

Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Competition

Formative Evaluation Report 3 - Summary

Introduction

SQW has been commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the **Office for Students and Research England 'Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange' Competition**. The Competition is supporting 20 projects to develop and share understanding of effective practice in student engagement in knowledge exchange (KE), and to inform on-going KE policy and investment. The broad aims of the evaluation are:

- to identify and evaluate project-level and Competition-level evidence on the benefits to students and partners of engaging in KE activities;
- to work with projects to ensure the quality, robustness and effectiveness of project-level monitoring and evaluation; and
- to present learning in different ways to inform the higher education sector, share good practice and provide evidence to support new partnerships and interventions.

The evaluation activities include a meta-evaluation of projects' self-evaluation activities, assessing the quality, coverage and credibility of evidence generated by the projects. As part of this, SQW developed an Evaluation Reporting Template for projects to provide data on their activities, outputs, outcomes, plans for evaluation, and learning at six-monthly intervals. The completed Reporting Templates will be used throughout the evaluation to inform a series of formative reports. **This paper is a summary of the third formative report, based on a detailed review of the fourth Evaluation Reporting Templates, covering activities up to March 2022.**

Project progress

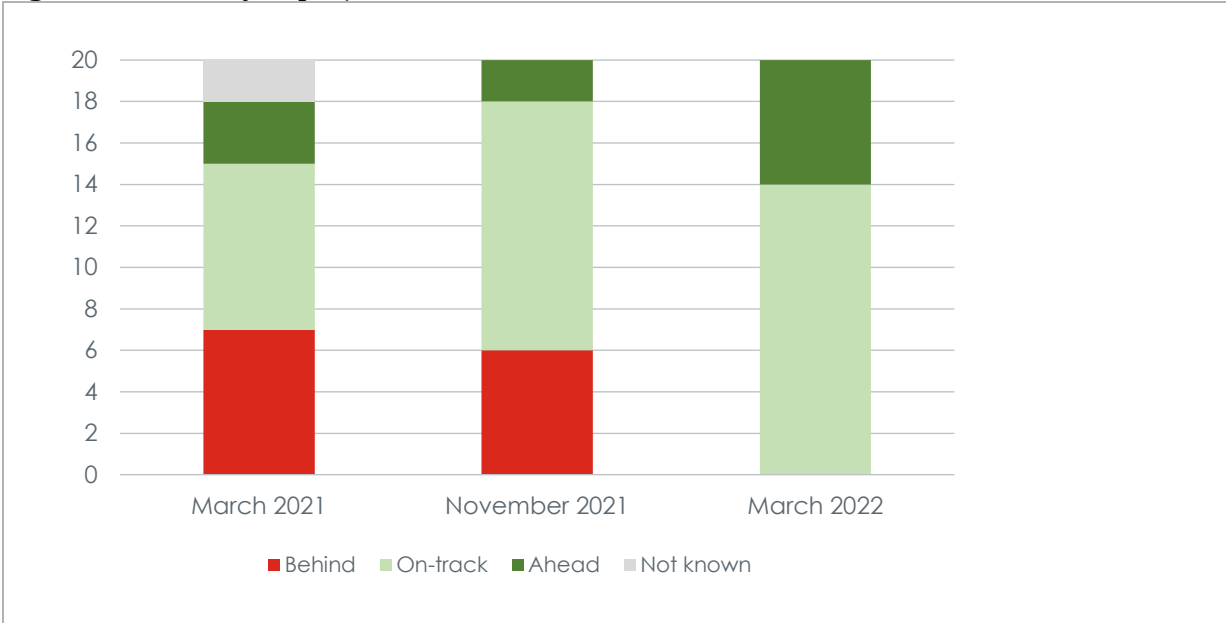
Progress against delivery plans

Since the previous reporting period (up to November 2021), **there has been a steady and encouraging progress in delivery**. As outlined in previous evaluation reports, this position is particularly positive given the on-going challenges faced by projects in delivering activity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption this has caused for individuals and institutions. Feedback in the narrative summaries provided in the Evaluation Reporting Templates suggests that projects have adapted their project design and mode of delivery, which enabled them to overcome the delays caused by these challenges. This has enabled the majority of

projects (15 of 20) to remain 'on track' in delivery on most or all of their strands of activity, with five projects considered to be 'ahead' of their workplan in delivery.

Notably, none of the 20 projects suggested they were 'behind' in delivery, including the two projects experiencing considerable delays at the last reporting period (and who have agreed to a revised timeline of delivery). Overall, this highlights that **substantial progress has been made in the Competition as momentum has been generated in delivery over recent months.**

Figure 1: Summary of projects status between March 2021 and March 2022



Source: SQW analysis of projects' six-monthly returns

Project scope and management

The majority of the projects did not make any material changes in the scope and scale of their projects in the latest reporting period. That said, **more than half of the projects have agreed with Research England on a time extension to their project** (generally of between four and six months), in response to underspend (predominantly due to cost savings associated with digital delivery). The extensions should enable projects to build on successful activities.

Around half of the projects reported changes in staff responsible for project management and delivery over the reporting period, although all projects indicated that they were at full staffing capacity. This indicates that projects have been able to fill in vacancies relatively rapidly, helping to mitigate the potential detrimental impacts of staff churn on project delivery.

Changes in staffing may have implications for learning and dissemination with the risk that the insight and knowledge developed from delivery is lost if and when staff move on from student-focused KE activities. However, there is also the opportunity for informal dissemination, as staff involved in project activity move into new roles and share the learning/insight in different contexts and positions. This will be an important issue to consider in the final stage of the Competition-level evaluation.

Overview of activities delivered

All projects appear to have gained momentum in delivering the various KE activities that they had set out to deliver in their workplan in the latest reporting period. Projects have continued to deliver a range of activity, including the delivery of enterprise challenges, work placements, the identification and sharing of thematic content with organisations, and the development of specialist KE content and materials.

All projects have made **good progress in their project evaluation activities**, with four in the final process of completing data collection activities, and 15 in various stages of analysis and reporting. One project had not started data collection as they were in the final stages of delivery, but have since redesigned their approach, including an evaluation plan, reported to be on track.

Since the last reporting period, projects have continued to **engage with increased levels of marketing and dissemination activity**, with many projects focussing on writing articles for academic journals and attending/presenting at conferences. Several projects are planning events to mark the end of their project, which will involve sharing findings and learning in relation to 'what works' in student KE across all projects in the Competition. This indicates that there is a strong appetite amongst the projects to develop a learning community around the topic of student engagement in KE.

Further, nearly three-quarters of projects have delivered activities intended to **enable the sustainability of their projects' activities**, including work to secure funding for student engagement roles in the future, establishing new partnerships to sustain activity post-project, and seeking to include student-focussed KE activity in wider university strategic planning.

Challenges faced

Projects have made good progress. However, challenges were evident, with three areas emerging:

- **Challenges relating to partnership engagement and relationships**, such as the need to increase the number of partners engaged with the project, reduced partner engagement in project activities due to competing commitments, maintaining effective communications between partners across different locations and ceased involvement from partners due to changes in delivery timelines.
- **Challenges in maintaining students' engagement in the KE activities**, mainly due to fluctuation of student motivation throughout the academic year, and lack of availability due to heavy study workload and as a result of changes in the project's timeline (e.g. where the timing of planned KE activities now clashed with exams and paper writing periods).
- **Challenges related to staff workloads**, including as a result of small delivery teams in some cases, which has meant that there has been little capacity to share/re-allocate workloads amongst team members, and pressure to deliver in a challenging context, which may have contributed to churn. The changes in delivery timelines have also affected workload, as individuals did not expect to still be working on the project beyond summer 2022.

Many of the challenges faced by projects are related directly or indirectly to the timing of delivery, as adjustments have been made mostly due to the pandemic. This may have implications both for outcomes and on learning to inform future KE activities and funding.

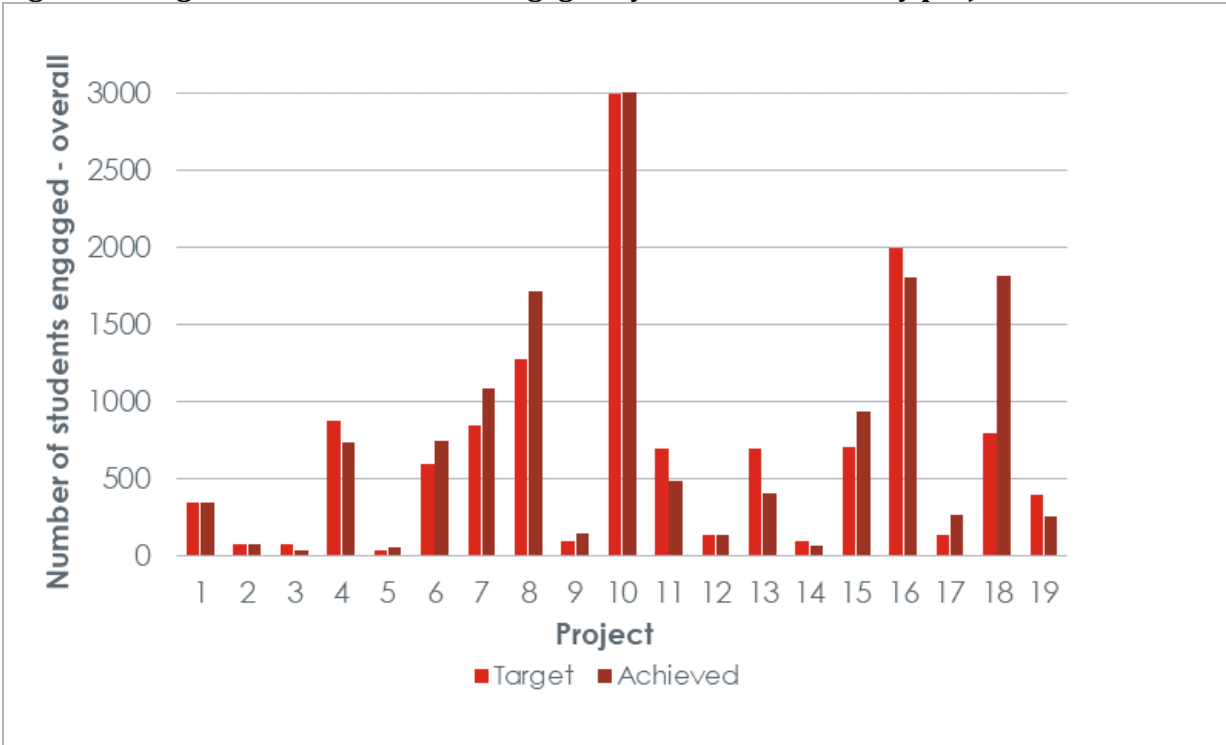
Half of projects also mentioned on-going challenges related to the delivery of KE activities and the impact of COVID-19, including a perceived or explicit apprehension around engagement with in-person activity and events, and staff and student absences due to contracting COVID-19 or from those experiencing on-going effects of the virus after recovering.

Outputs and outcomes

Outputs

Projects have made substantial progress delivering against core Competition outputs, with targets against all outputs achieved at this point in relation to: students engaged, partners engaged, events delivered, and toolkits/materials produced. Notably, **approximately 16,700 students have been engaged in projects so far (against a target of c.13,000), which is a substantial increase on the level of engagement reported at the end of September 2021 (c.10,000)**. There is considerable variation across the projects in delivery against targets, with some delivering significantly above their target, in contrast to others where targets have not yet been met (as would be expected with delivery on-going), or have been met almost exactly.

Figure 2: Target and actual students engaged by end-March 2022 by project



Source: SQW review of fourth evaluation reports

On the other core outputs:

- approximately 2,300 partners have been engaged across the projects to date (against a target of c.1,500)
- projects have delivered c.1,050 events in total (against a target of c.329)
- projects have produced 221 toolkits/materials (against a target of 33).

Several additional outputs were highlighted which had not been identified previously, including the publication of briefings, reports and blogs, the production of podcasts, the creation of a WhatsApp group for KE between students at different universities, the creation of academic and external stakeholder boards and student advisory boards, the submission of funding bids for future KE activity, and the completion of a mapping exercise (of KE activities and industry partner relations). These other outputs demonstrate the breadth of the KE activity that is being delivered via the Competition and reflects the increased focus on dissemination and sharing of knowledge.

Outcomes

The nature and range of anticipated outcomes from across the projects are largely consistent with what was reported at previous stages of the evaluation.

However, **an increased number of projects indicated that they have 'achieved' at least some of their anticipated outcomes, which is consistent with the wider evidence on progress in delivery and likely time-paths to impact.** Specifically, eight projects reported that they had fully achieved at least one of their outcomes, related to:

- increased and enhanced student involvement in KE activities, particularly from under-represented groups
- strengthened student networks and relationships between the higher education institution(s) and partner organisations
- improved student skills (research skills, entrepreneurial skills, project management, communication, employability)
- improved ability of businesses to see the value of KE activities.

Interestingly, in some cases individual projects are reporting that they now anticipate achieving outcomes that they did not previously identify (such as establishing new partnerships, enhancing the evidence base, and developing frameworks to sustain student-focussed KE activity). While these are not new outcomes to the Competition, these outcomes are new to the individual projects that reported them. In some cases, this was associated with extended/new activities planned as a result of the re-profiling of the scope/scale/timing of project activity.