



New university challenge

Analysis is used by HEFCE to inform decision-making and optimise investment in new higher education centres, with the aim of widening participation for local people and especially those on lower incomes.

Industry

Higher Education

Business Issue

Integrate and analyse a large and complex range of data to support fast and effective implementation of government policy to create new higher education centres and so widen access to more people.

Solution

Data manipulation, analysis, reporting and visualisation in a SAS® environment.

Benefits

A common national evidence base that delivered groundbreaking insights to support decision making, reduce costs for bidding organisations, enable optimum targeting of funds and so drive more successful policy outcomes.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) distributes money for teaching and research to 130 universities and colleges in England. It aims to promote high quality education and research, with a focus on widening access and improving participation. Recently, this included the government's 'A new University Challenge' initiative: seeking to establish new higher education centres, with an emphasis on more local provision, better serving low income groups and providing clear benefits to communities and business. A long-time SAS® user, HEFCE uses analysis to support policy development and delivery. "We need to use an end-to-end approach," says Dr Mark Corver, Senior Analyst, "from manipulating raw data into a sophisticated data architecture to applying different types of analysis to that data and creating high impact visuals to explain results."

Evidence-based policy implementation

HEFCE uses analysis to inform policy in a number of ways: to reveal policy issues in the first instance through primary research; to provide analysis and reports to help develop ongoing policies; and to assess the impact of policy initiatives. The aim of the new university challenge programme was to provide more people with the opportunity to attend higher education locally, in particular people living in neighbourhoods where incomes are low or relatively few people enter higher education. "Policymakers wanted to address 'cold spots' of Higher Education (HE) provision but we had the problem that no analytical work had been carried out to define what a 'cold spot' was or how to tackle it," Corver

says. Many questions needed answers, including the fundamental 'what is local?' in terms of acceptable travel times for commuting to university.

With more proposals expected than could be funded, Corver says "The risk was you'd get 25 proposals with each saying 'this is the best location' based on their own analysis that would be favourable to their proposal. We wanted to avoid that by creating a common evidence base informed by the best available analysis." This evidence is now available at www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/challenge/evidence/. Corver continues, "This project combined exploratory primary research and the manipulation of large and complex data volumes with the need to convert findings into a practical formula, bringing in geographical processing - again with large data sets - and methods to present results in understandable ways. Our work had to reflect a complex reality and complex layering of policy priorities while also communicating results quickly and easily to colleagues, ministers and those thinking of a proposal, direct from our analyses."

Defining the 'local zone'

"When you look at where people study you don't know if their choices are made because they don't have opportunities to study locally or simply don't want to," Corver says. For this question, he used large data sets on university applications from the university admissions organisation UCAS. "The unique aspect of the UCAS data is it records applicant choice sets and intentions - other sources simply register if a

“Our analysis meant we could provide new insights to optimise allocation of funds and so help widen participation in higher education while improving local economies. Our work was widely accepted – and praised.”

Dr Mark Corver
Senior Analyst
HEFCE

student is at one location or another. Interacting with the UCAS data at a sophisticated level meant we could identify applicants who wanted to study locally and then look across each of their choices to see if they believed they could live at home or not whilst attending that institution.

“This analysis led to a key breakthrough as we established how people respond to distance when choosing a university when they want to live at home: the commuter zone around universities. Nothing like this had been done before, and defining this was central to everything that followed. We had converted senior policymaker discussions of the ‘cold spots’ concept into an evidence-based definition and then went further, indicating where new provision should be located to best target the population groups they sought to assist.” The results were significant, he says, both for this policy and for the understanding of higher education in general: “We showed a person’s response to the choice of living at home against distance could be well defined and shown to be the same for those from both rich and poor backgrounds.”

Benefits and outcomes

Corver adds, “People can be very sceptical about research by government but this project was widely accepted and praised as sound, useful analysis. It also helped reduce the funds that proposals would have spent to get answers independently, and helped make the assessment process more efficient.” He says its true value was that if bids came from an area not favoured by the evidence, this was available for all to see - so the proposal “would need to be very strong elsewhere. They couldn’t just say ‘we’re the most deserving location to tackle cold spots

affecting poorer populations’ because we could show they were not. They’d need to make additional proposals, perhaps involving employers and addressing local issues like high unemployment or economic regeneration. The proposing organisations had to be more thorough and analytical about why they should get a share of the resources available.” Both in this project and its wider use at HEFCE, analysis informing policy is an integral element of how the government is working to widen access to higher education with knock-on effects in both social justice and economic competitiveness.

