questions and methodological approaches. They also described how developing the TOC strengthened its planning and design and, thus, supported stronger claims about the relationship between the programme and its outcomes.</p> | | | |