



## Case Study: Tyne & Wear Aim Higher Area Partnership Team **10H**

### **Context:**

The Tyne & Wear Area Co-ordinator is based in Sunderland. She had anticipated needing support with both the HEFCE and the Aim Higher requested evaluations. Because of my work with Newcastle WP team in phase 1 of the HEFCE WP project, she asked me to contact her through the NCL WP team. Our first meeting was arranged well before the HEFCE phase 2 project had been finalised. There did not appear to be a conflict of interest, rather it would provide the opportunity to discover how much more could be achieved through a more loosely constructed and longer term relationship with a WP team. The Area Co-ordinator commissioned some CPD for her and her colleagues (Aim Higher Co-ordinators in colleges and schools and Schools Officers) around the area of evaluation methods and strategies. Identifying that much of the ground work would be done by them and they needed to feel both 'fired up' and 'confident' about the approaches that would be required.

Session 1: What is Qualitative Evaluation, what frameworks can be applied?

Session 2: Qualitative methods and processes + individual mini projects designed

Session 3: Focus Group training – for Student Ambassadors

Session 4: Focus Group training – for the adult team (as above). Reprise of mini-projects.

Although the mini-projects were designed to enable individuals to try a new data collecting method, and analyse qualitative data, they were also planned to encourage the 'participants' to see evaluation as something that could directly apply to them. The mini-projects were adjusted so that they could form small case studies which would inform the wider evaluation strategy later. This allowed some informal trialling of evaluation ideas and strategies the findings of which could be incorporated into the developing cycle of evaluation. This activity in particular, because it was based on individual interests and reflection on personal practice both removed the feelings of threat suggested by a more grandiose evaluation, and provided manageable chunks of CPD related to evaluation that had a personal focus. This learning in a personally controlled context could then allow these individuals to act as ambassadors for the rationale behind the wider qualitative evaluation strategy. The rolling programme of evaluation proposed by the HEFCE requirement felt manageable and more obvious by making the mini projects part of a constellation around a bigger and wider focus.

### **Risks:**

- The mini-projects might 'fall foul' of other more pressing work issues.
- Individuals may need more support with analysis than capacity can provide.
- Individuals may not be able to draw interpretations of qualitative data from their gathered information in a way that is strategic to their work and thus will feel disappointed and demotivated by the process.
- The mini-projects may not be finished in time to inform the bigger focus or evaluation strategy.
- The co-ordination of a number of small projects may be difficult to manage.

### **Contingency Planning:**

- The mini-projects were personally focused so that individuals could see some immediate benefit to the task – action research informs practitioners and usually provides reflective information that make practice more efficient and more strategic.
- The mini-projects were linked to actual and current work – they were not add-on's and individuals conceived them to provide some required information that would otherwise be difficult to achieve in a normal work-load. Individuals perceived them to be a way to be more efficient at the outset.
- At each of the '*facilitating a focus group*' training sessions, a tape recording was made which was analysed by the consultant and circulated to the membership of the group, to show how themes could be drawn from a qualitative source and set up on a matrix. Whilst clearly not comprehensive training in analysis, this has give the team some confidence to proceed with the more difficult element of qualitative research. Collecting data is the easy part – analysing it is far harder and is

## Evaluation Capacity Building in Widening Participation Practice



the aspect that can make a big project (HEFCE WP Evaluation) appear too daunting for untrained researchers.

- Individuals have been allowed to contact the consultant at any stage of their mini-project to gain additional support and encouragement. This has promoted the idea of the mini-projects as effective CPD activities over and above their wider use as information for the bigger evaluation.
- The Area co-ordinator is well used to managing a number of projects, this wider team work well together and are mutually supportive. Team members have also been linked together where mini-projects could provide reciprocal data.
- Most of the mini-projects will be completed in time to inform the wider evaluation strategy, others have been expanded to form an actual part of the strategy because the chance to collect relevant data will occur later in the year.

### **Outcomes:**

- In order to build capacity in the longer term, team members need to have some ownership of the evaluation process and products. Without the chance to do a small and manageable piece of 'research' into practice, they are unlikely to 'buy in' to the bigger ideas floated as part of a long term rolling evaluation plan. This plan may feel like something that 'is being done to us'.
- Mini-methods training, leading to mini-projects, leading to some basic analysis awareness, leading to a constellation of developed ideas for longer term strategies has more chance of building capacity for a developing evaluation strategy. Individuals will see that the information they gather informs their own and others practice. They become the ambassadors for the process in their own organisations and seek to incorporate evaluation into all activities.
- The loose arrangement between the consultant and the wider team, plus the developing and supportive relationship with the area co-ordinator allows for more measured and tailored support for both individuals and the wider team. It becomes easier to be firmer about the requirements because these can be dealt with as part of a CPD relationship. Building on past skills and encouraging innovation in evaluation strategies.
- In the 'finding out fast' methods sessions I discussed and demonstrated some of the less obvious but quite interesting methods of collecting data and this enthused the team because it looked both challenging and intriguing. They wanted to initiate a mini-project just in order to be in a position to try one of the methods – they re-created a deeper interest in their own jobs and wanted to probe beneath the surface of why activities worked or didn't work, rather than remain stuck at the level 1 & 2 stage of 'counting and measuring.' *'It is very easy to continue to offer an activity because it is easy to organise and you get students for it every year – but maybe they don't actually get anything worthwhile from it, maybe they don't even remember it at all, it's just an excuse for a day out.....Now I want to know if it is effective and has an impact on their choices as well as why it is effective, without that knowledge it now seems pointless, I'm glad you showed me that.'*
- At the early sessions shared understanding of WP formed the focus for the group – this activity was done interactively with a power-point slide and in all contexts (not just this case study) provided the most obvious team building activity. All groups remarked on how important this activity had been to stimulate their thinking about the whole issue as well as demonstrating why effective evaluation was needed to inform a comprehensive articulation of the important work that was being done in this field. This was true of all groups in phase 1 of the HEFCE project as well as in phase 2 – It worked particularly well when groups were comprised of WP practitioners as well as senior managers in the institution – the sharing of these ideas is unlikely to happen and yet proved to be the salient activity that galvanised them into cross-institutional action.
- During the methods sessions the consultant created some sessional mini-projects, so that the group could experience an unusual data collection process and see how themes are drawn from interpreting qualitative data, as well as use one source of data to inform and create the next one gradually developing a deeper understanding of the issues involved. These activities were both enjoyable and successful. Experiencing a method provides deeper learning than just hearing about it.

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