**Ways of working between third sector organizations and**

**UK universities: *Are we getting it right?***

*How can we as a regional university help understand the business development needs of local third sector organizations?[[1]](#endnote-1)* This was the starting point for our relatively broad-based research agenda (beginning in 2012). In this article, we highlight interrelated themes and offer strategic advice and recommendations for third sector leaders. We also highlight educational issues that are important for UK regional universities in their support of local third sector organizations[[2]](#endnote-2).

As part of our research journey (as a university business school), we encouraged various PhD students studying the topic area, developed several applied student projects, and used long term student placements to better understand – *who third sector organizations are and what they do, as well as what they might want from us as UK universities.* Qualitative data were analysed using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). Findings were interpreted based on emergent and subordinate thematic analyses, drawing on a combination of student reflections, focus group data and approximately 45 semi-structured interviews (with third sector organizations). In addition, we drew upon reflections from interactive seminars and observations of working with third sector support agencies.

From our preliminary research analyses, we highlight key themes/issues and offer various advice (see points 1- 6) for third sector organizations:

1. **Build your efficacy - share the burden, don’t attempt everything on your own!**

Supporting third sector belief in social achievement and business success is essential. Many smaller third sector organizations feel they have insufficient business skills or expertise (in-house). Therefore, securing external support for business goals and key milestones becomes really important. Interviewees and focus groups highlighted the need for mutual engagement and mentoring. As one focus group participant noted;

*“Is there a need to hand-hold? Is there a need to have a business mentor, or someone employed in business development?... maybe.  Or [perhaps] outside support…just to help them through that process, I think that’s really important…”*

Advice for smaller organizations, or those thinking of starting a not-for-profit is… *don’t attempt all of it on your own!* Instead, try to find/enlist others to work with (as part of a team). Link up with community-minded people who share your interests and goals. Seek out those whom you feel have the necessary drive and commitment for the road ahead. Leverage the expertise of trustees, tap into your local university for willing volunteers. Try to get a blend/mix of skills and functional expertise on-board in your new endeavour.

1. **Partnership, or own the business skills yourself - which is more important?**

Many smaller organizations mentioned a lack of business skills and an inability to prioritise time for accessing support for funding or bid preparation. From an organizational development perspective, yes, there is room for business education and external support. However, we found several social entrepreneurs who didn’t like to *‘own this responsibility’*. Basically, they didn’t consider it their primary driver, or mission goal. As one informant noted;

*“Social entrepreneurs by definition are creative people, most of them are chaotic including myself… I am interested in doing the thing and making the difference. …what’s lacking [ in terms of support] is organizations that say ‘I’ll come and do the fundraising for you and I’ll incorporate it into my bill.*

For larger organizations, there is often business training, skills and competences available in-house. However, smaller third sector organizations tend to require a lot more help with business planning, marketing and access to human resources.

We suggest that regional universities can help by promoting better access to their *‘student volunteer schemes’*, and/or business school staff working directly with smaller organizations on ‘*applied student projects’* or *‘year-out student placements’*. However, we also offer a gentle reminder to both parties, namely, the responsibility for long term business skills development and strategic direction ultimately belongs to the third sector organization in question – i.e. not the university, nor any other external consulting body!

1. **Develop your *‘social mission’* and be *‘business oriented’* – it is possible!**

Similar to the previous theme, we found that many third sector organizations feel they don’t know enough about the *‘business* *side of things’*. As a consequence, personal tensions can emerge, borne out of frustration with daily life as a social entrepreneur/ business person. Many practitioners want to feel creative and concentrate on their social, environmental or community mission. Some feel constrained by the burdensome bureaucracies and daily chores of business life.

Our reminder to third sector leaders is simply that the ‘*business side of things’* won’t go away! So, like it or loathe it, you will need to get skilled up, or find a way of bringing the necessary resources on-board with business planning, effective bid preparation, social networking etc.

1. **Develop applied student projects - everybody wins (well mostly)!**

Developing applied student projects (and placements) can be a really useful way for regional third sector organizations and universities to collaborate. However, applied projects can throw up unexpected surprises. Sometimes, despite best efforts, students can become overwhelmed and active management on the part of a university staff supervisory team is required.

From our own experience, there were mixed fortunes. Some groups worked incredibly well on applied marketing projects, whilst others withdrew because of personal and work issues on applied accounting projects. Lessons learnt suggest that whilst applied student projects and longer term placements can be incredibly beneficial, there are also inherent (strategic) risks.

Our recommendation for third sector organizations is to always ask/enquire about placement opportunities, but be cognizant that higher education students juggle a myriad of competing commitments – especially around examination time(s).

1. **Think about student volunteers - it’s not a bad idea!**

Young people are great! Many universities have active volunteering programmes, and it is something that students and third sector organizations gain a lot from. Participating students often learn (experientially) through student placement, or work experience, and it is good for their CV’s. For the organization, there are benefits in terms of harnessing the intellectual enthusiasm and creative efforts of students.

For third sector organizational leaders, we recommend you consider the practical *‘wins’* of having energetic young people to share your ideas with and lighten the workload. Plus, they often have great marketing, or social media suggestions you would never think off, and usually all for free!

1. **Your regional/local university should be there for you!**

Universities can be a focal point for information gathering and research dissemination among third sector stakeholders. They offer a *‘neutral space’* to hold debates, symposia and conferences. Universities should act as research hubs, and share their resources with local third sector organizations. Many UK regional universities get involved in specialist knowledge exchange, or third sector consulting activities (such as social return on investment projects) that may also be relevant to your organization.

So, our advice to third sector leaders is straightforward - *browse your regional university webpages and send an email to relevant research or knowledge exchange directors*. Perhaps, there are mutual opportunities on offer you are not immediately aware off!

**Concluding remarks**

Going forward after the Brexit vote (2016), many regional universities will place a stronger emphasis on collaborative working, short-courses and research/ knowledge exchange in the UK. The espoused roles of universities are to engage in high quality teaching, research, and knowledge exchange. Increasingly, this should involve developing specialized courses, *for example, business planning, how to apply for funding, understanding social return on investment, or investigating what ‘sustainability’ means for the third sector*.

Ultimately, the relationship between regional third sector organizations and UK universities is a matter of priorities, resources, commitment and willingness to co-operate. Our final piece of advice to local third sector organizations is *don’t be shy about coming forward – in relation to any of the themes, or advice outlined above!*

1. “*‘Third sector organisations’* describes the range of organisations that are neither public sector nor private sector. It includes voluntary and community organisations (both registered charities and other organisations such as associations, self-help groups and community groups), social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives.” (National Audit Office UK). A full definition is available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/successful-commissioning/introduction/what-are-civil-society-organisations-and-their-benefits-for-commissioners/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Research was partly funded by Enterprise Educators (UK). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)