**Developing innovative approaches to tackling complex social problems: opportunities and challenges**

**Voluntary Sector Studies Network Day Conference, Wednesday 9th May 2018**

**York Business School, York Saint John University**

**Report on the day**

*Mike Calvert, Academic Development Directorate and Mike Hemmings, York Business School, welcomed participants to York Saint John University.*

*In brief*

The morning highlighted innovative projects, many reliant on voluntary action, with several presentations pointing to service gaps or failures in the ways that current marketised services and formalised contracts operated to exclude or exacerbate social inequalities. The afternoon drew on critical research to examine both recent government and research led initiatives, questioning and reassessing normative conceptual thinking about innovation and social challenges. While the day had fewer participants than some recent VSSN seminars, there was lively discussion on presentations with questions on theory, practice and methods of the projects described. Most of the presentations provided a range of illustrative examples from studies and projects. As ever, there was potentially more debate and questions than we had time for! From informal feedback so far: a successful and informative day.

*In more detail*

Joe Micheli, Head of Commissioning, Early Intervention, Prevention and Community Development City of York Council started the morning off speaking about challenges and developmental projects initiated in York, including through community based and co-produced projects in different neighbourhoods. He stressed the importance of local trust and relationship building and gave examples of local social projects, largely dependent on voluntary action. He highlighted the positive role voluntary action and organisations could play in cities like York in the face of cuts in public service budgets and how success in providing alternatives relied on strong local leadership around civic engagement.

Rebecca Ince from the Third Sector Research Centre and Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham explored voluntary sector projects involved in mental health crisis support. While there were a number of creative, innovative and cross-agency projects, heavy dependence on volunteers, and fragmentation of planning and funding meant that they could be short-term, piecemeal and fragile; whereas continuity and sustainable projects were badly needed. Consequently inequalities in access to support and postcode lotteries are sustained, often at the expense of the most vulnerable and at risk groups in the population. Questions and discussion which followed raised issues including how state institutions could nurture better spaces for civil society to work well and creatively. Currently conditionality and short-termism fragment and undercut positive developments, creating a patchy geographical system and a lack of systemic change.

Akash Puranik, undertaking research in Public Leadership and Social Enterprise at the Open University Business School explained his ethnographic research into non-contractual, informal collaborations, demonstrating the fluidity of organisational characteristics, ‘rules’ and their subversion in informal groupings, and reliance on trust relationships. Akash provided data from two groups - one purposely aiming to build local social relations, the other to promote support for refugee groups. Questions and discussion mainly focused on conceptual framing suggested by some of the data, including on boundary work, social capital, value and networks, and how power and authority were assumed, or trust and reciprocity built.

Zoe Raven, the Founder and CEO of Acorn Early Years Foundation, Milton Keynes, explored the challenges for social enterprises in the Early Years Sector, explaining ways that the current marketisation of services and distribution of funding support for childcare exacerbated social inequalities and undermined the quality and diverse range of activities that could be offered to young children. Combined with a severe decline in local authority services, the attainment gaps between more and less socially advantaged children entering school become ever wider as some children and families found it impossible to afford or access early years care and education. Zoe is exploring cross-subsidy among social enterprises as an alternative model to marketised provision to consider ways that this could realign the negative spiral of inequalities. Comments emphasised how patchy local authority provision and support impacts on childcare provision increasing relative advantages for already privileged groups. Other questions and comments highlighted parallels in other areas of service provision, including in primary provision, where marketisiation and policies which depended on voluntary contributions to add value to services had similar effects and undermined quality of services in areas of social disadvantage.

*Just before lunch information and announcements, included*:

1. Don’t forget the annual Voluntary Sector conference in September 2018 in London – deadline for abstracts extended! Get proposals in ASAP and there may still be a chance!
2. Watch the VSSN website for the announcement of future day seminars on diversity: the first in November 2018 will focus on race, culture and migrants and VSSN hopes to run this with support of community members in Birmingham. Please also contact us if you’d like to/or would be able to host a future event execofficer@vssn.org.uk

Chris Dayson from Sheffield Hallam University started the afternoon session, outlining research being undertaken with colleagues from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Newcastle University on the effectiveness of Social Impact Bonds (SIB) for addressing complex social issues such as social prescribing (SP). He explored a comparison of two English commissioning areas, one using SIB in commissioning, one commissioning SP through traditional means. Drawing on new public governance and new public management as conceptual models to investigate how each model was implemented, he identified a number of challenges and critical conclusions which also highlighted the hidden transaction costs of SIBS (which are often marketed on the basis of cost saving). The research also points to a need to consider complexity literature to interrogate the competing principles and divergent processes and outcomes. The paper drew some lively questions and discussion on different models and approaches.

Alison Body and Emily Lau from Canterbury Christ Church University highlighted research on critical approaches to learning in higher education through students engaging in a participatory action research (PAR) project with children and young people, and provided rich examples from the projects. They contextualised the work within recent youth voluntary (social) action and national citizen schemes which largely promote individualised ideas with a focus on employability and ‘good’ (conformist) citizenship. Their research was also framed by political literature pointing to ways in which a dominantly neo-liberal society promotes and promulgates such ideas as normative within schooling and how from an early age, risky or controversial ideas are often suppressed both at home and school. The PAR project as a third year UG module was also controversial, provoking resistance but subsequently positive feedback. The data drawn from children’s participation on different topics illustrated that exposure at an early age to alternative discourse and experiences in education can help to them to engage in active enquiry and develop a critical consciousness. For the HE students PAR offered a way to reassess learning experiences, both their own and in relation to children. It disrupted expected ways of imparting and receiving information in both contexts, offering developmental and democratic learning alternatives. Again debate was lively, questioning some of the concepts, in particular the need to unpick the complexity of the impact of neo-liberalism, and extending the paper’s conclusions to other contexts.

The presentation from Helen Britton, a visiting fellow at the OU and running an education and consultancy company, extended thinking around social problems to an international context. Drawing on examples, including multi-stakeholder activities in South Africa, she argued that while social innovation gains considerable interest as a means of addressing social and economic challenges, too often they amount to ‘quick fix’ strategies which are totally inappropriate for complex and longstanding problems. Such strategies can also mask the barriers to social development work succeeding, which often relate to a lack of core funding, resources or adequate research to assess how to construct better or more appropriate initiatives. Conclusions included better investment in understanding and thinking through new or innovative models; and a better support infrastructure and coordination of agencies if ‘innovation’ is identified as the solution.

The last presentation of the day posed a series of questions around assumptions about the innovative value of new technological applications. Sheila Cannon, Trinity Business School, Trinity College, Dublin and Raymond Dart, Trent School of Business, Trent University, Canada asked whether social enterprises using, for example, smartphone apps to address complex social problems were offering genuinely better solutions or simply presenting gimmicky distractions. The research was in its initial stages and the intention was to seek information from three different case organisations and to consider whether the same could be achieved without the apps. One organisation connected food bank (or similar) providers with supermarkets disposing waste food; the second used crowd sourced information on vacant properties; and the third offered an emotional check and monitor on mental health. The presenters were interested in developing research questions and additional ideas on literature and other relevant projects. The presentation drew considerable discussion including on how the apps would work for the intended beneficiaries and potential digital inclusions and exclusions. The debate also prompted some divisions between sceptics, optimists and those more neutral around these developments.

*Linda Milbourne, VSSN Steering group*