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CAN UNIVERSITIES DELIVER REGENERATION SKILLS? REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF CHESTER'S 'REGENERATION FOR PRACTITIONERS' USING A WORK BASED LEARNING FRAMEWORK

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Introduction

Chester, some would argue, is not a particularly good location for a regeneration programme. It is a small, prosperous city close to well established, existing programmes in Liverpool and Manchester. But it is located in the North West of England, close to the Welsh border. Both North Wales and the North West have major problems associated with poor economic performance and attendant social deprivation. It also offers a very different approach to regeneration education as is explained more fully below.

Informal meetings to consider the development of a regeneration programme began in Autumn 2005 between members of the Faculties of Lifelong Learning and Social Sciences. Early on, it was decided to use the University's Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework rather than more conventional delivery. The use of WBIS and e-learning provided the opportunity to develop a new kind of programme, which could attract learners unable to afford traditional Masters' programmes or commit to day release.

Before describing how the programme works it is necessary to explain something about regeneration in the UK and its relationship to education and training.

The Regeneration Industry and Educational Requirements

There are many definitions of 'Regeneration' but at heart it is any activity which seeks to redress social and economic spatial inequalities. Usually these activities may be underwritten by state policy and resources but there are other agencies (such as the Church and voluntary sector) who are also engaged. The presence of state investment also stimulates opportunities for private investment. The private sector is therefore also heavily involved.

By international standards, the UK is a prosperous country but there are significant spatial variations in wealth and opportunity, far more so than in many comparable European countries. In broad terms the south of England is a sea of prosperity with islands of deprivation, while the North, Scotland and Wales are much poorer with isolated pockets of prosperity (Gripaios 2002). Marked spatial inequality is evident at a regional and sub regional level, including extreme pockets of deprivation in the London boroughs (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2006). As a result, regeneration is a significant activity in all parts of the country employing many thousands of people.

Regeneration activity has significantly increased since the late 1990s. There are now more people than ever working in regeneration, performing a myriad of roles, for a multiplicity of organisations. Practitioners rarely come directly from universities, simply because it is rarely studied by undergraduates. The usual entry route is from established professional backgrounds such as town planning, housing, community work and surveying. The most authoritative review of skill requirements in the sector estimated there are over 100 occupational groups involved (Egan 2004). The presence of existing professions and the multiplicity of roles performed by regeneration practitioners has prevented the formation of a distinctive regeneration profession with an associated exclusive body of knowledge.

Regeneration practitioners tend to be graduates so over the years a number of universities have developed post graduate programmes to cater for those wishing to obtain a named qualification and perhaps acquire formal skills lacking in their first degree. Take up of such programmes has been relatively low, in part due to cost and time constraints. Since the mid 1990s there has been a growing conviction amongst employers, practitioners and government of a need to formally equip regenerators with appropriate skills and qualifications.

At a national level the Academy for Sustainable Communities, based in Leeds, seeks to promote skills. At a regional level in England, there is a body linked to each of the Regional Development Agencies dedicated to promoting good practice. Alongside this, other bodies, such as the British Urban Regeneration Association (BURA) and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) run a variety of training and learning programmes and events. Despite this, a recent survey found a quarter of all posts are unfilled because of skill shortages with an anticipated shortfall of 70% unfilled vacancies over the next decade (Academy for Sustainable Communities 2007).

From being a fringe activity in the thirty years ago, regeneration has become increasingly mainstream. The challenge is whether there is sufficient capacity to facilitate learning for the many practitioners who need it. The rest of this paper describes one means of achieving this using a pre-validated Work Based Learning framework.

The Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) Framework: Underpinning Principles

WBIS is one of a number of work based and action learning programmes which operate in UK universities and was developed by a team of tutors at Chester in the late 1990s. Enrolments began in 1998 and there are currently about 800 WBIS learners, following a variety of learning pathways. WBIS is informed by a number of theoretical and political developments in the field of learning largely dating from the late 1990s. This was a time when there was a remarkable coming together of developments in the field of learning theory but which also coincided with an interest in the facilitation of formal learning in the workplace (Department for Education and Employment 1998; Eraut et al 1998; Sutherland 1998).

Important underpinning theories include that of Andragogy which holds that adult learning preferences are significantly different from children and young people. Adults are motivated by such things as a 'need to know', especially as this relates to solving problems in their lives (Knowles et al 1998). Other important and related constructs include Situated Learning theory, where it is assumed that knowledge for most learners is context bound (Lave and Wenger 1991) and Action learning which holds that learning stems from doing and experiencing that which happens around us (Weinstein 1995). Defining knowledge in terms of the learners' own experience rather than the subject interests of tutors has resulted in WBIS being trans-disciplinary rather than subject specific.

Another distinctive feature is the inculcation among learners of reflective practice. No particular model is advocated. Instead learners are directed to a variety of writings on reflection, usefully summarised by Moon (2000). Reflective practice is not encouraged simply as part of a programme of accredited learning. It is also seen as the basis for on-going learning and forms part of a wider commitment among tutors to the idea of learning as the basis for professional practice and lifelong learning (Field 2006). An important aspect of reflective practice is that it moves beyond thought to action. WBIS is explicitly designed to facilitate improved performance in the workplace.

Within Fuller and Unwin's (2002) five models of work based learning, WBIS performs a variety of roles but it is principally designed to bring formal instruction to social learning in the work place as the basis for reflective practice and hence altered actions. Individual pathways of learning are constructed for all levels of learning in the context of higher education. A similar framework, *Learning Through Work*, has been developed at the University of Derby (Minton 2007)

The philosophy underpinning the WBIS programme has a number of key objectives, which can be summarised as follows:

- To bridge the divide between knowledge located in higher education and that in 'real life', specifically the work place so that both are informed by one another
- Enable individuals to engage with lifelong learning by sensitising them to their learning needs and preferred methods of learning.
- To place the learner and their needs at the centre of the learning process
- To provide low cost flexible education that recognises the profoundly social nature of the learning process
- To value knowledge from all sources including that of learners and recognise that we as facilitators learn from them as well as they from us
- To enable individuals to capture their informal, practical experience and reflect on that experience in the light of more formal theoretical knowledge
- In effect, WBIS attempts to encourage internal dialogue in the learner between informal and formal knowledge as the basis for altered action. It therefore seeks to transform individuals and organisations

The important point to note is that the context for Chester's approach to regeneration education is not regeneration or knowledge of regeneration but a commitment to an innovative approach to education, allied to knowledge of regeneration theory and practice.

WBIS in Practice: Devising Learner Pathways

The WBIS programme is the subject of validation and review not the individual learning pathways learners construct within it. This enables tutors to tailor learning to the needs of the individual or groups of learners. It also allows learners to begin and end their studies as they wish. Some pathways, like those for regeneration practitioners, are constructed with groups of other communities of learning interest. Other pathways are tailored to the needs of individual learners or in some cases, those of an employing organisation. Learners, provided they meet standard academic entry criteria, determine not only the content of their programme but also the award and title they obtain. Postgraduates can opt for a Certificate, Diploma or Masters. The title of their programme reflects their preference and the content of the programme. So while most regeneration practitioners opt for MA Regeneration Practice (WBIS), learners can develop titles to meet their needs, such as Regeneration and Community Engagement, Regeneration in the Context of Informal Adult Learning and so on.

Learners on the programme can study modules which have been developed specifically for WBIS or any module in the University, provided it is relevant and at the appropriate level. Individual learning needs can be catered for through the use of project modules or, if there is sufficient demand, new modules are developed on request. There is a rolling programme of module accreditation to accommodate changing requirements. Tutors can therefore adapt to the needs of new learners without the need for time consuming validations.

WBIS awards can be obtained with up to 50% Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL), whether certificated or experiential. This enables experienced practitioners to obtain academic credit for their acquired knowledge. This is especially attractive for older learners (one is 58) keen to obtain recognition for years of experience. Younger people, anxious to develop their skills, tend to opt for taught content,

Learning Strategies and the Learner Experience

A key feature of the programme is the emphasis on work based learning. Work based learning is now an established feature of many university programmes in the UK (Nixon et al 2006) although no others have adapted it to the needs of regeneration practitioners. Learning at work is recognised as a diverse activity, incorporating informal experience and short term

training, as well as the more formal learning associated with a university programme (Institute of Personnel and Development 2000). Within organisations, it is widely regarded as a key element of Human Resource Development (Beattie 2006). While it is an established feature in the Faculty of Lifelong Learning it is an entirely new experience for tutors in the Faculty of Social Science.

The first module learners usually complete is therefore not to do with regeneration at all but is designed to inculcate the values of reflective practice and sensitise the learner to their learning needs and preferred learning style. Within the module students conduct a self assessment of past and present achievements, as the basis for assessing their learning needs. From this they develop their intended learning pathway on the programme. In addition to developing their Pathway Rationale, learners are also introduced to literature in respect of learning preferences and critical reflection. They learn to engage in reflective practice by applying formal theorising to a critical workplace incident. The module is designed not only to enable the learner to think about their learning needs but also to begin to adjust mentally to the process of critical, workplace reflection in the context of regeneration practice.

At this stage, any applications for (APL), either Certificated or Experiential are considered. Hereafter learners can complete modules in any order, provided it is coherent and relevant to their needs.

The determining principles of learning are that it should be flexible and based around the needs of the learner. Tutors do not determine the content of the learners programme with combinations of core and optional modules. The choice on WBIS is far wider and almost open ended. The role of the tutor is instead to assist the learner to identify their learning needs and devise an appropriate pathway with an underpinning rationale so they can obtain formal academic credit bearing qualifications. Embedded within this process are a number of related objectives, such as enabling the learner to understand their own learning preferences, inculcating reflective practice as the basis for lifelong learning and assisting learners to discover more effective ways of working by a process of active, internal dialogue. In this sense tutors regard the process of learning as *negotiable*: the aim to identify needs and translate this into effective learning.

A distinctive feature of the WBIS approach is the intimate connection with workplace practice. In a typical WBIS module, the learner is introduced to a body of theory and wider literature and then asked to interrogate their practice. From the learners perspective the relationship with theory becomes much more immediate than is the case on conventional programmes. They select those theories/models which are relevant to their needs and use this as the basis for an internal dialogue, based upon their own practice and that of colleagues. In this way learners are encouraged to reflect upon their current practice as a means of improving performance.

Programme Delivery: The Virtual Learning Environment

One of the key requirements of the programme is to meet the needs of learners both in terms of content and delivery. E-learning enables the delivery of consistent, convenient and low cost learning to the workplace (Brown et al 2006). A key feature of the programme is therefore the development of a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), hosted on the University's intranet system. The VLE contains specific learning materials developed for the programme as well as links to a variety of other sources. These include electronic books, parts of books scanned in, e-journals and other relevant web sources. For each module, learning outcomes and learning opportunities are specified. For most modules there is also a Theory Document specifically created for the module, which summarises those theories and models appropriate to the learning outcomes. In addition, all other features, such as assignments, are on the VLE. Submission is also electronic.

The VLE attempts to meet all learner needs and there are facilities for on-line discussion. In practice, these have not been well used and the VLE, like most of its kind is text dominated, asynchronous and essentially uni-directional (Welsh et al 2003)

The requirement for minimum time away from work has greatly restricted face to face contact between learners and between tutors and learners. To overcome isolation learners are allocated a personal tutor and there is a subject tutor for each module. Tutor support is available on-line or by telephone. Workplace support is provided by means of a personal mentor. Peer learning is encouraged wherever possible and if an individual employing organisation requests it, the tutor team provides additional study workshops. In addition, regular peer events are organised, visiting one another's workplaces and dealing with learning issues. As with many essentially on-line programmes we recognise the importance of a 'blended' approach, incorporating a variety of learning experiences, including face to face experiences (Elliot 2002; Singh 2003; Graff 2006; Hughes 2007)

Programme Assessment

Assessment is regarded not as separate to the learning process but its most important element. Most assessments are individually negotiated formal reflective reviews, related to the learning outcomes for each module. In effect, the learner, in consultation with the module tutor, devises their own assignment. This is formalised through a Topic Learning Plan, where the learner indicates to the tutor how the requirements of the assessment will be met. Learners are encouraged to read the learning outcomes and Theory document and then consider ways in which they can relate materials to their own experience, which should form the basis for their assignment. Submissions can be in many forms, including traditional essays but could also include workplace artefacts with a brief reflective commentary.

Learners are encouraged to submit drafts for formative assessment. Heavy emphasis is placed on formative assessment as a means of facilitating personal development (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). In addition to evidence of subject mastery and application, tutors seek to encourage enhanced communication skills, as well as cognitive skills such as enhanced ability to synthesise, conceptualise, analyse and so on. Formative assessment is fundamental to adding value over and above conventional training programmes by non-accredited providers.

One of the limitations of a work based approach is that it assumes the learner is engaged in a wide variety of situations and activities upon which to reflect. In practice many on the programme perform fairly limited work roles. Assignments therefore always present learners with the option of work based or work related assessment. *Work based learning* is appropriate where the learner is engaged in an activity and therefore able to reflect upon it in the light of formal theories, models and empirical evidence which are supplied as part of the learning resources. *Work related learning* is suitable where the learning is knowledge based/contextual or where the learner is acquiring knowledge which will be applied in future.

Learners are always encouraged to engage with work based learning as much as possible to ensure relevance. Learners can submit artefacts or portfolios of material generated in the workplace, accompanied by a short reflective commentary. Submission is flexible in the sense that students are free to negotiate their own pathway and deadlines.

Developing Regeneration Pathways on WBIS

The decision to adapt WBIS for Regeneration practitioners resulted from a combination of circumstances. In part it reflected tutor knowledge and enthusiasm for regeneration but there were other motives. Some schools such as Geography and Communications are dependent on full time undergraduates and the ability to attract part time postgraduates is very attractive for them. Given the lack of familiarity with WBIS, it was decided development would occur principally in the Faculty of Lifelong before transfer to the Faculty of Social Science, as has indeed happened. This has given time for Social Science tutors to become familiar with the

facilitation of adult learning, reflective practice and so on. Another reason for developing the pathways was the scale of demand which exists among practitioners combined with a practical means of addressing their diverse needs. Following discussions in 2005, a decision was taken to begin the pathway in September 2006 and this was publicly announced at a regeneration skills conference in Manchester in February 2006.

Designing the academic content of the Regeneration Practitioners programme involved a number of challenges, in addition to the usual academic issues of coherence, relevance and progression. First, while regeneration includes forms of knowledge familiar to academic tutors, this was less the case for those in the Faculty of Social Science, unused to dealing with adult practitioners. It was clear that tutors associated with the programme would have to engage in new forms of knowledge themselves and be prepared to see themselves as facilitators of knowledge and not just subject experts.

The second challenge was to use the WBIS framework in a way which both enabled learner choice but which also facilitated it by presenting options. Early on it was decided to create a 'menu' of modules from which choices could be made. The nature of WBIS meant the menu could never exclusively determine learners' preferences but it was thought they needed some signposting.

The starting point for developing the menu was the published research on the skill requirements for regeneration practitioners. The largest and most comprehensive of these was conducted by the Scottish Centre for Regeneration (2004). The research identified twenty key competences such as project management, managing and leading organisations, financial management and so on. Many generic subjects (such as Negotiation and Conflict Management for example) were already offered as WBIS modules reducing the need to develop wholly new modules.

What the research did not indicate was demand for the kind of theoretical, contextual modules more familiar to academic tutors. From RENEW we were able to find practitioners willing to discuss subjects they wanted to learn. From this contact it was discovered that at least some practitioners do not just want skills- they also wanted a more academic theory than was suggested by the research. So in addition to more generic, skill based subjects like Project Management there was demand for more theoretical topics such as economic geography, social exclusion and urban policy analysis. Subsequent experience has borne out this judgement. Most learners choose to study theoretical modules at the beginning of their learning pathway.

During the spring and summer of 2006 a matching exercise was carried out to contrast modules we anticipated would be of interest to practitioners with existing provision, to identify gaps. Although there was a list of almost 20 topics, the flexibility of WBIS enabled the prioritisation of those topics which were anticipated to be of immediate interest to learners; others could await demand as it arose. Although WBIS learners can begin and finish any time a September 2006 start was decided, to meet the expectations of learners and their employing organisations.

Following a limited promotional exercise, the first cohort was recruited and inducted. From a standing start, recruitment was well into double figures and the indications are that whatever the problems there are, recruitment is not likely to be among them.

18 months on- Reflecting on Experience: Can Universities Deliver Regeneration Skills?

From the foregoing it might be assumed the question is rhetorical: given the right framework universities can indeed meet the needs of regeneration practitioners at whatever stage of their career, whatever their learning needs and at times and in ways which are low cost and suit them. Unfortunately while it is possible circumstances might change, 18 months on, there are real reasons to doubt whether this is true, at least at Chester. At the outset tutors assumed that if demand could be demonstrated (it has), resources, in the shape of staff and budgets would be forthcoming (they have not). Instead it would appear that from the University's perspective, Regeneration for Practitioners is simply additional income. Tutors working on it in addition to normal duties. Unsurprisingly, there is a question as to whether this is sustainable.

There is not the space here to fully address the reasons why this has happened. WBIS has traditionally been confined within a single faculty and it seems its application elsewhere has exposed some of the prevailing attitudes towards it in the rest of the university. At a fundamental level, WBIS is a different kind of academic enterprise to that traditionally undertaken in higher education. Caley (2001), in the context of discussing work based learning programmes at Cambridge, identifies it as a different academic paradigm. In place of the 'scholarship of discovery' is an interest in application of knowledge. Whereas traditional 'academic experience is founded on a recognised canon, work-based learning is founded on experience, problem solving and action based approaches' (p118) Academics may be sympathetic to the aims of lifelong learning, flexibility and putting the needs of learners first but in practice this can be seen as diluting academic standards and undermining the reputation of the institution.

UK universities have a history of failing to adapt to new missions. Robinson (2007) has described how successive challenges have been solved not by universities meeting them but by the creation of new institutions. Older universities would not admit more students following the post war expansion of secondary education so a new generation of 'red bricks' were created in the 1950s and 1960s. Both sets of institutions failed to develop vocational higher education in the 1970s, necessitating the creation of polytechnics. A similar inability to develop distance adult higher education necessitated the creation of the Open University in the UK and similar institutions around the world (Perry 1976; Leibbrandt 1997).

Whether the failure to invest in Regeneration for Practitioners at Chester is the result of active opposition from entrenched academic and institutional interests is hard to say. Perhaps it is simply that WBIS is too radical a departure for the rest of the institution which runs on pretty much the same lines as all universities do – for full time undergraduates and research (Callender 1997). The 'lack of fit' between traditional university culture and work based learning frameworks is evident in other institutions with such frameworks (Garnett 2007) and it seems, anywhere there is an attempt to introduce new ways of learning (Conole 2004).

As a final thought its worth drawing attention to an important observation made on the natural tendency to conservatism made by Raymond Loewy (1951, p 277) in the context of industrial design:

"The adult public's taste is not necessarily ready to accept logical solutions to their requirements if the solution implies too vast a departure from what they have been conditioned into accepting as the norm"

Instead of developing optimal new products, he advocated companies should instead develop that which is Most Advanced Yet Acceptable- the MAYA principle. In the case of WBIS, it seems the conservatism appears less with the customers and more with the supplier.

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