

Widening access to medical training in England: evaluation of a strategic initiative by HEE



Medicine can be seen as an elitist profession that requires substantial time and resource to train in. Widening access to medical careers is a key government objective, aiming to encourage a more diverse medical workforce that represents the communities it serves. WPG worked with Health Education England to explore if efforts across six new medical schools were making an impact.

Objectives: The evidence is clear: diverse healthcare workforces lead to improved health outcomes. But medical training is expensive, competitive, and entry is often influenced by prior academic achievement. In 2016, six new medical schools opened across England. They aimed to support targets to increase medical student numbers by 25%, and to use innovative admissions and training approaches to create a more sustainable medical workforce in under-doctored areas.

WPG were commissioned to undertake a multi-phase evaluation of activities to date, aimed at exploring if access to medicine was being widened, and how this was being achieved.

Results:

Clear framework for success	Sharing of best practice	Industry Award winning
 The evaluation identified 7 key success factors to inform future policy	 Approaches that deliver results have been shared as examples of best practice	 The evaluation won the ABP 2022 Award for Excellence in Using Psychology for Social Impact

What we did: The first phase was to develop an underpinning framework that provided a structure for different elements of evaluation; this was informed by research and expert perspectives. The second phase consisted of research with the six new schools and a range of other stakeholders. Where outcomes could be compared across the schools, findings were combined and reported at a national level to inform future policy. Institutional case-studies were also used to explore unique requirements and challenges of each school, and the interventions they implemented in response. The research provided a comprehensive overview of how different schools were meeting the challenge to widen access and provided valuable learnings for other institutions who are now pursuing the same goal.

Outcomes: The research findings have been shared with stakeholders across healthcare, formed the basis for a peer-reviewed journal article, and been presented at numerous medical education and psychology conferences, in the UK and internationally. The research was recognized by the British Psychological Society and won the prestigious 'Excellence in Occupational Psychology - Early career' award in 2024 for the WPG project lead. Stakeholders have shared positive feedback about the value of the evaluation in identifying initiatives that make the difference, and the framework has laid the foundations for longer-term evaluation of impact.

Client testimonial: "The evaluation has been crucial to identify shared learnings from this government initiative and will be used to inform future commissioning activities relating to important success factors to ensure a more diverse workforce in medicine. Since these new medical schools have opened, additional medical schools have been commissioned with the important learnings from this project informing future activities."

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