Realist Evaluation Case Study

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance (29–33)

Case Study

Formby, A., Woodhouse, A. and Roe, F. (2020a). A Presence in the Community': Developing Innovative Practice through Realist Evaluation of Widening Participation in West Yorkshire. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 22(3) 173–186. https://doi.org/
10.5456/WPLL.22.3.173
Available at: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/4636/
(Open Access)

Formby, A., Woodhouse, A. & Basham, J. (2020b). Reframing widening participation towards the community: a realist evaluation. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, *22*(2), 184–204. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.22.2.184
Available at: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/4635/
(Open Access)

Page references below are to the published versions of these articles.

Both these articles focus on a single evaluation project.

In the case study below, we have broken the case study evaluations down into a series of methodological steps as described in the Methodological Guidance to illustrate how a realist approach to evaluation might unfold when applied to a widening participation intervention. The nature of realist evaluation approaches means that there is no single 'correct' way of applying this methodology. The example given should be considered illustrative rather than a definitive model.

Case Study
Formby et al. 2020a
Formby et al. 2020b
Overview of articles:

These articles describe how a realist evaluation framework was used to iteratively assess the impact of a widening participation programme intended to support disadvantaged learners in areas with lower rates of higher education participation than attainment levels would predict. The programme includes the embedding of Higher Education Progression Officers (HEPO) within local school contexts (2020b) and community spaces (2020a). The key focus of this brief summary is on interventions in the school/college space (2020b).

As noted in *Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance,* there is no agreed methodological approach to undertaking a realist evaluation (p. 30). Consequently, it is not possible to set out a standard series of steps for conducting realist evaluations. This case study, however, outlines how one such evaluation was designed and implemented drawing on realist evaluation methods.

The research question is:
How significant is the contribution made by embedding HEPOs within local school contexts to the desired programme outcomes?

Describe the programme theories

The evaluation team consulted with programme staff and delivery practitioners to create three programme theories, designed to show 'how programme activities are understood to cause (or contribute to) outcomes and impacts' (Westhorp 2014, quoted in Formby et al. 2020a: 117). These programme theories were informed by empirical research. In the table below, the 'Programme Theory' column indicates the Theory of Change conclusions reached by the evaluation team, and the 'Empirical Research' column shows the research resources informing these conclusions.

Programme Theory	Empirical Research
1. Good quality continuing professional development (CPD) will equip school/college-based staff with skills and information to support young people to make informed choices.	Increased guidance and support – both formal and informal – for young people are essential for progression to HE (Hughes et al., 2009).
2. Dedicated progression staff in schools/colleges will have more time to invest in young people and support them in planning for their future.	The Department for Education (2010: 26) found that progression staff have a 'role in providing careers support to individual and small groups of students'.
3. There is a need to facilitate the delivery of outreach activity aimed at helping young people to make informed choices.	Dedicated progression staff increase the amount of outreach activity in the school/college. The Department for Education (2010: 26) notes: 'they may also provide support to students during work experience and other work-related educational activities'.

References:
Department for Education (2010) *Towards a Strong Careers Profession*, London: DfE.
Hughes, D. and Gration, G. (2009). Literature review of research on the impact of careers and guidance-related interventions. Reading: CfBT Education Trust.

(Formby et al. 2020b: 190)

The Evaluators drew on programme documentation, literature reviews on effective widening-participation outreach practice, focus groups with programme HEPOs and interviews with programme managers to develop context-mechanism-outcome models for these programme theories.

The realist interviews drew on experiential accounts from staff involved in the delivery of the programme. The involvement of both on-the-ground staff and their managers allowed for the triangulation of outcomes and the testing and refinement of the emerging programme theories (2020b: 192).

When refining the context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations relevant to school contexts, the evaluators also interviewed school leaders to gather their observations of the key mechanisms and contexts.

Establish mechanisms (M)

Embedding HEPOs in a local school context creates a space and focus for WP activity (2020b: 193).

When interviewed, one school leader identified the contribution of embedded HEPOs compared to schools where there was no equivalent role: 'Out of the three schools I have worked in, two have had NCOP staff and there has been a significant difference in outcomes' (2020b: 194).

Another hypothesised mechanism was the ability of HEPOs to prioritise student needs in developing site-specific interventions. This built trust between HEPOs and students and allowed the embedded programme staff to incorporate WP activity in the institutional sense of space.

Establish context (C)

Context can include a range of factors including but not limited to location, the individuals involved, interrelationships, institutional arrangements and wider infrastructure (2020b: 189).

The schools and colleges within which HEPOs were embedded became 'activities spaces' (2020b: 189). The HEPOs' familiarity with the schools and colleges within which they worked enabled them to tailor activity in the 'social relations' of that particular space and to introduce new resources that responded to the specific needs of that institution (2020b: 193). Therefore, context is not limited to location in this example, but includes the social interactions and relationships that take place within it.

Another contextual factor was the pre-existing knowledge of WP in some schools and colleges. HEPOs reported being able to access considerably more support in these institutions and felt their role was, therefore, more visible. In turn, this led to increased visibility of the programme activities (2020b: 193).

A further positive contextual factor was sufficient lead-in time to enable HEPOs to establish new interventions (2020b: 194).

Certain negative contextual factors worked against the desired outcomes. Issues such as organisational challenges, the scale of large schools and colleges and less developed WP cultures limited the effectiveness of the embedded HEPO 'mechanism' and its capacity to create institutional space for WP (2020b: 195).

Another challenging contextual factor was the cultural landscape outside the immediate programme, with HEPOs describing frequent resistance to the idea of young people progressing to university among communities and parents without a significant history of HE progression.

Establish outcomes (O)

The desired outcome was that embedded HEPOs would engage with and, where necessary, introduce or extend space for WP practice, and engage with student participants via a logic aligned with the prevailing culture of place in order to develop an engaged WP practice.

Evaluation outcomes

The evaluators drew on the interviews and focus groups with programme staff to identify and refine regular and 'demi-regular' patterns across the data that they could use to construct and confirm CMO configurations.

Their evaluation concluded that the presence of HEPOs and their embedding in institutional culture and their ability to work in partnership with the institution served to a) shift cultural practice where there was no existing embedded WP practice and b) complement and enhance existing practice where this was already in place.

The key elements of this success were due to a series of mechanisms (M):
- Embedded HEPOs who understood the needs of the institution and students
- The opening up of space for WP practice within the institution
- The introduction of new forms of WP
- The normalising of WP practice within the institution

The contextual conditions (C) that enabled these mechanisms to operate effectively were:
- Organisational support within the institution

- Organisational support in making the HEPO and their activity visible.

Other contextual conditions (C) influenced the success of the outcomes:
- A positive and supportive wider culture beyond the immediate space of the school
- A pre-existing culture of WP within the school that could be built upon
- Sufficient lead-in time to enable HEPOs to develop a sense of place and understand the character and needs of participants.

A key factor in the success of the interventions in delivering their intended outcomes was the HEPOs' ability to develop a sense of place within the institution. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of engaging with wider 'community' spaces and developing effective relationships with the community. The evaluators noted that 'it is not clear how sceptical attitudes can be shifted when links between HE and overall life success remain unclear' (2020b: 198) and recommend that further iterative research is carried out in this area.

Conclusion

The evaluators concluded that realist evaluation approaches had enabled the development of a deeper model of causation and practice than would otherwise have been possible. In particular, the attention to CMO configurations demonstrated the importance of engaging with specific local spaces to address the 'situated circumstances in which WP works' (2020a: 182).

They noted also that realist evaluation approaches are particularly effective in combination with process-driven evaluation, which can provide greater insight to support the generation of new programme theories and the development of further CMO configurations.