



RCS Fair Access Evaluation Framework

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Introduction

Fair Access at The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland is about ensuring that people from all backgrounds study the performing or production arts education. Our department is specifically funded to promote and provide fairer access to Higher Education and prioritise working with people who are living in a SIMD1 postcode, are care experienced, or are estranged from parents or carers. We provide a range of opportunities from taster sessions to more developed activities in preparation for higher education courses, working with some of the best artists and teachers across the UK.

There are two core Fair Access initiatives at RCS. Widening Access to the Creative Industries (WACI) provides entry-level short courses, workshops, masterclasses, information and guidance for school pupils and communities throughout Scotland. The Transitions programme supports and prepares people with talent and potential to get into undergraduate study at RCS through a well-informed programme that includes funded tuition, workshops, coaching, personal development, performance trips and other opportunities.

Prior to the SCAPP CoP, evaluations were conducted for almost all projects. These were used at regular committee meetings throughout the year as well as used for funding reviews and applications. Evaluations were, for the most part, seen as the end task to a project and an opportunity to evidence its impact. There was no commonality or standardisation amongst the team's reports in terms of format, method or process, although these were typically evaluation forms with a short series of questions and gradings 1-5, with recognition that the response rate was much higher in person than online or as follow up to an activity.

We joined with the intention of using the time to develop our evaluation skills by both focusing on specific project evaluations. We joined several workshops and talks but were both very struck by the sessions of Theory of Change and the NERUPI Evaluation Framework, and immediately saw the potential for the latter to be implemented on a structural level within our team.

Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) is a community of practice for those seeking to reduce inequalities in higher education access, participation and progression. The framework used by members was developed by Annette Hayton, University of Bath and Dr Andrew Bengry, Bath Spa University. It addresses the limitations of data and the potential for manipulation by combining clear aims and appreciation of context, comparability without uniformity in delivery, and rigour without prescription of research or evaluation methods. It is based on the Theory of Change, which is a process of mapping and navigating outputs and outcomes.



NERUPI is a model developed to be adjusted to the specifics of any Widening Participation (WP) team. We were able to adapt this model into a useable framework for our context over a series of sessions, some of which included management and our full team. In these sessions we were forced to map out and reflect on all the work we do as a team and place this alongside our core aims and objectives. This process of mapping out was incredibly useful in understanding how we work and how to improve in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. It was also a useful experience in understanding our individual and collective work. Through the course of these sessions, we were able to design an adaptation of the NERUPI framework for our own use.

While the framework is still being piloted, it's already produced a more cohesive approach to evaluations amongst the team. It has also allowed us to think more strategically not only about the projects we run, but the evaluations we conduct, which has already resulted in a more effective use of our time and work.

Methodology

Did you use a theoretical framework for your evaluation?

- Theory of Change
- Existing framework
- Theory from literature

We have implemented the NERUPI Evaluation Framework as a method of evaluation within our Fair Access department. The NERUPI Framework has been developed as a product of theory and practice and offers a template which can be translated into specific contexts and environments. We have been able to adapt the framework to meet the specifics of our work, this has been done through extensive workshops. It is now being piloted for a year within the team to allow us to assess the impact and suitability of the design. This will be assessed through team feedback and focus groups.



Discussion/ Reflections

We have used Gibbs Reflective Cycle to reflect on our experiences over the whole year through our involvement with WP Evaluation Matters

Description:

At the start of our involvement in the WP Evaluation Matters project both of us were looking at different activities within Fair Access RCS that we wanted to evaluate in a more rigorous or meaningful way. Although we both work in the same team, we had not worked together closely on a project before and it became clear very early on that having separate approaches would not have the impact on both the culture and working practices within the team that we wanted to achieve.

The turning point for us was the session we attended in April 2023 where we were introduced to the NERUPI Framework. We saw the potential in this model for reviewing all our activity and immediately started working on re-framing our projects. This enabled us to merge into a single focus of designing a revised NERUPI Framework that would fit our activities. At this stage we involved our manager who not only supported us in this new approach but assisted us in driving things forward.

Through a series of working sessions involving different members of the team and management, we were able to not only clarify all the activities we carry out within a structure that follows the student journey, but also to identify gaps in provision. Our longer-term aim is to audit our activities so that we interrogate more thoroughly whether everything we do has the potential to achieve the stated high-level aims. This may result in us doing less activity but having a clearer purpose for everything we do making our evaluation processes more rigorous in the future.

We were also able to identify all stakeholders. There is still some work to be done to record the kind of data that each of these groups require and plot this throughout the year, but we have begun this process and hope to have it in place for academic year 24/25.

Feelings:

What started off as feeling very overwhelming has become clearer and more manageable. We have been able to recognise that as a team we have a tendency to put ourselves under a lot of pressure to try to do as much as possible and recognising that doing less but having more depth to our enquiries will not only result in a better outcomes for students but will also allow us to use the data we collect to improve our work, something that we have struggled with in the past. We have often not taken clear action apart based on evaluating as it has been seen as an exercise for reporting what has happened rather than thinking forward.

Evaluation:

This project has allowed us been a very positive learning experience. Having the opportunity to work with peers across Institutions has been invaluable but also having two of us from the team to work



on this within our own Institution has been extremely beneficial. If we look at what have been obstacles for us, I am sure that in common with others, it is having the time to do this work alongside day-to-day activity. We have not always been able to meet deadlines set by SCAPP and that we have set ourselves, but we have had each other for support and the quality of our critical discussion has accelerated not only our outputs but our personal development.

Conclusions:

In looking at the learning from this project and how we can make this better in the future, we would have benefited from having regular time set aside for this within our own Institution. We work in a forward-thinking environment and there is no doubt that we would have been supported in this had we invested more time in planning. By approaching this more as a project with hours attached and a plan with deadlines our momentum might have matched our enthusiasm. Despite that we have made a lot of progress and are ready for next steps.

Action:

We have already set up a review meeting with the whole team so that each person responsible for evaluation can discuss their activity in Term 1. Our aim is to share practice and support our colleagues whilst at the same time using our model of activity to ensure that we are on track.

We intend to continue to employ innovative models for qualitative evaluation, particularly those introduced to us in the 'Using creative qualitative methods in evaluation work' session by Liz Austen and Stella Jones-Devitt.

Other members of our team took the opportunity to attend a Data Analysis session with AI Blackshaw so that we can work on our data collection to ensure that it makes quantitative reporting easier.



Limitations

There are two primary limitations we can identify within our Fair Access team in general. The first is our relatively low numbers of participants which makes quantitative data challenging. In Transitions we have around 100 students in total. We engage them through a number of compulsory and optional activities. Attendance can be between 2 – 30, which means we have a substantially mixed capturing of data. Low numbers reduce the statistical power of our reporting. This limitation does however mean the reverse for qualitative data. Low numbers enable us to capture a full set of quotes, images and observations.

Our second limitation is a structural one. We are currently going through a transitional phase which will result in a restructuring of output and will influence the student journey and aims mapped out in our current framework.

Lessons Learned/ Future Work

As a result of this project, we now have a framework through which to audit the activities and provisions we offer, and ensure these are effective and strategic, in line with our wider aims and objectives. The NERUPI Framework has influenced our work going forwards in many ways. It has embedded evaluations within the structure of our team's work; creating a cyclical process through which to reflect on our work, assess effectiveness and identify any gaps.

It has also provided a structure through which we can now approach evaluations as a team, rather than several individuals. By this I mean we now have a core framework which maps out all our work and should enable us to identify the most effective and necessary projects or activities to each evaluate. A key motivation for investing our time in developing this framework has been to achieve more focused and strategic evaluations, resulting in more effective use of team resources.



Additional Content

Images

| | SOCIAL & ACADEMIC CAPITAL | HABITUS | | SKILLS CAPITAL | INTELLECTUAL & SUBJECT CAPITAL | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | PROGRESSION CURRICULUM | STUDENT IDENTITIES | | SKILLS CURRICULUM | KNOWLEDGE CURRICULUM | | |
| | EXPLORE/INTRODUCE/ CHOOSE TO APPLY | HABITUS | BECOME | PRACTISE | UNDERSTAND | | |
| AIMS | Access and explore the benefits of studying at RCS, working in the performing arts industry and the role of FA | Explore the options and make informed choices about studying at Higher Education level | Develop confidence and resilience to prepare for the challenges of RCS life/Sense of belonging/Increase cultural capital | Develop skills and capacity to be audition ready and progress into RCS | Develop a deeper understanding of how to put skills and knowledge into practice (including criticality and adaptability) | | |
| What will tell us if we have achieved the aim | | | | | | | |
| How could we evaluate this? | | | | | | | |
| Who is the evaluation audience | | | | | | | |
| Agreed evaluation activity (to be completed with Team) | | | | | | | |