

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: York St John University		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 21 Sociology		
Title of case study: 'Moving beyond one-size-fits-all:' Improving Widening Participation through Realist Evaluation methodologies in Northern England		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2018 - December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Adam Formby	Lecturer	September 2018 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) engaged Formby (AF) to perform Realist Evaluation (RE) of Widening Participation (WP) activities in West Yorkshire to provide high quality WP to help young people to enter HE:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Formby embedded RE principles into all WP participation activities to develop enhanced WP provision. The outcome being: <i>“not only more effective practice, in terms of the positive impact we are able to demonstrate, but it has also enhanced GHWY’s reputation amongst local and national stakeholders” [5.9].</i> 2. GHWY and Formby have used RE to develop a new model of community-focused WP. This has helped reach ‘hard-to-access’ groups and increased provision through the deployment of a £100,000 community grant for small charities to support learners in their own community space. 		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
1. Performing a Realist Evaluation of GHWY Uni Connect WP activity to improve access-to-HE for underrepresented communities across West Yorkshire		
<p>GHWY Uni Connect are a £22million partnership responsible for WP provision in Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield that target 29 wards underrepresented in HE (focused on years 9-13; ages 13 and 18) with over 60 members of staff. Formby has developed an RE that has provided GHWY with a framework that explains why and how interventions work and for whom [3.3; 3.4; 3.5]. In RE, the principal approach is to engage with ‘process evaluation’ to ascertain the extent an activity has worked (and the circumstances it has worked within) with findings fed back into frontline delivery over the course of the initiative. It establishes a series of Programme Theories (PTs): statements that indicate how programme activities contribute to outcomes that are then iteratively re-developed upon realist analysis (with new additional activity identified). Formby led on producing substantive progress reports on Phase One that has resulted in new PT development that shaped the overall direction of the GHWY initiative [3.3; 3.5]. Underpinning research indicates how RE has helped GHWY to identify situated circumstances where WP worked across West Yorkshire [3.3; 3.4; 3.5]. Formby’s most recent contribution has been to assess all Phase One data and develop an analysis that points towards five cornerstone PTs that encompass general areas of activity: ‘Affective and Effective Mentoring’, ‘The ‘Role’ of Role Models’, ‘Experiential Learning’, ‘HE and the Community’ and ‘Realising and Embedding Youth and Learner Voice’ [3.5]. This has allowed GHWY to move away from focusing on strands of activity, to more ‘middle-range’ generalizable</p>		

principles that can be embedded across all activity (whilst still explaining how and why interventions that worked in one setting can be different elsewhere).

Furthermore, RE is not extensively used in WP evaluation. The development of Formby's research around developing RE in WP has created an innovative approach that enhances the evidence base of WP through causal explanations as to how, why and who WP works for – not just whether WP activities have worked or not [3.5]. This not just important for researchers and practitioners in this field but also to open up space for government to reflect on different types of evaluation strategy. All reports and published work [3.1; 3.2; 3.3; 3.5] have been submitted to the Office for Students (OfS) by GHWY as evidence of good practice – both establishing and increasing awareness of Realist Evaluation-based work in WP at the national level.

2. Embedding 'Community Outreach Widening Participation' across West Yorkshire

GHWY Uni Connect has community outreach WP in all 29 ward areas yet such provision is relatively new in the UK. The RE has focused extensively on the efficacy of such approaches, demonstrating the importance of reaching out to under-represented communities [3.1; 3.2], especially in terms of frontline staff through notions of 'social capital' and 'sense of place'. Formby performed an RE on the role of outreach staff in institutional [3.1] and community settings [3.2]; and found that by tapping into the 'everyday' social capital and relations that learners inhabit daily, WP becomes transformative in the support it offers to learners. In practice, this entailed building flexible and durable relationships in schools and colleges and the broader community to create holistic, supportive and effective WP [3.3].

The originality of this research lies in embedding RE – a relatively new evaluation approach – in national WP provision. It has allowed more nuanced accounts of programme initiative and identified different ways of addressing deep-rooted inequalities around accessing Higher Education in West Yorkshire. Furthermore, this research emphasises how innovative analytical sociological methods create social change in different community contexts [3.1; 3.2] - and the need to push past 'what works/one-size-fits-all' evaluation paradigms. By considering how, why and the circumstances initiatives work, our RE has explored how relevant sociological theories (Bourdieu – 'Social Capitals'; Creswell – 'Sense of Place') intersect with broader contextual considerations (such as the role of organisational involvement e.g. schools or colleges) – and explain different WP outcomes [3.1; 3.2].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Formby, A. Basham, J. Woodhouse, A. (2020) Re-Framing Widening Participation towards the Community: A Realist Evaluation, *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 22 (2). pp. 184-201. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.22.2.184>

[3.2] Formby, A. Woodhouse, A., Basham, J. Roe, F. (2020) 'A Presence in the Community: Developing Innovative Practice through Realist Evaluation of Widening Participation in West Yorkshire, *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 22 (3). pp. 173-186. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.22.3.173>

[3.3] Formby, A. & Basham, J. (2019) *Supporting Underrepresented Communities to Progress to Higher Education across West Yorkshire: A Realist Evaluation Interim Report*, Leeds: Go Higher West Yorkshire [Can be Supplied by the HEI on Request]

[3.4] Basham, J. Woodhouse, A. (2019) *Evaluation Plan: Phase 2*, Leeds: Go Higher West Yorkshire [Can be Supplied by the HEI on Request]

[3.5] Formby, A. Woodhouse, A. and Brown, J. (2020) *Supporting Underrepresented Communities to Progress to Higher Education across West Yorkshire: A Realist Evaluation (End of Phase 1 Report: December 2018 to July 2019)*, Leeds: Go Higher West Yorkshire. [Phase One Part Two](#)

[Report Completed 20th Aug \(2\).pdf \(yorks.ac.uk\)](#)

Research grants

[3.6] Go Higher West Yorkshire (September 2018-September 2019). Title: Realist Evaluation of Phase One (£10,000). Awarded to York St John University.

[3.7] Go Higher West Yorkshire (September 2019-September 2021). Title: Realist Evaluation of Phase Two (£39,000). Awarded to York St John University.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

In 2015, the UK government identified geographical areas at ward level “where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there” (OfS, 2019). In West Yorkshire, 29 wards were identified as POLAR 3 and POLAR 4 (participation of local areas): communities with deep historical barriers in terms of accessing HE. This RE ensured GHWY innovated its WP practices through continuous analysis of activity to identify highly effective and supportive methods that reached out to underrepresented communities. In practice, Formby developed new programme theory that reflected on activity efficacy and best practice, the deployment of resources (e.g. staff and activities) and the identification of emergent gaps in the GHWY evidence base. A Senior Project Manager at GHWY explains Formby *‘has worked with our research and evaluation team to draw out learning for practitioners from the emerging evidence, helping GHWY to improve our work on an ongoing basis’* **[5.8]**. This resulted in improved rates of progression to HE within West Yorkshire. Analysis of Higher Education Statistics data indicates that GHWY students have *“a rate of progression to HE of 43%, matching the national average in areas and with students who have previously seen lower than average progression”* **[5.1]**.

Formby embedded RE methodology in a large Uni Connect – government consortia that facilitate WP across England and Wales **[5.2; 5.3; 5.5; 5.8; 5.9]** – and demonstrated the overall impact of GHWY to external partners including the OfS **[5.5]**. A former research and evaluation manager at GHWY stated: *‘upon submission of the OfS phase two report we were commended by OfS for our connections with the academic community’* **[5.6]**. Modern WP evaluation needs robust approaches that elucidate the circumstances whereby WP activities work. Best practice evaluation by the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit at the University of Sheffield emphasised the positive benefits of the GHWY RE approach as it has enabled *“a relatively new approach to evaluating outreach”* **[5.4]**. Similarly, South Yorkshire Uni Connect cite GHWY as important in shaping their own WP evaluation approach: *‘the application of realist approaches to programme evaluation in WP is still in its infancy, and the work of Dr Formby and GHWY has offered the sector an example of how the approach can provide us with a means to develop causally focussed explanations of why and how our interventions work and for whom’*. South Yorkshire Uni Connect also cite GHWY and Formby et al. regarding their work on community outreach as influential when considering the introduction of additional WP resources: *‘the work published on the role of recent graduates in setting up and delivering outreach provision has informed HeppSY’s approach to the deployment of our own staff in this regard’* **[5.10]**.

Another significant impact of Formby et al. is the development of *“a robust realist evaluation approach”* that is *“applied across the whole range of the consortia’s work”* **[5.5]**. In particular, the continuous re-framing of core programme theories is highlighted in OfS evaluation: *‘the development of detailed programme theories, which are supplemented by a range of other supporting documents represents a very strong theory of change approach, which is highly commended’* and *‘the level of detail and thinking that is evidenced in this strategy is admirable’* **[5.5]**. A further consequence of Formby et al.’s research concerned how programme mechanisms differ in relation to the contexts in which they operate. For instance, the introduction of mentoring schemes in different communities across West Yorkshire resulted in divergent mentoring practice (a distinction between ‘effective and affective’ when mentoring took place in institutional settings or the wider community) **[3.5]**. This focus on the role of ‘context’ as a key explanatory factor in WP evaluation was also noted by the OfS: *‘the realist approach on which you draw is particularly*

suitable for considering participant context and we commend your research-informed approach to considering the importance of place as a crucial contextual factor' [5.5].

Formby also designed and evaluated multiple realist evaluation-based initiatives for GHWY around community outreach. Two core projects focused on the role of WP outreach workers both in educational settings and in the community context [3.1; 3.2]. Findings demonstrated GHWY's positive progress in engaging under-represented communities across West Yorkshire e.g. establishing 'sense of place' and the use of community 'role models' as key mechanisms that break down barriers around accessing HE [3.1; 3.2; 5.2; 5.3]. Examples of positive impact include the use of local graduates and student ambassadors within community settings (who we found were best placed to support young people) and developing activities that took into account the 'community setting' itself e.g. localised 'career-focused' housing initiatives, place-based photography projects or the integration of WP provision with the support of local organisations e.g. sports teams [3.2; 5.3]. Research and Evaluation management at GHWY argue this '*enhanced understandings of the importance of role models and identification in engaging hard-to-access groups*' [5.7]. As a result, GHWY expanded community provision across West Yorkshire towards the latter half of Phase One through the £100,000 Community Grants Scheme. This involved small charities providing bespoke WP activity to reach 'hard-to-access' groups of young people to support integration with future HE trajectory. As explained by the Research and Evaluation Manager at GHWY: '*the exploratory work of the Outreach Officers – and especially the insights they developed about the importance of building relationships with community groups as an entry point for this work – lead to the development of a substantive Community Grants scheme*' [5.7].

Overall, Formby has sought to support GHWY through the development of an RE that ensures they can meet their aims: to provide high quality WP that supports underrepresented groups of young people to access HE in West Yorkshire. The Research and Evaluation Manager at GHWY emphasises that Formby's contribution has been '*instrumental in supporting my team, our wider network of around 60 staff, and colleagues from other partnerships, to understand and effectively apply a Realist Evaluation approach to our widening participation practice (an innovative approach in this context, for which we have been commended by the Uni Connect national evaluation capability building team)*' [5.7]. More broadly, Formby has widened the national evidence base in terms of effective WP activity, as explained GHWY senior management: '*one of the intended outcomes of the OfS Uni Connect programme is to improve the evidence base for widening participation activity and to improve evaluative practice in the sector. Dr Formby's contribution, in supporting practitioners (both WP practitioners and R&E staff) to undertake evaluation and in helping to analyse and understand the data collected is contributing to both the local and national understanding*' [5.8]. Lastly, the Director of GHWY emphasises that the RE has fostered engagement across the GHWY partnership throughout West Yorkshire: '*as a partnership of diverse HE providers, GHWY's influence reaches beyond one institution and being at the vanguard of the realist evaluation movement has really supported us in keeping our member organisations engaged with the work of the partnership. The work that Dr Formby started with the Uni Connect Research and Evaluation Team has, through his stewardship, permeated the culture of our organisation: we have embedded Realist Evaluation principles to our widening participation activity, and have informed our partnership's evidence-based practice as a result of Dr Formby's applied approach to academic analysis and development of cornerstone programme theories*' [5.9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] Report: *GHWY Constituency Report Hemsworth*, Leeds (2020), Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.2] Report: *Supporting Underrepresented Communities to Progress to Higher Education across West Yorkshire: A Realist Evaluation (End of Phase 1 Report: December 2018 to July 2019)*, Leeds: Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.3] Report: *Supporting Underrepresented Communities to Progress to Higher Education across West Yorkshire: A Realist Evaluation Interim Report* (2020), Leeds: Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.4] Report: Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit (2019) National Collaborative Outreach Programme – Evaluation Plans Feedback and Good Practice Advice: Interim Report, Sheffield: WPREU

[5.5] Office for Students (2019) *National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Assessment of Evaluation Strategy*, Office for Students.

[5.6] Testimonial: Former Research and Evaluation officer, Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.7] Testimonial: Current Research and Evaluation officer, Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.8] Testimonial: Senior Project Manager, Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.9] Testimonial: Manager, Go Higher West Yorkshire.

[5.10] Testimonial: Evaluation and Data Manager, South Yorkshire Uni Connect Programme.