

Reach Aberdeen – Law

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Introduction

Reach North is based at the University of Aberdeen. Established in 2010 by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), this national programme has the express aim of supporting disadvantaged young people into high demand professional careers, namely law and medicine. Since its inception, Reach Aberdeen has developed and expanded to work with inner-city, rural and island pupils from every secondary school in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Highlands, Orkney, and Shetland, targeting pupils who are in most need of support including care experienced pupils, carers, and those from deprived postcodes.

Our initial engagement with young people commences in S4 and we continue to work with the pupils until they leave school, offering personalised guidance and running career exploration days relating to careers in health, medicine, and the legal profession. Many of the pupils we work with will be the first in their family to consider university, so a vital part of the programme delivers tasters for the careers these degrees lead to as they may not have any connections within these roles. We work in partnership with other education providers, employers, and professionals to run these activities, providing information and guidance to pupils, teachers, and carers on the different pathways open to young people.

Whilst all Reach Programme providers use the same metrics, due to our geographical position Reach North have many more remote and rural participants and less from SIMD20 postcodes. During covid, where possible, our events pivoted online. Post covid we wanted to learn from our students so we consulted them about whether to continue online, move back to in person or to develop a hybrid approach. Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the vast majority of our students coming from these remote backgrounds, most supported a hybrid programme.

This case study therefore focuses on an evaluation of the post Covid, hybrid Reach North programme. We evaluate all of our events and opportunities immediately post event and contribute to a national evaluation as part of the annual report for the SFC. However, the purpose of this project was to evaluate the Law strand of the Reach North programme in a more in-depth manner to understand students opinions and feelings of the impact taking part had on their interest in University.

This evaluation was undertaken for both Reach Law and Medicine however this report will focus on the Reach Law aspect of the programme only as that is the programme I lead on. Given the geographical constraints it was determined that the best method of evaluation would be a questionnaire as this would allow us to reach all current Reach Law students. There were 89 S4-S6 students contacted to undertake this evaluation.



Methodology

What sort of data did your evaluation involve?

- Quantitative
- Qualitative
- Mixed methods

Which methods did you use?

- Questionnaires
- Validated Scales
- Interviews
- Focus Group(s)
- Analysis of existing data from your intervention e.g. monitoring data routinely collected
- Analysis of externally sourced data, e.g. bespoke, institutional or publicly available
- Other

Which software package(s) if any did you use to assist with your evaluation?

- Excel
- SPSS
- NVivo
- Tableau or PowerBI
- Other

Method:

It was decided that since there hasn't been an evaluation of this type of the law strand and that the project has changed substantially since the pandemic, this evaluation was to be used as a purely 'where are we now' exercise. If successful, this would then allow us to include it in the annual evaluation cycle which will incorporate a formal validated scale such as the Students' Intentions Towards University (SITU) or TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire.

There was a majority focus on qualitative questions as it was felt this would best convey student opinions. Whilst a numerical scale can often work, we were looking for individual opinions to help tailor the programme and qualitative answers would give us the best information for this. Students had the opportunity to comment on each individual event we have hosted in the past 3 years. For example, every year we host personal statement workshops and an access programme.

If students had attended an event, they were then asked if they enjoyed the event and if so what they enjoyed. If they did not enjoy the event, they were also asked to comment on this. Finally, if students hadn't attended an event, they were asked why. All of this would give an insight into how sought after sessions were, but also how impactful.

We did this through an online questionnaire software, Gecko Engage. This made it simple and easy to access students as we would not see all in one place at one time. The questionnaire could be completed anonymously but we were concerned about the number of returns so, to combat this, we offered the chance to win a £25 gift card if they completed the questionnaire but to do this they had to supply a contact email address. This, we believe, increased the numbers of returning questionnaires but we discuss the cons later in this report.

There was a return rate of 29%. The surveys were then exported into excel and analysed manually.



Discussion/ Reflections

Conversations with other Reach partners have suggested that that keeping students attention has been more difficult since the pandemic, therefore, we felt it pertinent to keep this questionnaire short and to the point. Students were able to finish the survey in less than 10 minutes which we hoped would increase the completion rate. We asked students whether they went to events and if they had we would ask about their perception and enjoyment of the session. If they had not attended, we asked why so we could identify any attendance issues that could be addressed. As it was difficult to foresee all potential answers to these questions, some options were given and an 'other' box was always included so as to allow students to give an individual opinion if needed. Whilst it does make it easier to analyse answers with set choices, it did risk students just ticking a box because they felt we wanted that answer.

Another possible obstacle we predicted was that students may not want to be honest about any negative experiences if they were identifiable. We therefore made it an anonymous survey unless the students wanted to put their name in the draw for the gift card. One of the difficulties found here was that we were unable to get a lot of detailed answers or any expansions since we were not speaking to students in person and could not email for follow ups. We also understand that by using the gift card as a dangling carrot to get people to submit these questionnaires, we may have been influencing a more positive reflection from students as they may have felt their answers would determine their chances of winning.

As we haven't undertaken an evaluation of this type on the law strand since the move to a hybrid model it was difficult to compare to previous data to see if there was a difference over time. Additionally, it would have been useful to conduct this research at both the start and end of each programme year to look at whether the programme meets the expectations of the students and is having the desired impact. In comparison, we held an event in 2023 for Reach Law titled 'So you want to be a Lawyer' where there was a pre- and post-event survey. This then enabled me to draw very clear conclusions as to the impact and successfulness of the event, creating a report for management which accurately demonstrated the benefits of holding this event.

I believe that whilst there were definitely some great takeaways from this evaluation, this questionnaire needs to become part of the annual evaluation cycle to allow us to draw the maximum benefit from the data collected. From this evaluation, I was able to find out that there were events held that students seemed to be unaware of. It was also clear that there was some support students needed but we are not at present providing. I was also able to analyse however that for the events we do run, the people who attend overall do enjoy the sessions and find them beneficial. We therefore can see that our running of the events is successful but there are some awareness raising issues and some additional events we could be working on.



Limitations

Pupils engage with this programme for up to three years. As discussed earlier, this evaluation was devised as part of a CPD programme, data was collected at a single point in time which meant comparisons across the programme year or between years were not possible. This was a limitation as, whilst it could be concluded whether students found specific events to be helpful, we could not draw any conclusions as to whether the whole programme was impactful in the way we wished it to be. We were unable to ask any questions you may see on the TASO questionnaire because we would have nothing to compare it to and therefore no way to make a solid conclusion on the impact of the programme. If we were to then ask students to rate their perceived impact of the programme, it would not be accurately reflective. Students may think the programme has not worked at all when a pre- and post-programme questionnaire would show different and vice versa. It would also raise questions as to the accuracy since students may just want to 'people please' and say the programme has helped when it may well not have. Neither of these scenarios would have helped give us an accurate evaluation of the programme and therefore would not have allowed us to make meaningful changes that would support the students better.

The return numbers were also an issue. 29% is not a bad return rate by any means – Qualtrics state between 20% and 30% is average however more than 50% would constitute a good response rate - however it is widely recognised that a bigger number of returns gives a much more accurate reflection. The answers also were likely not as rich in quality as we would have liked. Any students who used the 'other' box or made suggestions of sessions they would like to see, did so in very few words.

The difference between the participation rate in this questionnaire and the 'So you want to be a Lawyer' event pre- and post-event survey were dramatic. In the latter case, we had the students use a QR code on the screen to fill out the form in front of us. We were then able to let them know we could see how many responses there were and so we had a 100% completion rate for both pre- and post-event. This could be due to many reasons, but I do believe one of the biggest was that we gave this form in person and asked them to complete it. It is much easier for them to not see or ignore an email request for a survey response than it is when we are standing in front of them.



Lessons Learned/ Future Work

One of the biggest lessons learned throughout this project was that there are many ways to evaluate but that without something to compare to, you cannot truly calculate the impact of a programme or event. This is why I will now be recommending to my manager that we add this type of questionnaire to our annual evaluation cycle to allow us to better evaluate the programme as a whole and its impact.

I will also implement pre- and post-event surveys in all events which students will fill out whilst in attendance. This will increase our return rate greatly and allow us to better evaluate event and programme impact. These will also use more standardised questions such as those in TASO which will give more credibility to our data and conclusions.

We will also aim to investigate the possibility of conducting some focus groups with students and teachers to facilitate the collection of more detailed qualitative data. It will also be useful as it will allow a semi-formal line of questioning which will allow key themes to be investigated whilst still being flexible enough to allow the interviewee to contribute as they see fit.

We will include a summary of the findings of this, and future, research in the annual report to the SFC with the further, more detailed reports available on request.