

## Student Knowledge Exchange Reimagined: Breaking Down Barriers and Connecting Communities.

### The evaluand (policy or project being evaluated)

The *Student Knowledge Exchange Reimagined* project was funded by the Office for Students (OfS) to August 2022, was a collaboration between the University of Birmingham (UoB) and Keele University. to develop best practice and expertise in the delivery of knowledge exchange activity. The project supported civic internships, student consultancies, virtual placements, international opportunities, enterprise challenges, and curriculum design that embeds student knowledge exchange. The concept of knowledge exchange involves a transfer of ideas between different parties, which in turn requires the use a range of evaluation methods and techniques. As a result, the project included the development of evaluation toolkit to assess different types of impacts that could be used with the project and similar interventions.

### Evaluation focus

The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

- To what extent did the projects break down the barriers for students to access knowledge exchange internships?
- What are the impacts of short-term micro internships and enterprise events for students, employers, University departments, and place?
- How did the transfer of ideas between academia, students, and opportunity providers occur?
- How can the evaluation techniques be used with similar programmes in future?

### The evaluation approach (methodology)

We adopted the approach of developing an evaluation toolkit that collated and critically assessed existing methods and tools as well as developing specific resources around more novel evaluation approaches to answer the questions set out above. This incorporated c. 20 individual methods to frame the deeper questions that should be asked, and was developed by determining the most appropriate methods for evaluating the impact of student knowledge exchange with each group of stakeholders:

Stakeholder group	Evaluation Methods to include
Students	Pre- and post- event surveys Weekly reflection logs
Opportunity providers	Capturing good news stories Post-event surveys
HEI	Links to knowledge exchange framework Links to Civic University Agreement
Wider economy/society	Links to Access and Participation Plans Links with economic strategies and plans

The most appropriate methods were developed in collaboration with the Careers teams at the University of Birmingham and Keele University, to answer the above questions – and were based on the logic model of the project but also taking into account realistic, practical capacity and the

timeframes of the team. Regular contact between the teams at the different universities helped ensure that the methods being developed for inclusion were appropriate. The careers teams at both institutions were integral to the day-to-day running of the project and in supporting the sharing of data in a GDPR-compliant way.

A working group and an advisory group were set up to guide the direction of the toolkit. The working group was developed to incorporate colleagues from Keele Business School and City-REDI at the University of Birmingham Business School, and focused in particular around the evaluation, trialling and disseminating of the toolkit and met once per month. The advisory group meet twice a year and was formed of external partners from industry and evaluation experts to ensure that the toolkit had practical relevance beyond the two universities – the group also oversees and steers the development and implementation of the evaluation toolkit by acting as a critical friend.

A soft pilot launch of the toolkit during autumn and spring terms 2021/22 allowed refinement of the toolkit in collaboration with careers teams from seven institutions - Anglia Ruskin University; University of Bristol; University of Greenwich; Nottingham Trent University; University of Portsmouth; University of Plymouth; and York St. John University - who provided feedback and insight into the practical use of the toolkit available in their institutions.

The toolkit includes a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods which were used to evaluate the programme and similar initiatives. Quantitative surveys provided a snapshot of insights, and were recorded and organised using Microsoft Forms, before being downloaded and analysed in Microsoft Excel. Some qualitative data was also recorded via Microsoft Forms which was organised into Microsoft Excel and then analysed thematically.

The toolkit allows much of the qualitative data to take the form of capturing the day-to-day interactions with students, opportunity providers, and higher education institute (HEI) departments, and was recorded in the internal processes of the Careers teams at the University of Birmingham. This data, together with the connections between the different stakeholder groups, can be analysed thematically to draw out the key learning and areas for action in sharing knowledge between the different parties (universities, students, employers).

### Key Findings (Methodological)

The toolkit has benefited from Careers teams of Keele University and the University of Birmingham involvement and their input into which evaluation tools would be useful for their work.

Soft piloting with seven other academic institutions has provided valuable insights into potential applications and how the toolkit can provide the most value for busy practitioners supporting students to gain relevant experience through internships and other initiatives to increase employability and entry into a rewarding career.

A number of potential outputs have been identified which could help practitioners in future:

- Templates for questionnaires or analysis tools e.g., how to use Microsoft Excel to easily compare pre- and post-evaluations.
- Guidance on step-by-step learnings/findings when conducting evaluations.
- Summarise resources for practical use.
- Examples of good practice.
- Research symposium to share further the findings and examples of good practice.

## Key Findings (Project)

The process of undertaking internships has many different impacts for stakeholder groups. The main beneficiaries are the students, opportunity providers (e.g., businesses/charities/organisations), HEIs; and indirectly then the broader economy/society.

While it is noted that this project is still in progress, and therefore the evaluation has not yet reached the stage where findings are assisting decision makers/practitioners on delivery, the evaluation show a positive impact on one or more of the stakeholder groups.

Through providing access to internships, this project benefits both students and opportunity providers. Additionally, the HEI is able to evidence the impact of the internships on both, and further on the regional economy and society. These benefits are therefore predominantly instrumental, with additional capacity building and academic impacts, and have occurred from the start of the 2020/21 academic year until the present day.

The indirect benefits of the project included the learning and development of processes (both evaluation and practical processes) which would enable smoother project management. It also raised questions which could be explored in more detail in future, for example concerning the interconnected impacts for students, opportunity providers, HEI, and place.

Further planned activities include a further pilot and dissemination of the toolkit within the Santander group of universities (around 80 HEIs) to refine and develop supporting materials and examples of the application of the toolkit in different contexts.

## Further Information and References

University of Birmingham (2021) *Student Knowledge Exchange Project* webpage. Available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/partners/employers/services/student-knowledge-exchange-project.aspx> (Accessed 14.12.2021)

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