

# Evaluating change: Giving a voice to social impact

## 1. Summary of Impact

Many of the great social justice programs, initiatives and research projects that occur within our universities go unnoticed due to the lack of support and knowledge on how to demonstrate their social impact.

Social Impact Research and Evaluation Specialist, Dr Clare Netherton, has made it her mission to give impact a voice that can be heard by policy makers. Thanks to her support and contributions, many projects have flourished and continue to get the resources needed to drive social change.

## 2. The Problem

While there are countless programs aimed at tackling various social issues in and around campus, project managers and senior academics often lack the capacity and confidence to communicate the importance of their work.

Social change in particular is often difficult to measure and quantify, especially if each team is reporting in isolation. Many projects fail to communicate the importance of their work because teams cannot reach a consensus on indicators and language for evaluation.

As a result, much of the great work remains unnoticed and, consequently, underfunded, limiting its ability to make an impact.

### 3. Beneficiaries

The most immediate beneficiaries of Dr Netherton's support are project teams working on social justice initiatives. This has included universities, but also government programs designed at widening participation in higher education. As such, young people, especially those who are statistically less likely to enter higher education, have felt the benefits from her work.

More broadly, Dr Netherton has also aided the research community as she has designed evaluation frameworks and tools which can be used to measure and report impact in a number of contexts.

### 4. Approach to impact

There are various ways of evaluating social impact, and Dr Netherton believes in a multiplicity of approaches to effectively measure change.

Between 2013 and 2016, she played a leading role in the evaluation of the UTS Widening Participation Strategy, a policy aimed at increasing engagement of underrepresented groups in higher education. The policy is structured around themes of building educational aspiration and attainment, widening access, supporting transition and ensuring retention.

Numerous initiatives across the university work towards these goals. They include strategies such as school outreach, access schemes and pathways, peer mentoring and academic support, as well as professional learning and development for teaching staff.

Since many of these initiatives operate in isolation, Dr Netherton, working closely with Andrew Connolly, Student Equity Manager, and the Student Equity team in the UTS Equity and Diversity Unit, established an evaluation framework that enables the collection and reporting of impact at both an institutional and an individual project level. Importantly, given the breadth of programs that support the widening participation policy, the framework had to be flexible in its implementation to suit the evaluation needs of all the various activities.

To achieve this, Dr Netherton collaborated closely with individual project managers and other stakeholders in the widening participation space. Once she determined their research and evaluation needs, she took a participatory approach by building the research and evaluation capacity of project managers.

According to Dr Netherton, embracing a broad range of research and evaluation methods has been instrumental to demonstrate the impact of diverse factors on complex systems and lives. This will also ensure that the research is rigorous and can stand up to scrutiny. In addition, customised evaluation plans have to be appropriate for the individual context whilst remaining in alignment with the institutional framework.

To take an example, U@Uni projects work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds to increase confidence in their academic abilities and to encourage them to consider higher education as an option. To demonstrate that these projects were successful and achieved the desired impact, Dr Netherton and the project teams engaged in pre- and post-project research activities including surveys, interviews, self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. Using this approach produced both quantitative as well as qualitative results which, combined, developed a solid evidence base for reporting.

Dr Netherton also argues that when reporting outcomes and impact, it is important to find a common language and bring projects together. While many initiatives work towards a common goal, few of them have opportunities to collaborate. This is especially problematic because impact reports remain individual, small and isolated, and cannot effectively communicate the bigger picture. However, through the evaluation framework, Dr Netherton was able to demonstrate progress and change that has been driven by all the efforts combined.

## **5. What has changed as a result of this work?**

### **5.1. The Outcomes**

There are a number of positive outcomes resulting from Dr Netherton's efforts in the widening participation strategy.

Whilst working with the Equity and Diversity unit, she was able to establish evaluation and monitoring frameworks which help a wide range of UTS faculty and unit-based programs in their efforts to widen participation in higher education. These frameworks are adaptable to the unique context of the initiatives and enable project teams to demonstrate impact in a measurable, academically rigorous way.

In addition, the support she provided has resulted in the successful implementation of evaluation strategies and tools to inform program improvement and meet reporting requirements. This has seen many widening participation programs continue to receive the support they need to do their important work.

Finally, Dr Netherton and her colleagues published several scholarly publications related to research and evaluation of widening participation in higher education initiatives, including empirical research conducted with Dr Tracy Barber on students' perceptions of navigating pathways from TAFE to university study.

## **5.2. Impact**

The provision of evaluation support is an important step towards a greater goal which is a shift towards more impact-driven and evidence-informed work.

According to Dr Netherton, project teams often neglect impact evaluation in their day-to-day activities due to time and financial restrictions. Her role has provided these teams the necessary capacity and time required to measure and report on the significance of their efforts and the change that is resulting from it. The frameworks and tools she developed will continue to ensure that impact remains the focus of all initiatives, and that it can be demonstrated to receive continued support.

Dr Netherton also recognises a willingness in the academic sphere to make research more impact-driven. This is an important development she hopes to have contributed to, and she maintains a positive outlook for the current system to change.

Finally, she has helped to bring some very unlikely teams together. As a representative of the Bridges to Higher Education Evaluation Project Group, she participated at roundtable discussions amongst key competitors, including UTS, The University of

Sydney, Macquarie University, Western Sydney University, and the Australian Catholic University.

Putting their business interests aside, evaluators from these institutions combined forces to work towards the common goal of widening participation in higher education. Dr Netherton believes that great change can be achieved when impact stands at the forefront of all activity, and she is proud to have contributed to the formation of such collaborative partnerships.

## **6. What has helped you accomplish this work?**

### **6.1. Personal enabling factors**

Dr Netherton has worked within a range of research and evaluation contexts connected to education, health and wellbeing. Her doctoral and postdoctoral research explored the relationship between stress, and physical and emotional health in young people. For this, she had to work across two very different types of disciplines: anatomy and psychiatry.

In her words, she found herself often ‘translating’ from one field to another and creating a common language—a skill which would later be instrumental in her work. The multifactorial and transdisciplinary nature of this research taught her to use a broad range of research and evaluation methods and strategies, especially when it comes to understanding complex systems.

### **6.2. External enabling factors**

Many project teams have very little time to dedicate to impact evaluation. Dr Netherton explains that she was able to successfully launch research and evaluation initiatives thanks to the extra effort and willingness from the teams she worked with.

She also adds that UTS as an institution is a supportive environment for her work due to its ongoing commitment and investment in social justice.

## 7. Challenges

There are a number of key challenges in evaluating and demonstrating impact, especially in the area of social change.

According to Dr Netherton, change and impact are still commonly expected to be economic. While this is certainly possible in some instances, social change must be measured using a wide range of indicators, many of which are qualitative. To overcome this issue, Dr Netherton advocates a multidisciplinary approach which evaluates impact from many different angles.

In addition, when bringing people from different professional backgrounds together, it can be challenging to reach a consensus on how change can be measured. Despite working towards the same goal, people inherently differ in the way they feel impact can be demonstrated. While one person may insist that impact needs to be shown in numbers, another person may argue that impact can absolutely not be a number.

Over the years, Dr Netherton has developed a unique sense of creativity which helps her bring team members closer together to find a set of common indicators that can collectively be agreed on.

She also hopes that programs will shift towards a more impact-driven approach in which relationships to competitors, advocacy groups and external partners are formed and nurtured to achieve the desired change.

## 8. Associated research

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## 9. References

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<https://www.uts.edu.au/about/equity-and-diversity/student-access-participation>