

Evaluation of OFFA-Warwick Symposium: Evaluating Outreach: Methods, Praxis, Standpoints and Policy

Background: In March 2016 the University of Warwick, in partnership with OFFA, held a symposium designed with the aim of encouraging dialogue, debate and the development of a network of interest that is concerned to work collaboratively in building expertise and initiatives in the evaluation of outreach. The two-day symposium had three main objectives:

1. To map out the diverse interests, standpoints, praxis and approaches to evaluation amongst symposium members;
2. To provide a structured focus for a critical discussion of a range of methodologies used to evaluate the effectiveness of outreach activities in widening participation to higher education;
3. To contribute to the development of a framework (or frameworks) for evaluation of outreach.

Participants with specific interests and/or expertise in the area of evaluation and outreach were invited to participate, this included students, practitioners, academics, policymakers and third sector partners.

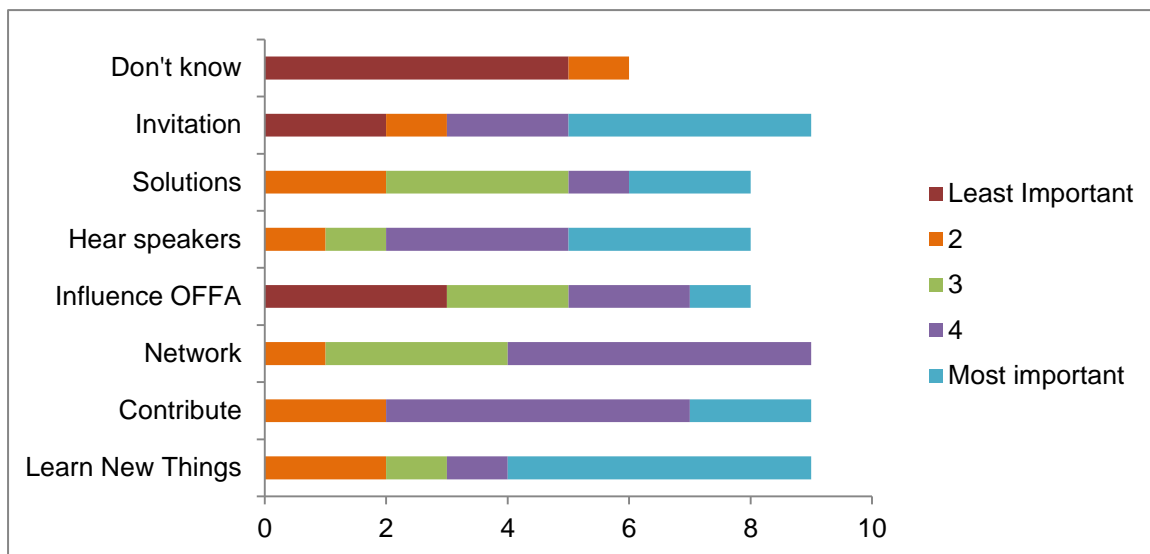
Survey: A survey was designed by members of the steering group to explore the impact of the symposium on participants, learn how things could be improved in the future and create a space for participants to reflect further on their experiences. The survey was shared with participants three months after the symposium.

Total participants	39
Total responses	9
<i>University</i>	9
<i>Practitioner</i>	1
<i>Academic</i>	6
<i>Student</i>	1
<i>Other (Practitioner-Academic)</i>	1

Reflection: The evaluation had a very low response rate. Only those participants from universities responded. Although the survey was designed to be reflective and capture thoughts sometime after the event, in the future harnessing momentum of the event could improve the response rate. All the responses came from universities and the majority were academics. Finding ways to reach all participants and being clearer about why we are seeking people's thoughts would provide a more diverse picture of how the event affected the participants.

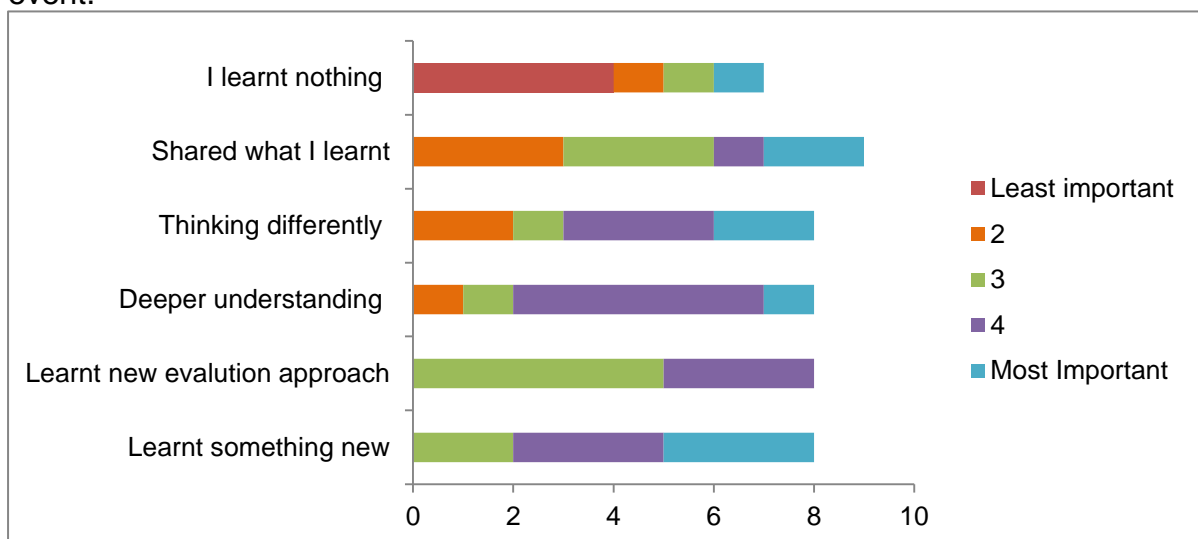
Respondents were asked to rank their answers according to what they felt was the most important/relevant.

Motivation: What motivated you to come to the symposium?



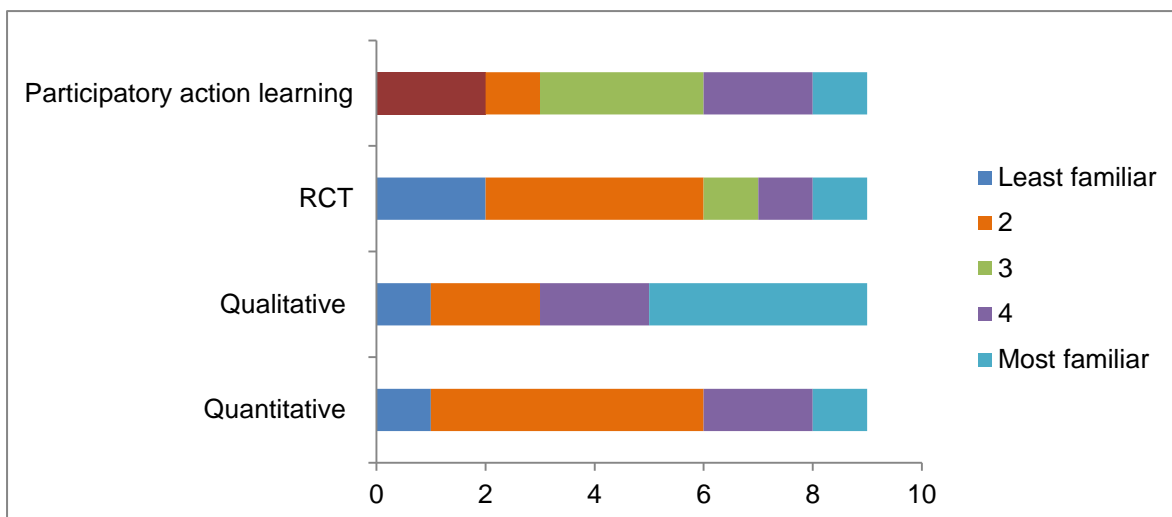
The data shows that the participants had focused motivations for attending. The most important motivation was the desire to learn new things, because participants were invited and to hear speakers. Contributing to the discussion, networking and finding solutions were also seen as important for participation. Influencing OFFA was not seen as particularly important for the majority of participants.

Learning: Respondents were asked to reflect on and rank their learning from the event.



Learning something new, thinking differently and gaining a deeper understanding of the topic were seen as important factors. This suggests that the objective “to map out the diverse interests, standpoints, praxis and approaches to evaluation amongst symposium members” was achieved. However, sharing this learning is not seen as a high priority for respondents. That we see a more neutral response on whether or not respondents learnt new approaches to evaluation suggests that the heightened sense of learning was not just focused on evaluation approaches as such.

Methodology: Which of these methodologies or approaches were you most familiar with before the symposium?



Qualitative methodologies and approaches were the most familiar to the respondents before the symposium. This aligns with research that has established that the majority of research in the UK exploring the impact of outreach is drawn from qualitative methods (Heaslip *et al.*, 2016). Respondents were the least familiar with Randomised Control Trials (RCT) and quantitative methods.

Did you learn more about different methodologies for evaluation during the symposium?

Yes	No
8	1

What do you think are the methodological gaps for evaluating outreach?

It is about evaluators knowledge, skills and experience rather than methodological gaps
robust estimates of impact of interventions
more relay of information between departments, universities and schools concerning their methods of evaluation and research
I don't think the gaps are specifically about one approach or another but more about the capacity to conduct quality evaluation of outreach across all kinds . This is not a criticism of individuals trying to do so but rather of the resources available to them to do this. That said, I do think more could be done to bring quantitative and (quasi-)experimental approaches to evaluating outreach .
Outreach evaluation methodologies tend to focus on determining whether change has taken place; there is not enough focus on why change has taken place. We need more approaches to help understand why change takes place.
Theorisation that enables the bridging of academic interests and concerns with a 'what works' agenda of policy makers see Pawson and Tilley 1997.
Structuring and developing effective evaluation frameworks / methodologies / approaches . At the moment there sometimes appears to be the tendency to use 'off the shelf' evaluation approaches, without sufficient attention to the nature of the project or intervention being evaluated

Reflections: These responses suggest that respondents see gaps in the area of knowledge sharing and capabilities building – particularly in the area of quantitative methodologies and developed focused frameworks for practice.

Practice: Do you think that you have changed the way that you work as a result of the symposium?

Yes	3
No	6

Comments:

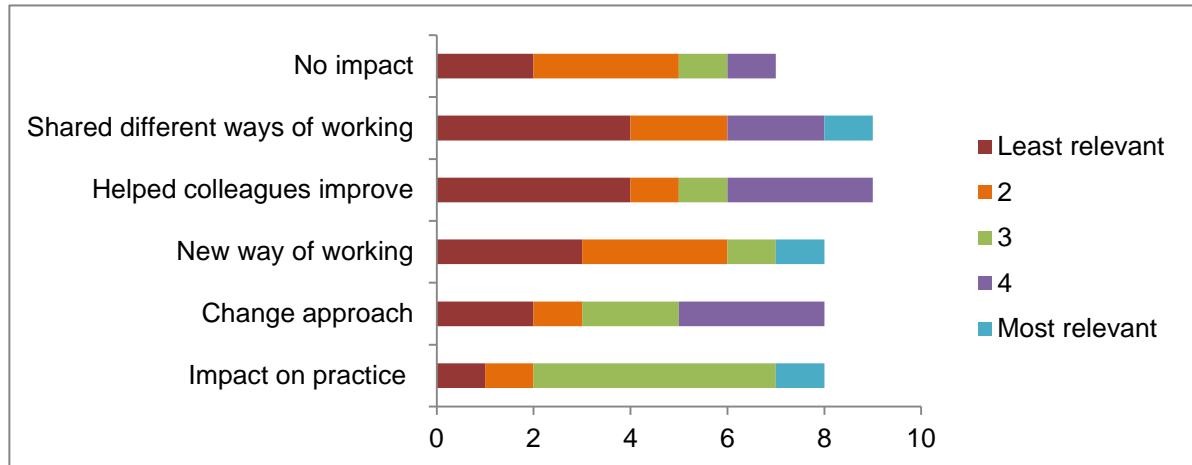
as a student ambassador my influence on policy and evaluation is minute but the **symposium did affect my understanding of such events** as I was able to have a **greater appreciation for the input into such programmes**

Encouraged me to network and engage with outreach departments in universities to develop **mutually beneficial opportunities for evaluation work.**

The **symposium highlighted (again!) for me that context is significant** so the density of areas such as London perhaps create a more competitive atmosphere than more rural regions where there is less competitive pressure

I went with a **fairly well formed idea of what I though the ideal evaluation approach was** - but the **diversity of views during the event made me realize that there are no correct solutions** - but that **plural and collaborative approaches might be the best way forward**

Respondents were asked to rank impact of the symposium on their practice after the event.



n/a

Renewed (as I know this intellectually but don't necessarily embody it) my understanding of the complexity of the system and the **range of different positions** that we occupy

I have **become more aware of the need to develop collaborative approaches with a wide range of sector colleagues.** I've thought about top down vs bottom up approaches and am trying to encourage a **more nuanced and detailed approach to developing contextually specific** evaluation approaches

If you haven't changed your practice since the symposium, could you please provide some detail:

as a student my role has no direct effect on evaluation

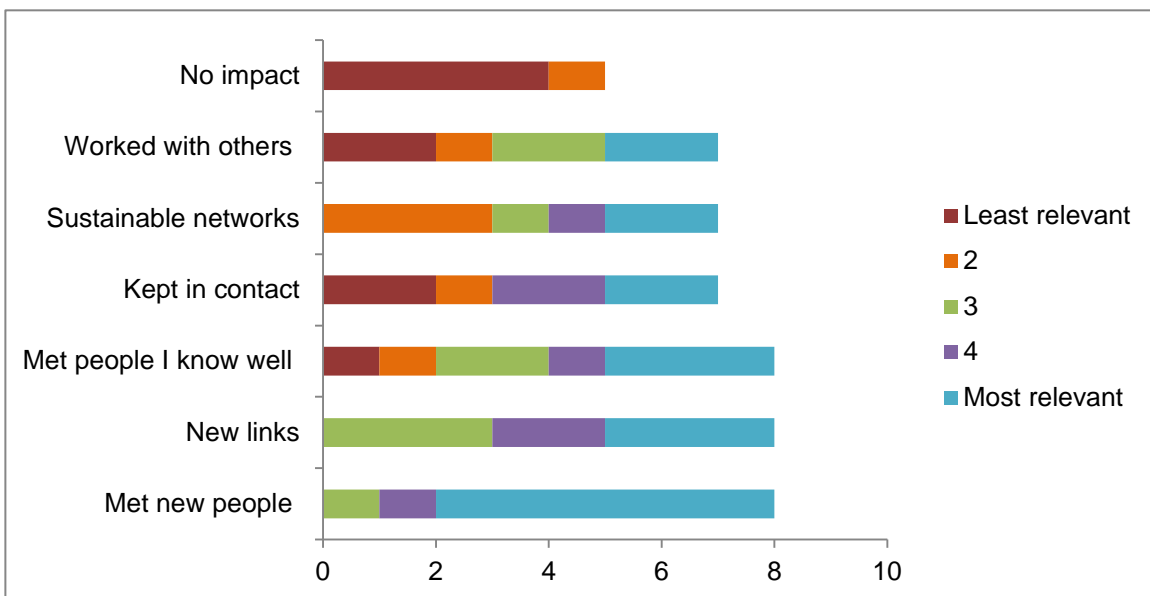
Have **not yet had an opportunity to start putting things into practice** (I am a researcher rather than a practitioner **so longer lead time to develop work** with practitioners).

Nothing really learnt that could be applied / wasn't already doing

Reflections: The symposium does not appear to have encouraged a change in behaviour for the majority of respondents. For future development, it could be important to make sure that sufficient time during an event is made for participants to develop (and commit to) applying thinking and discussion. In saying this, the comments show that the respondents highlight the importance of collaborative approaches and understanding different contexts. This data suggests that the symposium has helped encourage knowledge sharing and building a community across the sector.

Networking: Was the symposium a good networking opportunity?

All the respondents reported that they felt the symposium was a good networking opportunity.



The most relevant networking opportunities for the respondents centred on meeting new people and making new links suggests that the symposium facilitated new relationships across the sector. For some of the respondents, the symposium created the opportunity to make and sustain new networks.

What would you have done differently to build and sustain networks?:

Share social media contacts as well as email addresses.

n/a

Explicitly built in follow-up opportunities.

The perennial answer - have more time

The event was an EXCELLENT opportunity for networking and many of the connections I've made have continued. However, the lack of formal follow up might have inhibited the growth of networks (perhaps a reasonably regular meeting of participants / and or work to create a virtual community of practice) might help push some of the network connections into more

practical outcomes. Unless everyone else is actually doing loads of stuff, and I'm just not aware of it / a failed networker!

Participation: What did you want to get out of participating in the symposium?

Understand views across the sector as well as OFFA's views
To learn more about widening participation, outreach and evaluation. Particularly in practice. greater understanding of the need for evaluation and the different groups of people responsible for outreach
I wanted to meet others interested in improving the evaluation of university outreach work, share my experiences, learn from others knowledge and experience and potentially identify opportunities for future work.
Learn about effective outreach evaluation approaches Contribute to developing an evaluation framework Network
Reminding myself that I have a lot to learn
I made excellent contacts. I found all of the discussions and activities really useful and inspiring - it was an intensive time, but the space to test ideas and draw on others work in a concentrated way was invaluable and has add an additional outward facing element to the work of our evaluation team

Did you get what you wanted from the symposium?

Yes	8
No	1

If you didn't get what you wanted from participating in the symposium, could you provide some detail:

Partly not fully. There was no discussion / work on the outreach evaluation framework

Did you enjoy the food and refreshments?

Yes	9
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Did you like the accommodation?

Yes	8
No	1

Did you like the format of the symposium?

Yes	7
No	2

If you didn't like the format, could you provide some detail about any improvements:

I felt that some **sessions either got lost or drifted** off topic
Two days was **too long - it was dragged out**

What part of the symposium did you find most useful

Networking and discussions

Reflections: The responses suggest that participants were comfortable with the symposium's infrastructure (refreshments and accommodation). However, for future development making sure that all the participants are clear about the aims and intentions of different activities could help provide greater focus.

Improvements: What would you do differently if you were involved in a similar event in the future?

Keep people on topic
More debating/discussion sessions as well as individual presentations.
i would have done some more background research on the groups of people that attended to gain a better understanding of their work and contribution
I didn't have as much time as I'd have liked to engage with the material shared beforehand , which would have helped get more out of the days since some parts (e.g. "lightening lectures" were quite speedy - and necessarily so).
Not sure. I think the two-day with an overnight and dinner worked really well to help people get to know each other/renew relationships. Second days are always exhausting as everyone is tired so perhaps some thought here?
I would know to go with an open mind about the potential offered by different approaches - I think it is hard to avoid nailing our individual colours to particular masts - when what I realized quite quickly was that there were a range of valid and useful, approaches, methods and ideas that all had value.

Do you have any other comments about your participation in the symposium?

I had thought we were going to look at producing a special edition of a journal? I put myself forward but heard nothing back...
n/a
None
I would have liked to spend longer chatting to people about their work and getting to know people I don't know.
The symposium was excellent. I think the emphasis on thinking about innovative practice was inspiring as was the spirit of experimentation and collaboration that was explicitly encouraged - and I guess it's this that I see as the potential legacy of the symposium . It would be good to bring the group together again to take stock of progress and implications - with a full recognition of the challenges we face but also an encouragement to keep working together to address them jointly .

Reflections: The responses suggest that developing some sort of afterlife of the event would be beneficial – whether a follow-up event or a publication.

Summary: The main influences of the symposium for the respondents appear to be in the area of network building and sharing of knowledge. In terms of realising objectives, the responses suggest that these were, for the most part, realised, particularly in terms of sharing different standpoints and approaches. However, some of the respondents felt that the objective to developing a framework/s was not quite as focused as they were expecting.