

Assessing the Value and Impact of Services that Support Students



FINAL REPORT to HEFCE LGM funders

Process

Objectives

1. AMOSSHE undertook the Value and Impact Project (VIP) to enable managers to better understand the value and impact of services that support students. The project sought to develop a holistic approach that would enable managers to improve the student experience whilst also advancing professional development in the sector.
2. The funding application stated that:

‘The project will develop a holistic approach to understanding and evaluating the value and impact of services that support students. It will:

 - identify meaningful ways to measure and demonstrate the impact and value of services in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
 - develop potential measures and pilot them in at least four HEIs
 - produce and disseminate tools and techniques to measure value and impact of services.

Outputs will:

 - include a toolkit offering a basket of approaches to evaluation
 - improve universities’ understanding of the value of their support services
 - increase efficiency and professionalism
 - improve the quality of services and the student experience’ (AMOSSHE 2009).

Aims and phases

3. The project included four key phases: development; implementation; pilot; evaluation and dissemination. For the most part, the project progressed to time with the exception of:
 - a. Moving the pilot phase completion date from the end of February to mid/late March. This was due to the delayed start of some of the pilot studies and suitable dates for the workshops being found.
 - b. Some phases merging with others as the literature review did not provide the starting materials originally hoped for and so extended into other phases; the pilot period being too short in practical terms.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the project completed to time and delivered against the stated aims and objectives.

Dissemination

4. The toolkit formally launched on 9 June in Sheffield with a second launch event on 13 June in London. These events were provided free to delegates as part of the project, and proved extremely popular. Over 125 people attended, many from departments outside the traditional Student Services remit. Each launch event included representatives from other HE professional and policy bodies including Universities UK, BUFDG and HEFCE, all of whom are championing the toolkit with their constituents.

5. The reception to the toolkit has been overwhelmingly positive. AMOSSHE has and will continue to contribute to external events with information about the value and impact approach. These include:
- AMOSSHE Facing the Economic Downturn conference, 1 March 2010, London
 - AMOSSHE annual conference, 7-9 July 2010, Cardiff
 - AUA South West regional conference, 25 January 2011, Bristol
 - AUA annual conference, 18-20 April 2011, Nottingham
 - AGCAS task measurement group conference, 21 June 2011, Warwick
 - AMOSSHE annual conference 6-8 July 2011, Newcastle
 - Deutsches Studentwerk conference 12 July 2011, Berlin
 - Students Unions' conference, 19 July 2011, Leeds
 - Support for Care Leavers, 10 August 2011, Sheffield
 - AUA Midlands regional conference, 14 September 2011, Oxford
 - Student Experience conference, 15 November 2011, London
 - ANZSSA conference, 4-7 December 2011, Sydney

Project management

6. The project planning and management implemented at the start of the project proved very useful:
- a. **Risk register:** One of the major risks identified of a key member of staff leaving was realised early in the project. The mitigations in the risk register were used to full effect, resulting in the consultancy becoming increasingly collaborative with the AMOSSHE office team. Whilst this increased the time the remaining researcher and project manager each committed to the work, it created a shared and solid bank of knowledge that both AMOSSHE and CHERI can continue with. The other key risk identified, a lack of engagement, has not been realised; quite the opposite.
 - b. **Budget:** The project delivered to budget in terms of actual spend; however it could not have delivered without considerable extra in kind commitment from across the sector including the consultants, the AMOSSHE team, the pilots, and additional mini pilots delivered by members of the peer support group and AMOSSHE Executive. This has not been monitored but the real project cost is estimated to be closer to £250k than the £135k projected.
 - c. **Governance:** The steering group was very helpful in guiding the project, and its light touch approach allowed the project team freedom whilst ensuring the work remained on track. Several other professional bodies asked to join the group, and membership was expanded to include groups such as JISC and the HE Academy, whilst carefully maintaining a manageable group with sector wide management interest rather than niche services.
The peer support group's engagement with the project was uneven at time, but their contribution was immense and ensured the validity of the project ideas. This is a useful model that could be applied for other projects to ensure national relevance and wider engagement across the sector than the pilot HEIs only.

Outcomes

Lessons learned

7. The pilot experience highlighted practical lessons for both the project itself and anyone wishing to undertake value and impact evaluations:
- a. The amount of work the pilot universities had to undertake in the design and delivery of their evaluations was more than expected, given the theoretical nature of the toolkit (at the time of the pilot phase).

- b. The timing and the timescale of the pilot phase presented particular challenges for the pilot universities.
 - c. One of the pilot universities was required by its university to submit two of its three studies to an ethical review process, which meant that these studies did not start during the pilot phase. However, the actual process was useful in helping to plan the studies.
 - d. The pilot universities noted the scale and complexity involved in evaluating student support services, the cost implications and the specialist nature of the research skills required.
 - e. Some of the pilot universities highlighted the challenges associated with understanding and measuring impact, but felt that the toolkit had gone some way to providing a useful explanation and helping to focus their studies.
8. Overall, the project found that:
- a. To state an aim of assessing value and impact is beguilingly simple and does not articulate or understand how ambitious the project was. This manifested itself in two main ways: the dependence of the material identified by the literature review to inform the development of the toolkit; and the timescale and timing of the project, in particular the pilot phase.
 - b. The lack of material on value/value for money presented a challenge to the project team to look beyond the original parameters of the literature review and explore less familiar territory. This is not peculiar to this project, but has been experienced by other similar projects such as the Value and Impact Measurement Programme undertaken by SCONUL. Some financial analyses are included in the toolkit; efforts to relate these to retention data were also made.¹
 - c. Developing both quantitative and qualitative evaluations is essential. Value and impact assessments rely on a variety of data and should combine these approaches for a holistic overview.
 - d. Most value and impact evaluations require assessing feelings or perceptions, which are notoriously subjective. There can also be a danger in relying too heavily on questionnaires or focus groups; practitioners need to be conscious of survey fatigue amongst students and the sensitive nature of the issues being discussed. The pilots that were most successful in engaging students in these groups articulated clearly that participation would influence future improvements to the student experience.
 - e. Evaluation has to be context driven and there is no off the shelf solution to questions of value and impact. The toolkit attempts to balance a non-prescriptive tone with sufficient tools and examples to be useful and useable.
 - f. Evaluation (and in particular evaluation of impact and value) is not a simple process – there are many issues to take into account, not least the skills involved in undertaking an effective evaluation.
 - g. Engaging a peer support group virtually was a challenge, and engagement varied across the group. The workshops toward the end of the pilot phase encouraged camaraderie and an introductory meeting at the start of the project might usefully have engendered this more. Despite these issues, AMOSSHE recommends this approach of calling on experts throughout and will use it in future work: it provided timely guidance to the project team whilst being relatively burden light for the advisory group.
 - h. Without the dedicated support and work of the pilot universities (including the members of the Steering Group, the Peer Support Group and the AMOSSHE executive - and of course the project team), the toolkit would not exist and the project would have failed.

¹ These metrics were too crude for inclusion in the toolkit but future work may develop these to a level that can be included in any future database of evaluation examples.

Future benefits and sustainability

9. In the funding application, AMOSSHE committed to delivering at least one value and impact CPD event in 2011/12. Current plans include two CPD days for members in 2011/12, which may be repeated depending on their popularity. These are likely to include one practical working session day and one networking conference style event.
10. In collaboration with University of East London, Anglia Ruskin University and John Smith's Booksellers, AMOSSHE has been awarded £55,000 from JISC toward the Students FIRST project. This will look at the interactions involved in providing student bursaries via a smartcard platform; as part of this work, the team will apply value and impact tools to assessing the success of this approach in encouraging student retention and transitions. AMOSSHE will continue to seek external funding through project approaches to test the value and impact tools against particular interventions, develop further tools and support colleagues to develop their skills and approach to value and impact measurements.
11. Recognising the skills and staff development challenges that the value and impact approach involves, AMOSSHE submitted a Small Development proposal to the Leadership Foundation in Higher Education in November 2010. Despite receiving positive feedback the application was unsuccessful. The AMOSSHE Executive group then discussed the urgent need to address these issues for the sector and whether, and if so to what extent, the organisation might draw upon its limited reserves to further this approach.
12. AMOSSHE has identified embedding the value and impact approach as key to its future activity and improving delivery and professionalism across the HE sector. As such, it has agreed to invest £21,000 of reserves in continuation work. This includes:
 - a. Appointing a project officer on a part time and fixed term basis to collate, catalogue and make available to AMOSSHE members existing HEI evaluation materials. Used strategically in combination, such tools may become meaningful in the context of value and impact management.
 - b. A support package to enable Student Services managers to prepare for the cultural and change management issues associated with moving to a value and impact approach.
 - c. A skills programme to equip Student Services managers with the skills approach to adopt value and impact management.
13. Universities UK is explicitly advising vice chancellors to consider the toolkit and ask managers to adopt the value and impact approach; it is a key part of their work on efficiencies. Similarly, BUFDG is recommending the approach to finance directors and anecdotal commentary suggests that that QAA is looking at the toolkit materials. AMOSSHE will continue to work with these and other groups to champion the approach.

Publications

14. Two formal reports have been published at www.amoshe.org.uk and disseminated:
 - a. the literature review²
 - b. the toolkit document³

² Hard copies of the literature review were also distributed at the AMOSSHE 2010 annual conference

³ A limited print run of hard copies has been distributed to professional sector bodies, at the launch events and at the AMOSSHE 2011 annual conference. Demand for hard copies is incredibly high; a decision has been taken against a second print run because of sustainability considerations, cost implications, and that the resources will be added to with future work so the hard copy may date quickly.

In addition, an online toolkit was produced: this is far more than a download of the toolkit document but an interactive site that allows users to dip into the material, includes vignettes and guidance from the pilot sites, and downloadable templates of every tool and case study.

15. Journal publications, additional to the project output requirements include:
 - a. R. Williams and R. Hiles (2011), The changing face of services that support students in the UK. *Zeitschrift für Beratung und Studium (German Journal of Advisory Service and Studies)*, issue 2, pp47-51.
 - b. R. Williams (2011), Supporting students in a time of change (in Higher Education and Society in Changing Times: looking back and looking forward). London: Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (accessed 15 July 2011 at <http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/documents/Lookingbackandlookingforward.pdf>).
16. Supplementing the published outputs, project webpages at www.amosse.org.uk were regularly updated, presentations were given to various conferences throughout the project duration, further presentations and workshops are planned, and information was disseminated to AMOSSHE members and other professional bodies through e-mail bulletins and twitter using #amossevip.

Summary and conclusions

17. The value and impact project was ambitious and challenging, but has proven itself timely and rewarding. Value and Impact evaluation represents a rich, reflective process paying strong dividends in terms of improved user understanding, professional learning and service enhancement.
18. The sector has embraced the findings wholeheartedly, and this will shape professional development in future. The changes in funding climate and anticipated move toward a marketisation of higher education mean that support services need to articulate the difference that they make to the student experience; without value and impact this might not be possible.
19. The greatest validation for the value and impact approach comes perhaps not from the sector groups championing the work (although this is of course welcomed), but the pilot HEIs. All four HEIs have committed to continuing the value and impact approach as part of their core business, and many are rolling it out to other areas of their service team. There can be no greater affirmation of the importance of this work, and it supports our commitment to embedding value and impact work across the sector.