

Realist Evaluation case study: Evaluation of Micro-Placements

December 2023

Professor Clare Rigg
Dr Laura Reeves
Amy Carpenter

Realist Evaluation

Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: [Methodological Guidance \(p. 27-31\)](#)

Case Study

This Realist Evaluation (RE) was conducted as part of a TASO programme to pilot the use of a series of small *n* methodologies within widening participation (WP). The nature of Realist Evaluation approaches means that there is no single 'correct' way of applying this methodology. The example presented here should be considered as illustrative of the approach rather than as a definitive model.

Methodological Guidance

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

Realist Evaluation case study: University of Suffolk Micro-Placements

Programme overview

Programme Context

The University of Suffolk (UoS) is a relatively new and small HE provider spread over four campuses in the Southeast of England. It assumed degree-awarding powers in 2016. It has a large proportion of mature students and students requiring targeted support to meet their diverse needs.

The micro-placement scheme has been run by the university's Careers Team since 2016, providing a 30-hour placement to students. The overall aim of the scheme is to provide students who may otherwise struggle to get relevant work experience, the opportunity to gain experience in a supportive environment. This might include those with caring responsibilities, who are tied to an existing job for financial reasons or have limited access to relevant social capital.

Evaluation Context

The evaluation was partially retrospective, in that it focused on participants who had already completed the programme. Some data had to be collected post hoc therefore.

The evaluation investigated the following questions:

- How does the UoS micro-placement scheme enhance the employability of students in the context of their backgrounds?
- What are the mechanisms by which the UoS micro-placement scheme achieves the employability outcomes it does given the context of students who use the scheme?
- What are the lessons for other evaluators of small 'n' employability interventions using realist evaluation?

Initial Theory of Change development / Developing Context, Mechanism, Outcome models (CMO configurations)

The first stage in this evaluation process was to develop a Theory of Change mapping out what is known or assumed about how the programme delivers its outcomes.

A realist evaluation approach brings together a consideration of the change mechanism (M), the context (C) in which it works, and the outcome (O) it delivers.

In this case, the project team did not have a pre-existing Theory of Change and progressed straight to developing a Theory of Change made up of CMO models.

The team noted the absence of any relevant Theories of Change in the academic and grey literature on student work placements. They began the process by developing an initial Theory of Change by conducting a literature review of academic and grey literature on student placements and micro-placements. They then conducted semi-structured interviews with nine key programme stakeholders, who were involved in the design, commissioning and implementation of the micro-placement initiative. The team also drew on programme documentation.

The design of the Theory of Change drew on Pawson and Tilley's (1997) guidance on realist evaluation. As such the primary focus was on identifying 'configurations' (models) showing how the relationship between context (C) and change mechanisms (M) is understood to lead to particular outcomes (O).

A note about context:

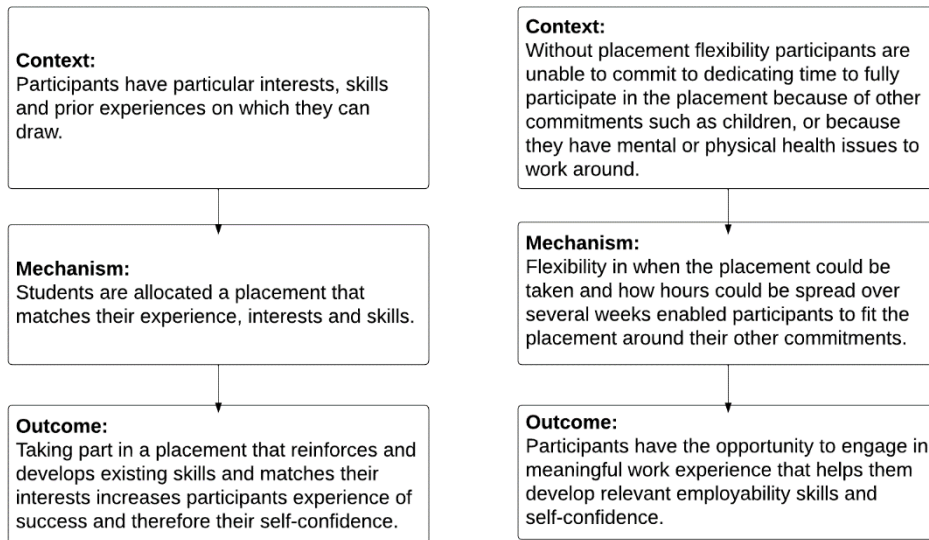
The idea of context as used in realist evaluation can be complex. In their original Theory of Change, the project team chose to consider context at the organisational level. They located the programme in the context of institutional settings and student populations. Dalkin et al (2015) provide a useful discussion of how context and mechanism concepts might be used in realist evaluation. They suggest that 'mechanisms will only activate in the right conditions, providing a context + mechanism=outcome formula as a guiding principle to realist enquiry' (p.3).

Context can include a wide range of factors including, but not limited to, economic, geographic, historical and political circumstances, material resources, social structures, and participants' cultural values and experience. The context of an intervention can cause or prevent a mechanism from working as expected.

The **mechanism** is the element of the intervention that acts to cause the desired changes when facilitated by the context.

The **outcome** is what happens as a result of the change mechanism happening in the context identified.

From this perspective, it is possible to construct the following CMO models from the project report. The programme team developed a number of CMO models. For illustration, we focus on two models here. Detail about other CMO models is available in the UoS local evaluation report.



Revisit Theory of Change

The next stage in Realist Evaluation often consists of developing and refining the CMO models through an additional round of data collection.

Having developed a Theory of Change and a set of CMOs, the programme team wanted to test these against other evidence and stakeholder perspectives.

Taking a realist interview approach (Manzano 2016), the team devised a series of questions to ask a sample of 23 students who had participated in the micro-placement scheme. Unlike traditional qualitative approaches, realist interviews are extended in-depth interviews (taking to two hours) with structured questions designed to encourage participants or other stakeholders to confirm, refine or falsify initial theories of how contexts and mechanisms interact to deliver observed outcomes.

This process revealed the complexity of the micro-placement intervention. The team concluded that there were three key phases, each of which had its own outcomes and contributed to the impact of the programme as a whole. Accordingly, they modified the initial Theory of Change to reconceptualise the intervention as a three-phase scheme, comprising pre-placement, placement and post-placement and developed a separate Theory of Change for each.

Evaluation outcomes

Programme participants reported that the 30-hour micro-placement scheme was effective. Self-report data indicated that it doubled their employability skills, increased their knowledge of how to apply for graduate jobs, and improved their chances of gaining a job interview, and subsequently a job.

The outcomes of the realist evaluation generated valuable knowledge about how the programme achieved its outcomes. It revealed several important mechanisms contributing to intervention success. It demonstrated, for example, that placements needed to be highly accessible to target participants, paid, flexible and provide participants with high levels of support and advice from all stakeholders involved.

The evaluation also indicated that 30-hours of placement experience alone was insufficient to guarantee a full range of intended outcomes. The evaluation process also revealed additional change mechanisms not originally considered by the team. These included a series of activities delivered during the pre-placement phase and the significant and personal support provided by a programme Anchor (key support and point of contact for participants). The team also recognised the role of careers team members, placement supervisors, and mentors as important change mechanisms.

Adaptions to the methodology

Because this was a retrospective study, the project team faced limitations in the available data. In particular, they lacked before and after metrics of key employability skills. Instead, they asked participants to retrospectively rate their employability skills on a scale from 1 to 10 before and after their placement experience. The team acknowledge that this limits the reliability of this outcome data.

The team acknowledged that ideally an intervention is designed with the evaluation planned from the beginning. In this case, this would have made the Theory of Change explicit from the outset and allowed for data requirements and collection arrangements to be identified before the intervention began. The team noted that this would also have supported the capture of pre- and post-outcome measures, using validated metrics of confidence, self-efficacy or similar.

Reflections from using the Realist Evaluation methodology

The team grappled with several minor challenges at different stages of the evaluation project:

1. The absence of Theories of Change within existing academic and grey literature on student placements as employability interventions meant it was necessary to devise a new one from scratch. The team relied on key stakeholders to generate and describe the theory underpinning intervention design and operationalisation. Ideally, CMO configurations would have been developed using a wider range of sources and perspectives.
2. Because of the complexity of the intervention, which consisted of many activities and involved multiple actors across several university teams, the team initially found it difficult to identify and define the key programme mechanisms. This was resolved in later stages by reconfiguring the programme into three distinct, although overlapping, stages: pre-placement, the placement itself, and post-placement, and drawing up a Theory of Change for each.
3. A third challenge resulted from the need to gather some evaluation retrospectively. Ideally, pre- and post-outcome measures would have been collected at the time, using validated measures.

Conclusions

Based on their experience of piloting realist evaluation, the programme team have recommended that peers aiming to conduct a realist evaluation of HE-based interventions:

1. Use published sources for developing an initial Theory of Change and CMO configurations where possible.
2. Spend sufficient time reading around and developing a working understanding of key concepts such as mechanism or context, prior to the start of the programme. The theory and terminology underlying realist evaluation is complex.

3. Where possible, plan to use realist evaluation at the outset of intervention design, so that pre- and post- outcome measures can be most validly collected.

References

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