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Title Theorising and evaluating alternative visions of widening participation in Higher Education: appraising the work of the Caledonian Club at GCU  
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**Proposed Paper:** Theorising and evaluating alternative visions of widening participation in Higher Education: appraising the work of the Caledonian Club at GCU

Widening Participation (WP) to Higher Education (HE) is a global challenge that takes different forms in different places (Scottish Government, 2016c; Scottish Funding Council, 2016). In the UK, such challenges have matured from aspiration with transformative potential to become part of the everyday landscape with institutional mission statements, national targets, and funding streams aligned to achieving this goal. In Scotland, the challenge is conceived as more than a matter of maximising potential in the national interest; it is underpinned with a desire to pursue social justice that reflects how the nation views itself (McKendrick, 2015), a clear sense of which pervades the mission and work of the Commission on Widening Access, formed in response to the 2014-15 Programme for Government (Scottish Government, 2016c). The key metrics used to monitor annual change – the percentage of new full-time Scottish-domiciled entrants who reside in the most deprived areas – evidences the scale of the challenge, with new entrants from deprived areas being under-represented in all but one of Scotland’s 18 HEIs (Scottish Funding Council, 2017). In response, each institution has its own strategy and initiatives to access and widen participation to its institution from under-represented groups.

Desirable as this may (or may not) be, populating the student body with an equitable share of students from more deprived backgrounds is not the only way in which the role of HE in WP can be conceived. Indeed, while concurring that this goal is in the national interest, arguably WP to HE could and should be conceived more holistically (Moore et al, 2013), i.e. HE should strongly value and actively facilitate the participation of children from deprived backgrounds in the present.

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) positions itself as the “University for the Common Good” and has a long tradition of supporting both widening access and participation. Central to this is the Caledonian Club, a particular WP initiative which engages more children, more often, than any other such project in Scotland. The Caledonian Club was introduced in 2008, as a long-term commitment by GCU, working with children and families in five ‘learning communities’ across Glasgow, in some of the most impoverished parts of Scotland, which were identified as having fewer children progressing to ‘positive destinations’ after school (author removed for blind review). Club activities are currently delivered to all of the children at six key points in their nursery, primary and secondary education (with a further six additional targeted activities), with a view to equipping students with key life skills, raising aspirations and enhancing positive educational outcomes (author removed for blind review).

Although it is beyond the capacity of a single HEI to transform the social landscape of a city, the Caledonian Club has articulated a sense of purpose through which it can affect positive change in the domains for which it has the capacity. The theory of change (Nesta, no date; Centre for Theory of Change, 2017) that underpins the project is multi-dimensional, reflecting both the broadly conceived goals of the project and the range of circumstances in which participants find themselves:

- *Anchor.* Through early and sustained intervention, university is established as a firm and stable presence in young people’s lives.
- *Lifeworld.* By conferring Club membership and being a recurring presence in the child’s educational journey, the Caledonian Club (and GCU) becomes part of the pupil’s lifeworld. University becomes a known and familiar realm that is populated by people like them from neighbourhoods like theirs.

- *Enabler.* Although presenting opportunities for skill development at each level and with each activity, it is in the upper years of secondary school, when the Caledonian Club is an effective enabler, as it offers focused learning and support to assist Club members to realise their potential for university-level study.
- *Tipping point.* The Caledonian Club acknowledges that, set apart in isolation, its work would be insufficient to transform pupil's capabilities and fortunes. However, the additional work of the Caledonian Club may provide the inspirational 'tipping point' that precipitates positive outcomes.

An independent programme of research related impact and evaluation is undertaken of Caledonian Club activities (author made for blind review), by academic and educational researchers from within GCU who are not part of service delivery. In this presentation, we consider the challenges of evaluating WP work, which involves counting the proportion of children from deprived areas/backgrounds who are progressing to HE. The evaluation comprises a series of inter-related tasks, including:

- Data mining of existing publicly available data to fully understand the wider environment, e.g. four in every five pupils from Caledonian Club schools live in one of Scotland's MD20% areas; and two in every five secondary pupils are eligible for a free school meal (Author removed for blind review; Scottish Government, 2016a; 2016b).
- Engaging with parents and children to appreciate their educational backgrounds, e.g. our survey research has established that only 13% of Caledonian Club parents/guardians reported having been a university student, with two thirds of parents/guardians leaving school before the end of S5. Significantly, one third of S1 Caledonian Club pupils have never heard of university prior to the project.
- Pre- and post- intervention analysis with participating pupils to ascertain whether there is any immediate step-change in perceived competency and aspiration is undertaken. For example, 90% of secondary school pupils expressed an increase in self-confidence (in at least one competency); and post-participation, 63% now aspire to go to university (a seven point percentage increase on pre-project aspirations).
- Ethnographic observations of projects on- and off- campus.

This presentation challenges the way in which 'widening participation' is conceived, arguing that the greater good can only be achieved if it understood in a manner that extends beyond institutional self-interest or in the interest of future students of HE. Equally, the challenges of evaluating the theory of change that has been conceived for such a holistic vision of widening participation are not to be under-estimated. The extent to which these have been achieved at GCU forms the second substantive focus of this paper.

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\*Selected papers removed due to blind review process