'A Middle-Range Realist Approach to Evaluating the Student Lifecycle in Widening Access and Participation' (0483)

Greg Brown[1], **Adam Formby** [2] [1]*Universty of Sheffield, United Kingdom* [2]*University of Leeds, United Kingdom*

Paper

Widening Participation (WP) has become an ingrained policy strategy that seeks to ensure that young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds enter Higher Education (HE) in the UK. The current Conservative Government have laid out two targets in this regard – to double the numbers of disadvantaged young people progressing into HE, and to increase numbers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds by a further 20 percent (Smith and Hubble 2018).

Going further, the government has prioritised a 'student lifecycle' approach (SLA) (Smith and Hubble, 2018). This involves not only supporting WP students into HE via outreach activity, but also helping them succeed when they arrive, and further, supporting them out into the labour market or further study. Indeed, a temporal understanding of WP that encompasses varying stages of the 'student lifecycle' is noted by OFFA (Office for Fair Access), and now the OfS (Office for Students) as having three main components – access, student success and progression. Thomas (2018) carried out research on the efficacy of the 'whole institutional' approach in several HE institution in the UK, and noted the growing use of SLA's across the sector:

> "A lifecycle approach is common place across English HEPs, and certainly all the case study institutions viewed WP as a process that occurs across the student lifecycle, some starting with primary school pupils, and including pre-entry outreach, admissions, transition, learning and teaching, student engagement and support, progression into employment and study, and in some cases access to postgraduate study and entry into the professions" (Thomas, 2017: 13).

The implementation of such strategies is to be welcomed. Evidence suggests that sustained, linked up programmes of support yield the best outcomes, and address issues that inevitably arise at different stages in the student journey. In particular, we know that the concept of the 'student lifecycle' helps identify student needs as they progress (Burton et al. 2013). Furthermore, research emphasises that a 'student lifecycle' helps improve engagement and retention (Taylor and Harrison, 2016; Wilson et al, 2016) and can be utilised to improve interventions for students (Tower et al. 2015). In terms of improving the employability of students, Bates and Hayes (2017) assert that employability frameworks that run concurrent to the overall 'student lifecycle' can be beneficial (although it is also noted there is a lack of evaluative evidence to substantiate these claims).

However, the broad nature of such activity – and how institutions come to prioritise certain outcomes based on their individual objectives in relation to Widening Participation – throws up new and difficult challenges for evaluators and policy analysts.

We would argue, that one way to counter these issues is to develop 'middle-range' frameworks, to ascertain who SLA's work for, the circumstances they work in, as well as why and how they work. Sociologist Robert K Merton developed the concept of the middle-range theory as we seek to use it, outlining it as a means to bridge the theory-empirical research divide:

"...theories of the middle range: [are] theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research, and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organization, and social change." (Merton 2007: 448).

A contemporary proponent and advocate for the use and advancement of middle range theory is the evaluation methodologist Ray Pawson; best known for his work developing realist approaches to policy evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997; 2004; Pawson 2013), and evidence synthesis (Pawson 2002; 2006). Realist evaluation stresses that programmes and policies are theories incarnate (Pawson and Tilley 2004), and as such, the goal of evaluation should be to formulate, test and ultimately refine those theories that appear most plausible, offering insight into how a programme or policy works, for whom, in what circumstance and how.

Building on this framework for the evaluation of individual interventions, realist synthesis was developed as a form of evidence synthesis that takes articulated programme theories as it's unit of analysis (Pawson 2002; 2006; Rycroft-Malone et al. 2012). This approach seeks to embed context, and take account of the inherent complexity in many policy domains (of which WP is one). Realist synthesis then stands as an alternative to the traditional systematic review - and the use of effect size measures as sole units of analysis.

Pawson postulated that Merton's notion of the middle-range theory, whilst 'offering the clearest blueprint of theory-driven empirical inquiry' (Pawson 2000:1), lacked ontological and epistemological grounding, leaving it ambiguously focussed. To this end, he introduced his notion of 'middle-range realism', which sits at the heart of the two approaches briefly outlined above. Conceptually, the realist approach to policy research seeks to marry the ontological and epistemological principles of realism (see Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1978) with the methodological power of middle-range theory, offering researchers and evaluators a means to improve (through appropriate theorising) and federate (through abstraction) empirical policy research (Pawson 2000).

So how does such an approach aide us in the evaluation of WP policy, and more specifically, joined up student lifecycle approaches? We argue that the usefulness in utilising a middle-range realist framework is three-fold:

1. It provides the sector with an opportunity to properly articulate the aims and objectives of individual and collective access and participation schemes, in a way that both recognises and embeds grand social theory with every day, context specific practitioner hypotheses.

2. It offers a means to think about how individual programmes within an SLA framework interconnect, and how we can account for issues of rivalry and emergence (Pawson 2013) in our evaluations.

3. It offers evaluators and policy analysts a framework to empirically test and refine those theories and hypotheses surfaced initially, offering robust and cumulative outcomes useful for both specific HEI's and the wider sector.

To conclude, this paper outlines middle-range realism as an appropriate framework for the evaluation of student lifecycle approaches to widening participation, strategies that are becoming common place across the sector.

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