

Social Innovation for a civic mission: Societal and learner gains through collaboration

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Context: Over the course of the last 12 months Simply Do Ideas and Coleg y Cymoedd have been exploring how the conjoined worlds of institutional civic mission and social innovation connect with the priorities of local businesses in the South Wales Valleys region. The Valley's Innovation Project (VIP) combined the entrepreneurial skills of young learners with the economic and social need for businesses to innovate, using the digital innovation platform Simply Do Ideas to enable the collaboration.

Literature Review: In the UK, the majority of universities and colleges are part-funded by the Government and have a charter to deliver social and economic benefit to the communities they serve. This creates a difficulty in defining what is public and private in education, as it is mainly a political and social construct which changes over time (Carnoy *et al.*, 2014). The lack of a clear definition between public and private outputs means the discussion is open ended (Daviet, 2017) and those definitions between economic and social outputs are still evolving (Marginson, 2016). The remedy for this potentially comes in the form of the institutional 'Civic mission' of higher and further education institutions in Wales has gained greater importance for institutions over the past few years (Thomas and Vokes, 2018, p. 2). Exploring the effectiveness of civic mission and if the boundary between social and economic outputs can be either clearly defined, or even crossed, is a key question for this study leading to the following research questions.

Research Questions: RQ1: Do learners gain entrepreneurial confidence and skills through social innovation challenges?

RQ2: What is the economic impact for local businesses using socially-driven innovation challenges?

RQ3: Does the civic mission of VIP educational partners align with local business priorities?

RQ4: How does a digital solution enhance proximity between education and industry?

Methodology: This study uses a sequential mixed research methodology combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore the research questions generated (Saunders, M.N.K., Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The purpose for using this method is facilitate the discovery of new insights which are then expanded upon sequentially in further research using a different methodology. The approach was chosen to explore each of the research questions from multiple perspectives which “fortifies and enriches” to ensure findings are triangulated and provides more generalisable results (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 3).

Method: A combination of quantitative surveying and semi-structured interview content from 5 educational institutions and 2 employers outlined a wide range of learning and understanding to influence the future direction of social innovation activity.

Findings: The key findings of the research are presented below:

- 1. Learners gain entrepreneurial confidence and skills through social innovation challenges**

Skills gains were empirically evidenced across the following areas; creative thinking (+27%), creating and seizing opportunities (+28%), digital skills (+33%), making

ideas a reality (+33), self-reflection (+47%), decision-making (+19%), and communication skills (+52%). Respondents also indicated that before the project they had, on average, ‘a moderate amount of confidence’ in starting a business with that confidence growing to ‘a lot of confidence’ in starting-up after the project.

2. Social innovation can provide economic benefit and wider benefits for local businesses

Employers and educators highlighted that they saw economic benefits from social innovation such as ‘improving processes’, ‘income’, and savings on ‘cost and time’. This makes social innovation more attractive for future business participants.

3. Civic mission of VIP educational partners aligns with local business priorities

Both businesses and educational partners illustrated knowledge, awareness and understanding of civic values and the importance of their local communities. All parties highlighted the development of talent and skills and supporting local businesses as key features of their strategic and operational activity. It should also be noted that care must be taken in future social innovation projects to ensure alignment of civic values between business and education is established during project inception.

4. Digital solutions enhance proximity between education and industry

All parties used the Simply Do Ideas platform to create, manage and assess solutions to these social innovation challenges. Both education and business representatives highlighted the ability and importance of these platforms in engaging young people above and beyond traditional methods of collaboration.

Conclusion: The Valley’s Innovation Project has highlighted the importance of social innovation for learners, educational institutions, and employers to continuously improve, which is clear from the results of this evaluation. There are clearly illustrated links between civic mission and the economic outcomes required by business. Institutional understanding of civic mission has also been confirmed and appears to align with social, rather than economic imperatives, building on the current perspectives on this issue (Carnoy *et al.*, 2014; Daviet, 2017). The learning from the existing project and evaluation will allow future regional and national social innovation projects, for example those forming the recent Foundational Economy Fund projects (Welsh Government, 2020), to build on the successes of this project. The challenge of delivering civic mission outcomes is one that all areas of community will need to take-up as we enter a period of socio-economic uncertainty. Investment in social innovation is vital to the advancement of not just enterprise education, but the civic society as a whole.

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