

Postgraduate Voluntary Sector Management Project

Final Evaluation

Disclaimer

This evaluation report needs to be read with the report from the project: "Research Report. How can the Universities of Brighton and Sussex best offer educational provision to Sussex based Voluntary Sector Managers? An evaluation of the issues and possibilities." This evaluation can in no way be seen as a summary of the project findings.

Project Description

This project was to explore the feasibility for developing postgraduate opportunities for voluntary sector managers both in terms of demand from the voluntary sector and in terms of willingness of university departments to engage. Then if there was demand, to find the most effective / efficient method to build on existing provision, which could then be further developed in the future once a proven market has been established.

How the Project came about

The Working Together Project has been championing at a strategic level for some years, the need to develop learning progression routes for VCS staff in a management position, or those wanting to move into management in the sector. Both the University of Brighton through the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) and the University of Sussex through their Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), have more recently been focused on community development and community empowerment rather than on the management of community run services and activities.

After a number of conversations about this, the Cupp Director, David Wolff started to champion the management theme within the University, when the opportunity for a Community Knowledge Exchange came about. It is useful to reflect on the development stage of the project because of the realistic and pragmatic approach that was taken to it from the beginning, which made it easier for university partners in particular to buy into it. There was never the intention to write a new course for VCS managers, but to look at what already exists within both local universities, focusing particularly on University of Brighton provision, and see what is already relevant and / or look at what could be adapted.

It was at this point that David Wolff brought on board the Cupp Student Learning Manager, Juliet Millican who has experience of thinking creatively about the use of university accreditation as well as working on projects that cut across university schools and departments. Juliet did some initial work within the

university to establish where this project would best sit. The School of Applied Social Sciences (SASS) was the first choice because they have an MA in Public Service Partnership and Management (MAPSP), which is designed to attract students from both the public and the voluntary sectors, but has traditionally appealed more to public sector managers. Deputy Head of SASS and course leader for the MA PSP Phil Haynes was approached and keen to support a project which might broaden the reach of his course and supportive of taking on board recommendations about how the course could change in the future. The project was also timely because of the government's re-emphasis on public sector procurement and on the VCS having a larger role in the delivery of public services in the future.

SASS was also a good home for this project because it is based in the Faculty of Health which has a flexible modular postgraduate programme which the modules that make up the MA PSP are a part. The modules and the courses are also very reasonably priced, which was an essential consideration in relation to VCS recruitment.

Through Juliet's initial scoping exercise, we also established that the School of Education have developed a flexible MA which enables students to determine their own content, and that the Business School had a number of management courses that might be relevant, as well as a certificate in Social Enterprise course.

Developing learning for and with community partners had been a key strand of Cupp during the first couple of years of its life, but had stimulated few projects. Through the work of both the Cupp Student Learning Manager and the Cupp Director, both the Business School and the School of education were represented on the steering group.

It was also timely that the SLN was in its infancy, a network specifically set up to encourage and develop progression routes into Higher Education. Since this time Community Practice has become a specific strand of the SLN, and the findings from the project are feeding into that work. Both Cupp through Juliet Millican, and the SLN through Sarah Hardman, the Deputy Director of the Network were represented on the Steering Group.

Who should do the work?

It was important that the work was undertaken by someone who had a good knowledge and understanding of the VCS and related management issues. It was clear that there wasn't any one who fitted the bill within the university who wasn't already too busy. The university approached the Working Together Project (Community Partner in the project) to undertake the Work. This made sense as WTP already had a good relationship with the University of Brighton

through their involvement in Cupp, as well as needing to have someone in post quickly because of the short timescale that had been determined for the project> The short timescale had also been predetermined since any adjustments needed to be made to the courses would have to be agreed before being advertised, leaving adequate time to recruit. As a result of these discussions, it was agreed that Paul Bramwell would undertake the research, and Michelle Pooley would join the steering group as the community supervisor.

Knowledge Exchange

It was stated in the project proposal that: "In pursuing this project, the voluntary and community Sector will build its capacity through enhanced skills and networking and the University of Brighton should enrich its teaching and research through developing and / or repositioning / targeting courses for / to the VCS." We should therefore reflect on the extent to which this exchange has occurred.

It is certainly the case that the Working Together Project has been able to build its capacity to work with partners to develop joint work on progression routes and is better networked and better placed to undertake this work in the future with a greater knowledge of working with the university sector. It is also hopefully the case from this project that VCS managers will have their capacity built through enhanced knowledge and skills and that they too will be better networked with colleagues from both the voluntary and statutory sectors, although it is too soon to evaluate this.

The university has greater information with which to engage with VCS managers including a number of short and longer term recommendations about the development and adaptation of learning provision for and with the sector. Already, two modules have been added to the MAPSP framework as was recommended in the report, as well as introducing VCS based visiting lecturers into existing modules. The findings from this project will also feed into the Community Practice strand of the SLN.

The Report

A research report has been produced which describes a significant demand for a postgraduate voluntary sector management course including a full MA. Of the 53 people who were interviewed, around 40 were keen for provision at this level. An in depth search of relevant post-graduate modules delivered by the University of Brighton was also undertaken, so as to eliminate the need to unnecessarily develop something new if it existed, or if something could be adapted. These module descriptors were used during the interviews to generate feedback from interviewees and to gauge their relevance to a VCS audience. Possible alternatives for VCS managers were also explored, along with previous research identifying a high number of graduates in the Brighton & Hove VCS.

It had been suggested that new modules might need to be developed that respond to the needs of the VCS. However, feedback from interviews with VCS managers showed that they want an element of any course to be flexible, so that they are able to relate the content to their specific work situation and therefore be of direct benefit to their organisation. This led to two existing modules being added to the MA Public Service Partnership and Management. The first is a Reflective Journal module from the School of Education which will enable a VCS cohort to identify their own content and then reflect on its application in their work setting. It is likely that part of this module will be taught by the Business School if any cohort requires input on Social Enterprise. Visiting VCS tutors will also be brought in to teach on this module and therefore expand / transfer expertise into the department. The second is a Personal Development module from the Faculty of Health that will enable a VCS cohort to reflect directly on their own management practice and their continuing professional development. Reflection on when these modules might be accessed by students might require more analysis and it may be the case that take up of these modules may only start to bear fruits in year 2 as students opt for the predefined taught modules.

The aspect of the project that is about linking H.E. to pre H.E. provision, has been less successful in terms of having some concrete results. However, the project should be seen as part of a wider push for there to be better plotted progression routes for VCS practitioners. There is now a strand of the Sussex Learning Network (one of the funders of the project) which is about community practice. The recommendations from this project about progression from community based provision into HE, should be dealt with in this strand and this project contributed to this strand being developed in the way that it has been.

It was unrealistic to think that this project could achieve more than this within the resources that we had available, and the complex agendas that need to be negotiated to get agreement on, if provision is to be formally linked in the future.

Recruitment

An event was held to launch the project, at which 25 people were present and interested in enrolling on the course. Another 5 people gave their apologies. This was a positive response, which left us hopeful that it would recruit a good number of people. However in the first round of recruitment the course has only recruited 4 students. This is around half the number that we were hoping for. The success of the recruitment process may need to be measured over a longer period than the first cohort of students. The main bulk of the publicity went out end of July, and was not incorporated due to time constraints in the main University of Brighton hardcopy publicity, leaving a short period for registration. On reflection this may have not been a huge incentive for people to VCS workers to negotiate time off from work or indeed to finance their study.

Relationships

The project brought together people from three university departments, Cupp, Sussex Learning Network (SLN) and the Working Together Project (WTP). It has enabled a productive and ongoing relationship to develop between SASS at the UoB and a VCS provider (WTP), where for example WTP has been involved in the university's review of the MA PSP. It has also, along with a number of other projects including the Progression Pathways Project at the University of Sussex, led to University colleagues being better informed about various activities related to the project.

Issues that have arisen during or as a result of the project

The research into existing courses and modules was difficult on Student Central. It was unclear which modules were for which courses, and whether modules could be taken across faculties. Also, different faculties have different ways of presenting information, rather than having a standardised format for presenting learning outcomes, which would have enabled easier comparison. Also, staff are able to put blocks on access to information about courses to those not enrolled on them. This was extremely unhelpful for gathering information about what could be accessed. The point needs to be made, that if it is difficult for the research associate to access information on courses, then it is more than likely that it is difficult for students and potential students to find the information they need to make appropriate choices. This is backed up by what we found in the research phase of the project where a number of people who were interviewed had looked at a range of courses on offer, and had not found the MA Public Service Partnership and Management.

A number of people have commented also on how difficult it is to apply for, and enrol on postgraduate courses through the central online application process. One person sent an application which didn't arrive and had to rewrite it. It also seemed to take a while for applications to reach the course leader from central the central admissions department. Once given an offer, it is then difficult to enrol, which a number of people have fed back.

It might also be that the low recruitment in October 2006 is down to the short lead in time to the new voluntary sector pathway. The level of commitment needed for this course requires some planning for, as well as a good deal of mental preparation. There were a number of reasons for there being relatively short notice, including too many work commitments on the part of the VCS partner, the timing of the University committees that needed to approve the changes, as well as designing a leaflet by committee so to speak and then a large delay at the printing stage. If recruitment from the sector is still relatively low next October, then we need to ask some questions about the difference between people saying that they are interested in a course, and people actually committing. We have

already had feedback from a number of people who had expressed an interest saying that they would be unable to afford the course.

There has also been confusion about the cost of modules (£390), versus signing up to a certificate course (£1,560). A certificate course is three modules, and therefore the modules are more expensive if you do more than one, although you can opt to do a number of single modules, but you won't receive a fuller award without opting into it a paying the fuller amount. This does reduce the flexibility that VCS people said that they would like, because students would be unable to pick a module at a time and add modules slowly to receive an MA over the full 6 year time frame that is allowed.