

Evaluating the impact of a Welsh Government lead education intervention: Economic regeneration or ‘soft’ outcome success?

Theme

Policy

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Short Abstract

It has not been uncommon for governments around the globe to follow post-school educational strategies that pursue skills development for economic competitiveness and social inclusion. Due to the public monies involved, it is perhaps inevitable that the measurable consequences attached to such government interventions are framed in terms of hard outcomes such as number of students completing programmes and jobs created. However, it is argued that success cannot be tidily explained by how many individuals achieve certain targets. Therefore, this paper utilises a regional development initiative in South Wales, UK (University of Heads of Valleys Institute – UHOVI) to explore the reality of hard versus soft outcome success. The journeys and learning trajectories of learners who have engaged with various aspects of the UHOVI offering will be appraised and reflected upon. The testimonials and journey narratives will be evaluated in order to present a broader insight into the project “success”.

Introduction

As Zepke & Leach (2010) commented, since 1999 it has not been uncommon for governments around the globe to follow post-school educational strategies that pursue skills development for economic competitiveness and social inclusion and cohesion. It is unsurprising that the HE sector is often pivotal to such strategies as they are seen as “the vehicle to develop processes for dissemination of new knowledge at a regional level”. (Hagen, 2002 pg. 207). Due to the public monies involved, it is perhaps inevitable that the measurable consequences attached to such

government interventions are framed in terms of hard outcomes such as number of students completing programmes and jobs created. However, as Butcher & Marsden (2005) suggested, success cannot be tidily explained by how many individuals achieve certain targets. Therefore, some authors have advocated (e.g. Dewson et al 2000; Hyland 2003; Zepke & Leach 2010) that it is important to also evaluate success of such educational intervention strategies in terms of “soft” outcomes; where success is also measured in terms of the distance travelled by the learner towards programme goals rather than by their final achievement and skill development.

This paper utilises a regional development initiative in South Wales, UK (University of Heads of Valleys Institute – UHOVI) to explore the reality of hard versus soft outcomes. The journeys and learning trajectories of learners who have engaged with various aspects of the UHOVI offering will be appraised and reflected upon.

Background the Heads of Valleys (HOVs) region

The South Wales valleys are the oldest regeneration region in the UK, having been established as an area for economic assistance by the Special Areas Act in 1934. In 1934, the problems facing the valleys were economic inactivity and unemployment, high levels of morbidity, under-developed communications, poor housing and low-levels of workforce skills. Unfortunately in 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government published a document entitled “Turning Heads” that outlined almost identical issues. For example, in the 2008 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, the three Local Authorities with the lowest medians in Wales were Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent and Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT), all of which fall within the Heads of Valleys region. In summary, a range of issues and significant challenges were identified in the “Turning Heads” document, including: high levels of economic inactivity ; low educational attainment and skills levels ; low quality of jobs and opportunities ; a high incidence of long term health problems ; an unfavourable image ; deprivation, a lack of quality housing and poorly equipped town centres ; limited transport and telecommunications links in some areas ; poor maintenance and management of key natural and historic assets.

University of Heads of Valleys Institute (UHOVI)

UHOVI is one facet of the Welsh Government’s response to the issues highlighted above. UHOVI was created in 2009 following a project proposal developed by the University of Wales, Newport and the University of Glamorgan. At the core of the UHOVI business plan is the aim to develop a knowledge and skills base within the HOV region that matches those set out in the Leitch Review (2006), thus enabling the region to offer a skilled labour force equipped for 21st century employment. In essence, UHOVI is substantially about developing higher skills levels – addressing the Welsh Government targets for the achievement of Level 4+ qualifications and through this the regeneration of the HOV region. UHOVI has three key features

namely, to make a measurable difference to identified sectors of the society and economy of the region; to provide access to all levels of expertise – from basics skills to postgraduate centres in a way that is coherent and targeted; to utilise an approach that involves integrated planning and collaborative provision, not only between the two universities, but with key partners in the local authorities, employers and FE sector. The identified sectors are : Creative and Cultural Industries ; Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths (including land based) ; Sport & Leisure (including tourism) ; Business Development ; Community & Voluntary/ Third Sector; Public Services: Health & Education and all curriculum has been designed to fit with one or more of these sectors. To bring about this significant up skilling UHOVI set out a target of achieving in excess of 4,000 new full-time equivalent learners by 2015. These numbers are being resourced through a combination of HEFCW funded credits and ESF Convergence funding drawn from Priorities 2 and 3 of the Structural Funds Programme. Foundation Degrees, Work Based Learning and an Escalator Project provide the three main foci of attention and Welsh Government has provided £10 million of funding for this ambitious project. In 2011 / 2012 the number of learners enrolled upon UHOVI programmes equated to 1553 students (864 female and 687 male.). So there has been some success in meeting the targets set.

In both the physical and cultural context the location of delivery is proving to be key. The typical profile of a potential learner in the HOV regions means that delivery in FE college, community centres and the workplace, is likely to be more attractive than delivery on a traditional university campus. Similarly, challenges attached to widening access agendas are very relevant as it is generally acknowledged that widening participation may result in increased failure and dropout rates for students (Cartney & Rouse 2006; Bennett 2003). Therefore the hard outcome targets can be even more difficult to achieve. Indeed, initial evaluation of the UHOVI project indicates that there have been retention issues. Additionally, the continued poor performance within the region at earlier levels, particularly the low attainment at level 3 means that there is a limited pool of learners qualified to enter onto UHOVI courses and modules.

Paper Presentation

Therefore, this paper presentation will disseminate the findings of a study that attempts to illuminate the “soft” outcome successes of the UHOVI project. The testimonials and experiences of 10 disparate UHOVI learners will be considered. Their journey and narratives will be evaluated in order to present a broader insight into the project “success”.

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