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## **Universities need to listen and learn on outreach programs**

ANDREW HARVEY

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Their role in enthusing school students is growing

As activity in outreach programs grows, universities need to consider several key questions.

What are the objectives of outreach? How are different activities co-ordinated, promoted and evaluated? How is staff involvement measured and rewarded?

We recently evaluated activity across the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology at La Trobe University that provided some valuable insights.

An overarching strategy and narrative is valuable. Ensuring that individual programs sit within a broader strategy helps to avoid duplication and ensure an appropriate balance of objectives.

Evaluating outreach programs is an ongoing challenge. The Aim Higher program in Britain was axed in 2011 amid claims of poor evidence of its impact. In response, a proposed national evaluation framework seeks to use consistent data, avoid duplication, create economies of scale, and utilise national data sets for more rigorous evaluation.

Similarly, Canberra is moving to develop a performance measurement framework in Australia.

There is evidence that universities need to avoid a "postcode lottery", where schools receive variable outreach depending on their proximity to campuses. The added costs of time and transport for rural and regional students are substantial.

Metropolitan students also receive a greater quantity and diversity of outreach activity. This fact may help to explain the widening gap between urban and rural participation in higher education.

A less visible challenge of outreach is staff recognition. Work with schools is rarely counted in academic workloads, entered in position descriptions or rewarded by universities.

This informal approach is not sustainable as activity continues to increase. Science faculties are often the ones conducting the most outreach.

Dominated by demands to publish and receive external funds, many science academics are nevertheless spending time promoting their disciplines in schools. Measuring and rewarding this contribution is important.

University students are also spending considerable time in schools through programs such as In2science, where they work as teaching assistants and mentors.

Such efforts may constitute paid work, volunteering or activity for university credit. Outreach programs provide excellent opportunities for university students, but guidelines for their participation must be clear and consistent. Connecting schools and universities is a challenge.

Despite policy tensions, outreach activity is growing and plays a crucial role in enthusing school students about higher learning. This activity is most effective when it is planned, evaluated, integrated, and rewarded.

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Dr Andrew Harvey is Director of the Access and Achievement Research Unit at La Trobe University.