Systematic Reviews: making sense of research

This Research Approach Paper outlines how to undertake a systematic review of widening participation research. A systematic review enables you to explore a wide range of studies in an accessible and rigorous way. This resource aims to share research knowledge and build capabilities.

Context:

In The Office for Fair Access's (OFFA's) most recent access agreement guidance, institutions were asked to take an increasingly collaborative and evidence-led approach. Evaluating the impact of interventions and understanding what effective practice looks like in your context can help target your interventions more effectively, supporting progression towards the Government's social mobility goals.

Reviewing existing research can establish a context for your work and support the development of innovative and meaningful approaches. Being able to see gaps in knowledge and identify key research themes can help you design evaluations that can build insight and lead to sustained changes in behaviour.

Understanding how universities and colleges can best work to support young people to enter, succeed and progress in higher education is of real importance economically and socially, particularly at a time of significant change for the country and the sector.

Changing practice brings different expertise and ways of working together to ask challenging questions, share ideas and take creative paths. However, there are often tensions between the different demands of practice and policy which means that research is not always being mobilised to effectively change behaviour. Undertaking research to help inform and evaluate the development of interventions can offer one way to build a collective culture of widening participation within institutions and across the sector.

Process:

One of the successes of widening participation research is that it crosses disciplinary and professional boundaries. It draws on different fields of knowledge to shape understanding. A systematic review can help capture these different ways of knowing. It is a strategy for critically evaluating the research evidence on a particular topic by addressing a focused question. It also provides a framework for searching through and organising large bodies of work.

Systematic reviews have their roots in the fields of science and health. There has been some criticism about their use for educational research due to fears that the approach restricts intellectual freedom and reiterates inequalities in how knowledge is produced, understood and disseminated.

However, a systematic review can provide an accessible and enabling tool to help engage with the broad range of literature in the field. Having an agreed protocol for reviewing research is beneficial when working in a team with different expertise and professional knowledge. It means that there is a framework to build consistency and can increase the rigour of the research. It also provides a transparent methodology which is repeatable to

other topics and fields of research. The PRISMA Checklist is a structured means of improving the reporting of systematic reviews and meta-analyses
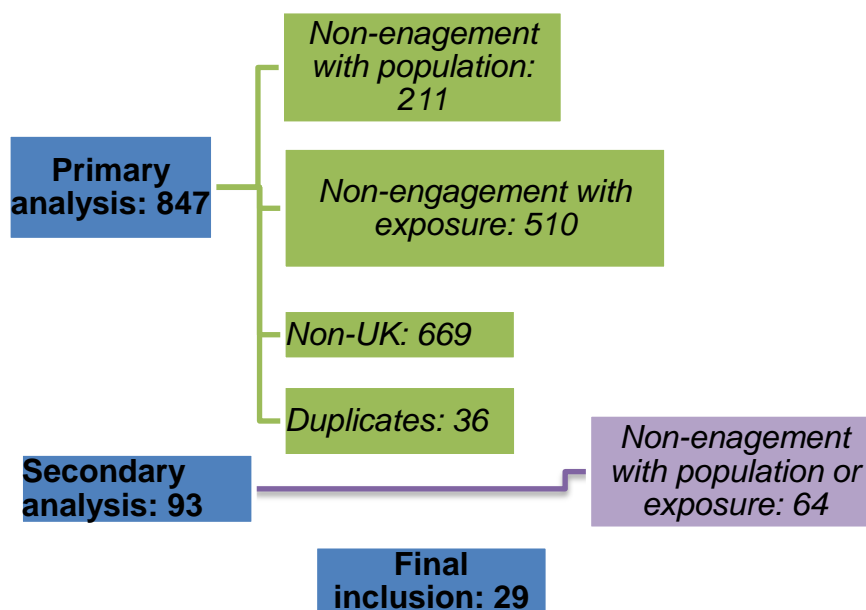
Young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to enter higher education than they were a decade ago. But those from the most advantaged backgrounds are still two and half times more likely to enter higher education than their less privileged peers.

The Sutton Trust conducted research that found there is a lack of evidence identifying what can work to support disadvantaged young people to access and succeed in higher education. Our systematic review develops this thinking by exploring *how* the impact of outreach is being understood in UK research.

After developing our research question, **How does current research identify the impact of outreach?**, we agreed inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a timeframe based on the development of the access agreement process (2006-2016). A search strategy was designed using the Population, Exposure and Outcome [PEO] framework as a basis, as outlined by Bettany-Saltikov (2012):

Population (who?)	**E**xposure (what?)	**O**utcome (changes?)
Widening participation target groups (e.g. low income, Care Leaver…)	Outreach intervention (e.g. mentoring, summer schools …)	Equitable access to higher education (e.g. increased participation rates, raised attainment…)

We established terms of reference for our search criteria, which helped maintain a consistent analysis approach within the team. An initial review of ten papers was undertaken to verify consistency of team interpretation. The initial search identified 847 articles. In the primary analysis we examined titles and abstracts of papers to exclude those studies which did not fit our search criteria.

Primary analysis: 847
- Non-enagement with population: 211
- Non-engagement with exposure: 510
- Non-UK: 669
- Duplicates: 36

Secondary analysis: 93
- Non-enagement with population or exposure: 64

Final inclusion: 29

For the secondary analysis papers were shared between the research team, read in full and excluded where the search criteria did not match. During this stage a deeper, more critical analysis of the texts was conducted, highlighting different research designs, sampling methods and conclusions or recommendations.

Once papers for inclusion in the final review had been established, studies were analysed and key themes identified. The final stage involved a critical analysis of the selected papers in which we identified impact in a much more rigorous way. We used the [Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Tool](#) to ensure consistency was maintained throughout the analysis process.

What we found out:

The evidence from this systematic review presents a picture of how impact is being understood in UK research that is far broader than simply increased student numbers. We see research that highlights the impact that outreach has on the lives of practitioners, school staff and families in terms of personal and social development.

The majority of the research studies we analysed focused on an idea of impact that was person-centred rather than trying to capture direct links to improving recruitment. From this perspective, outreach is being conceived as a complex negotiation of different perspectives and possibilities for young people. We also found impact being understood reciprocally, whereby outreach activity is seen as a way of enabling students to succeed once at a university or college.

However, identifying impact in terms of person-centred changes, rooted in ideas of aspiration, risks reiterating existing assumptions and inequalities. The focus on individual change and ideas of social capital is not always being mobilised to realise more structural changes.

This is not to say that there is no research reflecting on structural challenges and tensions; some of the studies do reflect upon and explore ways that outreach can lead to changes in institutional culture.

Ultimately, this systematic review has highlighted that the nature of much of the research concerning the impact of outreach in the UK is qualitative, small-scale and localised. We have identified how the research is characterised by a person-centred approach and identified a lack of multi-site longitudinal studies which could help better inform institutional and national changes to policy and practice.

Undertaking this systematic review enabled the research team to consistently engage with and interpret the breadth of research available to us in an accessible, critically informed and replicable way. This systematic approach offers the opportunity for all those working in the field to have a much broader overview of research and see the broad themes and challenges of existing evidence.

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