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**Creators:** Durkin, C. and Irwin, W.

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**Developing Social Innovators and Social Entrepreneurs through a Creative and Innovative Programme**

**“Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself”**

**George Bernard Shaw**

**Chris Durkin** - Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Northampton and head of the Northampton Institute of Urban Affairs.

**Wray Irwin**- Head of the University Centre for Employability and Engagement, University of Northampton

**Abstract**

In today's increasingly interdependent and rapidly changing world, understanding the transformations of the 21st century that are characterized by uneven development, accelerated globalization, economic uncertainty, entrenched and complex social problems requires an academic approach that is interdisciplinary and focused on both innovation and commercialisation. This paper will focus on the development of a Social Venture Builder (SVB) programme at the University of Northampton; an example of a course that aims to develop the skills of the innovators and entrepreneurs whilst at the same time developing sustainable social ventures. We will place this in a wider context of the University of Northampton's institution wide strategy around social enterprise and how this is developing from one that concentrates on developing social enterprises to a more embedded strategy that develops creative and socially entrepreneurial students. Ultimately, as a University we believe we have to develop a creative learning environment that nurtures talent as well as engages with communities and neighbourhoods whilst connecting us with other local, regional, national and international networks.

**Introduction**

This paper will focus on the development of a postgraduate Social Venture Builder (SVB) programme; the M.A. in Social Innovation. The proposed programme aims to equip students with the knowledge base and skills sets that are essential in developing a sustainable social venture that will have social impact, and lever in other actors to effect social change in the public, private and third sectors; both nationally and internationally. This connects to the University's institutional social enterprise strategy in which the University has engaged with the social enterprise sector to invest in and support a range of social innovations to effect positive social change. Since its inception the SVB has developed and provided a balanced mix of support and skills development within those organisations and innovations supported but has lacked the ability to provide those individuals with any mechanism by which their competence and skills can be recognised.

This development in turn can be seen within the context of developing narratives about the changing role of Universities in society, social policy developments and in turn is a creative response to market-led demand from the social investment market, strategic actors within the provision of public services and the social enterprise sector. To be effective we believe there is a need to address not only the issues of investability of social innovation but also its marketability and capability of the leadership within social enterprise activity to effect change. The development of a post graduate qualification which builds skills and competence within the sector, alongside the development of an investable and marketable social innovation not only bridges these gaps but fits within the university's strategic aims and objectives.

We have structured this paper into sections, starting with a brief discussion about the changing role of Universities, second placing the development within a wider social policy context, thirdly examining the developing University strategy and finally focusing on the programme, its design and the pedagogic approach adopted.

### **The Changing role of Universities**

The title of this section suggests that Universities have changed and yet if you look at the structure of the majority of Institutes of Higher Education they remain organised into schools, subject areas or faculty; structures that were put in place hundreds of years ago. However, if you focus on Universities role in society it has gained in significance in areas as diverse as places to enhance social mobility, centres of research, knowledge transfer and enterprise. Universities are, for instance, increasingly important in regional economic development and are also focused more strategically on the skills agenda. In summary, Universities are 'community anchors' part of increasingly diverse social, community and entrepreneurial networks who can be innovative and transformational, breaking through traditional barriers.

In addition to the changing role of Universities in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, their relevance is being called into question in part due to the changing financing of higher education. As students are being increasingly forced to shoulder the financial burden of courses, questions are being asked about added value and the relevance of the curricula taught to the needs of present day society.

Universities like other institutions are being forced to adapt and change. The job environment, for instance, is changing rapidly in part due to the reduction in public sector funding. The latter has had a particular effect on the University of Northampton where many of our graduates have traditionally gone into the public sector.

### **Wider Social Policy Issues**

We can also see during the 1990s and early 2000s an emerging policy agenda around social enterprise and social innovation both within the U.K. and in Europe connected in part to social cohesion. The financial 'crash' in 2007/8, in particular, posed some significant issues including:

- The fundamental essence of western capitalism and its focus on short term profit;
- The role of the state;
- The large numbers of young people not in education employment or training, and

- The increasing demand for welfare services at a time of financial constraints.

However, to 'blame' the changes taking place on a shrinking state is to ignore the changing needs of an increasingly complex and uncertain society. We can also see a society where institutions have been breaking down and where many organisations are perhaps not fit for purpose with the changing demographics, reduced public expenditure and the need for less centralised public services, for instance, the national health service was designed for episodic care whereas currently the majority of the NHS's resources are going on long term conditions. In addition we are an ageing society that is demanding more personalised, personalised and locally designed services.

What is clear in this narrative is that social problems and needs are not neatly defined and do not operate in departments - they are complicated and interconnected; societies are made up of complex social eco systems (Bloom and Dees 2008). Equally if we concentrate too narrowly on the problems and issues, we concentrate purely on the negatives, the weaknesses and the deficits losing sight of the strengths and assets of people living in communities. In part the focus on experts and professionals as the prime 'source of wisdom' may have inadvertently reduced people's own abilities because as the great Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire would say we need to recognise the 'lived experience' of the people that we are working with.

What is clear is that services that were designed centrally in the 1950's are increasingly seen as not fit for purpose in an era of personalised and localised services. Within this context Local authorities are having to come increasingly become commissioners of services rather than deliverers. This can be seen as the evolution of a 'mixed economy of welfare'. As Rick Muir and Imogen Parker (2014) point out the United Kingdom has gone through a number of phases since the 1950s from a centrally designed system up to the 1980s, a market driven system until 2000's and what they see to be emerging today is what they call a relational state which requires different and more localised approaches.

### **Raising the Bar**

The University of Northampton is a relatively new Higher education institution located in an increasingly competitive environment which if it is to survive and prosper needs to change. The appointment of a new Vice Chancellor in 2010 signalled the start of a period of significant change. A plan for organisational change was put into place in 2011; a strategy which put social enterprise at the centre of its approach for transformation, community engagement, and survival. This recognised the fact that it had to play to its strengths and develop a 'unique selling point' with particular fortes in a variety of areas including health, social sciences, creative industries, education, business and enterprise.

The strategy which was called 'Raising the Bar' aimed to create a University that is the 'No. 1 Higher Education Institution (HEI) for social enterprise in the United Kingdom. The strategy is unique in that the university has set itself an institutional wide agenda which integrates social enterprise into:

- The student offer;
- Teaching, learning and research;
- Corporate and Community engagement, and

- Delivering public service improvements that are scalable and sustainable within Northamptonshire and beyond.

The social enterprise key driver were seen to unite work carried out in all Schools of the University and many of its Departments; enhancing the University's commitment to enterprise promotion, community interaction, and regional engagement; widening participation, third sector partnership, student volunteering and employability. The whole arena of social enterprise is, however, fraught with definitional problems. The one used by the UK government is the following:

“a social enterprise is an organisation ‘with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners’”. (Cabinet Office 2006: 10)

The fact that there is no agreed legal definition of social enterprise, the danger was at the beginning that we were too focused on starting up new organisational forms called social enterprises. This focus on an organisational construct was acknowledged and in 2012 the University adopted a definition that enabled it to focus its attentions on specific activities whilst allowing flexibility to explore potential new ground as the opportunities arose. The University definition of Social Enterprise is as an organisation that:

“Uses market disciplines to achieve a social outcome driven by social values”

In turn the University aimed to show its commitment to social enterprises that deliver:

- 1) An enhanced student experience;
- 2) Values of social inclusion, social impact, social innovation and change, and
- 3) Entrepreneurial, innovation and enterprise skills.

The importance of these values cannot be overstated because they provide the parameters for engagement with students, staff and surrounding communities; an agenda that if it is to succeed needs to be value and mission driven.

Whatever the definition used it was part of a wider development 'in doing' business which comes from socially innovative approaches being adopted, social innovation in this context being defined as:

“... new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations.” (Bureau of European Policy Advisers, European Commission 2010:9).

The University's holistic strategy for the first year consisted of three elements:

1. A new student offer (all students are able to work in, volunteer, start or explore social enterprise as part of their degree course);
2. The integration of teaching, learning and research with social enterprise, and

### 3. The support for and development of the social enterprise sector in the county, the region, nationally and internationally.

A series of initiatives were developed and launched during this initial phase, including the appointment of a social entrepreneur in residence (SEiR). This was a joint project developed with the Young Foundation in which the SEiR worked with staff, students and local communities as a talent scout, spotting potential entrepreneurs and ideas that will transform into new cost effective services – services that have social impact, are sustainable and have potential to scale. His focus was, therefore, on systemic change, community Engagement and venture building and as part of this work the Big Ideas Bonanza was launched which was a programme that invited people to submit ideas on how to tackle social inequalities. This in essence was the genesis of the Social Venture Builder programme (SVB). Early initiatives focussed on the development of ideas into start-up ventures. Building upon research related to ideas generation, creative spaces for venture development and the role of technology in capturing and leading innovation, a range of approaches were utilised to spark new venture ideas. This strategy raised the profile of the University's position in this arena and led to over 1100 applications being received over 3 'Calls for Ideas'. These were of varying quality and appropriateness came from any sector; not just limited to social enterprise and were not always start up proposals.

Selecting the ideas in which we would invest our time, money and other resources presented another challenge. Whilst adopting a traditional 'Dragons Den' approach, this did not always identify the innovation that would lead to scalability or sustainability. Although the majority of those applicants that got through to the Dragon's Den failed to secure investment they went on to sustain, grow and develop their venture to a greater level than those that won. The reason for this was identified as the impact of the pitch made by the applicant to the Dragon's Den panel: in particular the passion and attractiveness of the applicant's pitch and ideas to the panel. Analysis indicated that of the 12 awarded funding through the Dragons Dens 10 were start up propositions where the panels' comments highlighted the enthusiasm, passion and clear commitment of the applicant. Whereas those with existing propositions which had a track record were seen as a little less passionate, 'under presented' their idea, and presented the problems they faced rather than the potential the proposition had.

In effect those propositions which had a track record were disadvantaged through the process because they were more reality based and as a result the enthusiasm for the idea got lost in the process as the real reason for wanting support was not the money on offer but the expertise available. By focussing on developing existing ventures which have a track record or evidence base on reframing the idea and developing the entrepreneur we found we were able to have greater impact and support ventures in a much more meaningful way.

The research supported this view; and indicated that the University had an additional role which other venture support organisations were not in a position to provide. Research into the effectiveness of Investment readiness programmes (Mason and Harrison 2004) identified that focussing on the ideas marketability together with the investability of ventures was the key focus of all such programmes. What they missed was the skills development of the entrepreneur. This was crucial as even after accessing investment or winning new businesses, the skills of the entrepreneur to build a venture with the right skills base and culture was crucial for its further development and

success. By incorporating this into a support programme and recognising the skills development of the entrepreneur through the venture development process by accrediting their development, we identified that we would have a unique and attractive offer. It was on this base that the Social Venture Builder programme was developed.

### **The Social Venture Builder**

Since 2011 the University has engaged with the social enterprise sector to invest in and support a range of social innovations to effect positive social change. This incubator programme, the SVB has developed and provided a balanced mix of support and skills development within those organisations and innovations supported; but has lacked the ability to provide those individuals with any mechanism by which their competence and skills can be recognised.

After consultation with a range of stakeholders we decided that the best way forward to deliver investable and marketable innovations alongside recognition for skills development is to accredit the SVB as part of Post Graduate Diploma award and provide a pathway to a full Master's qualification for those interested. This combination of social venture incubation methodology with an accredited programme which builds skills in social innovation we felt would open up the market not only to UK based ventures, but would also have international appeal; as well as providing a new academic option for those interested in international development, business, third sector and the wider changes in public service and health delivery.

The first task for any programme is to decide what should be included and whether this was going to be a wholly new programme, an amalgam of existing modules or a combination of existing and new modules. At the core of the programme, we decided, was going to be a relatively new 20 credit module which had been designed for the M.A. Youth & Community Work which was called 'Managing Social Entrepreneurship' and which focused on the design and development of a social venture. The module on the M.A. Youth and Community Work aims to provide an in depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities for social entrepreneurship in the creation and co-production of innovative solutions to unmet social needs and the role of end user and community engagement in the innovation process.

### **M.A. Social Innovation**

After our initial idea exploration we began to look at possible options and in discussion with colleagues from the Northampton Business School we concluded that we needed to design a completely new programme; the M.A. Social Innovation. Core to the programme was 'Innovation' not just as an outcome but as a means to that end. It also had to acknowledge an asymmetry of knowledge and expertise in favour of the 'student' who in this case would be an experienced innovator and entrepreneur who would bring knowledge and practical understanding to the programme that may not be available to the lecturer. The role of lecturer as the facilitator of learning within a programme they did not necessarily control had to be redefined.

The innovation had to be evident in the structure, content and delivery model and as a result even the module mentioned in the previous paragraph needed to be rewritten away from a focus on 'start up's to 'scaling' existing services, and in a way that 'pulled in' new thinking rather than applying existing knowledge. The programme naturally fell into two halves – the first part is the post

graduate diploma which includes the venture building and the second part is a Work Based synthesis designed by the student as either a traditional academic thesis on a subject of their choice related to their venture or a more practice based piece of work.

The programme has three clear aims to:

1. Develop skills and leadership capability within organisations across all sectors engaged in social innovation;
2. Provide a flexible programme that can be delivered both nationally and internationally and across any sector embedding Ashoka U Changemaker campus ethos into the curriculum, and
3. Develop a pipeline of investable social innovations which are also marketable.

Putting the word Innovation in the title of any new course is in some respects a risk because you are making claims before you begin, a point that was not lost on some of the panel members at the validation event!

There were a number of specifications that we wanted to incorporate in the design of the programme, these included:

- Student centred and personalised learning;
- Deferred fees;
- Blended learning;
- Support from academics, mentors and business support;
- Social venture development as the core module;
- Policy being very much the lens through which the venture was developed and framed, and
- Multidisciplinary in approach.

The programme has been designed to be delivered in full-time mode over two years, involving students attending three residential master classes at the University of Northampton. Each residential master class lasts three days and will provide elements of the taught input for all the modules in the programme. The starting point was, therefore, to design a programme that did not use traditional didactic teaching methods, as Albert Einstein once said:

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.”

This provides the essence of the master classes as they develop the students’ critical thinking and endeavour to enable the students to ‘embrace the entire world’ and ‘think differently’. Between the Master Classes, students’ studies will be supported through access to online materials, personal mentoring support and business support services. The delivery team have worked with the University’s Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education on a transformational learning



process to create and develop aligned interactive educational Resources. This helped develop the on line e-tivities to support the venture development as well as embed the values and ethos of the programme into the structure and expectations of all involved. The on line site will over time be part of a large online international learning resource centre expanded by the activities of the participants.

All students on the MA in Social Innovation will have access to a personal mentor who will supplement the support provided by academic tutors and business advisers. The mentors are social entrepreneurs who have personal experience in implementing social innovations and/or running social enterprises. The mentors are critical friends and supporters who will act to support personal non-academic needs and provide access to networks and additional sector specific support to help students develop their venture.

Although the programme is divided conventionally into modules and each of these modules in turn contains assessments, each individual student will have to design their own programme through a personal development plan. This in turn allows the students in part to manage their learning and the development of their social venture in their own individual way 'drawing down' information when they want it and not just when the lecturer wants to deliver it.

### **Open Space Learning**

We have mentioned already about the three master class weekends which will be the main face to face contacts between academics and students. The structure of these weekends caused us some anxiety in that we wanted the weekends to be thought provoking, creative, exploratory and in large part experiential. Our colleague Helen Ure, Senior Lecturer in Work Based Learning at the Business school came up with the solution which was to adopt the Open Space Learning methodology. "In Open Space meetings, events and organizations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance, such as: What is the strategy, group, organization or community that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?"<sup>i</sup>

This methodology we feel will suit the participants because it will involve them in the design of the curriculum ensuring that the agenda is relevant to the needs of the participants. The open space learning approach will be adopted on the second day with day one being structured and the third day will focus on the individual. In adopting this approach the dynamic changes from the expert novice approach to a participatory co- produced model of learning; as Benjamin Franklin once said "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."

### **Conclusion**

Although we feel the design, content and approach is innovative addressing the needs of an expanding market we have had to recognise that we are breaking new ground. The latter has meant that although to date we have put out calls for ideas as a prelude to a more conventional University admissions process we have not had sufficient students. However, we now have funding, contracts and recruitment under way to commence the next cohort in September/October. In addition we have considerable international interest both for delivery overseas and as a consequence we are looking at holding international ideation 'boot camps' and also a shortened programme for students to undertake workshops here in the U.K. as well as undertaking written work back in their home

communities (with on line submission) recognising that a social venture will only succeed if it is contextualised in its own setting/community/neighbourhood.

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### Contact:

Chris Durkin  
Associate Professor  
Head of the Northampton Institute of Urban Affairs  
University of Northampton  
Park Campus  
Boughton Green Road  
Northampton  
NN27AL  
Tel: 01604 892080  
Email: [chris.durkin@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:chris.durkin@northampton.ac.uk)

<http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?AboutOpenSpace>

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