

### **Understanding social innovation: preparing undergraduates for opportunities in social enterprise**

As graduate unemployment rises, universities are under pressure to get better at promoting student employability. Find out how York University is supporting students to engage with social enterprises.

What links these three successful young people? Harriet, who set up a programme providing smart interview clothes for long term unemployed people. John, who developed a drama based AIDs awareness project for remote communities in Ghana. And Maddie, who is investigating the branding and the promotion of social enterprises in the UK. The answer is that all three have pursued an interest in social enterprise thanks to an innovative module offered by the University of York in England.

Like many UK universities, York has been looking at ways in which it can support the employability and entrepreneurship of its students. This is against a background where UK levels of graduate unemployment have been steadily rising, due in part to the economic downturn but also to the growing proportion of young people educated to tertiary level. Consequently, competition for jobs is tough and likely to get tougher. This is also in a context where from next year, rising tuition fees will prompt students to look more carefully at the extent to which university qualifications will add value to their labour market credentials.

As one of Britain's top universities York has an established model of research commercialisation with a campus-based science park and close ties between business and the university science community in particular. In this respect it is fairly typical, but it was the need to look beyond this that took the university into new areas of activity. As a result, today it has a growing internship programme, and an extracurricular offer that includes a thriving student-run entrepreneurship club. In addition, it has embedded enterprise across the undergraduate curriculum in ways that are quite distinctive, but highly effective.

Let's take the Social Policy and Social Work (SPSW) Department as an example. It's a good example because, rightly or wrongly, this is not a discipline which is often associated with

enterprising behaviours and entrepreneurship. However, that might have to change as a result of what's happening in York.

A few years ago the university decided to promote the embedding of enterprise within all of its curricular areas. To encourage this, it made small amounts of funding available which departments were invited to bid for. In response to this, the SPSW Department obtained resources to establish a new module called "Working in Organisations." The aim of the module was to introduce undergraduates to the core skills required to develop and manage social enterprises.

Rather than promote the notion of enterprise itself, the module was designed to encourage students with an interest in social welfare to consider how enterprising characteristics might be applied in their academic sphere. In particular, the module focussed on the growing role of social enterprises within a public policy context where there is an appetite to increase community ownership and control over a range of services. It also tapped into an increasingly important driver for young people going into business – the aspiration to make a difference. As Robert Gunn, SWSP departmental lecturer put it: "When we set out on this we really wanted to tap into the social aspirations and ethical values of our students and look at ways in which they could take these forward in an enterprising way. "

The module is designed to give students an understanding of exactly what is involved in setting up and running a social enterprise. It has a strong practical focus and its starting point is consideration of the distinctive characteristics of 'not-for-profit' organisations. Students also examine how these organisations function – at both the strategic and operational level – as well as exploring issues around user involvement. They also examine generic functional issues such as finance, marketing and HR, but with a view as to how these might be distinctive within the not-for-profit sector.

The emphasis on practice is also reflected in the delivery model. In addition to the inputs from departmental staff, the module is delivered via workshops provided by local social economy organisations. Stronger links have been established between the university and the city's not-for-profit sector as a result.

Two years ago the department enhanced the programme with the introduction of a competition which encouraged students to pitch their best social enterprise ideas. The winning project receives a start-up funding package which includes financial support, as well as access to

ongoing advice from departmental staff. That is where the AIDs education and clothes exchanges came from – and Robert Gunn expects there will be more successes like this in future.

“We’ve been pleasantly surprised by the levels of take up and the enthusiasm with which this module has been received. So much so that we are now being approached by students from beyond our own department whilst our colleagues in Lifelong Learning are adapting content for their own social enterprise module to reach a wider audience.”

Robert, a former probation officer has also taken his own professional interest in this area further, by editing a guide to skills for social entrepreneurship which draws upon his experience and that of colleagues in the US, China and India . (Gunn Robert and Durkin Chris (eds): Social Entrepreneurship – A Skills Approach; Policy Press 2010)

Harriet, who undertook the module last year says “I found the Working in Organisations module to be one of the most engaging modules I took throughout my undergraduate degree. What I particularly liked was the quality of the guest speakers; their perspectives made the module applicable to real life, which was refreshing in contrast to some of the more abstract module available.” Maddie is one of the students who came in from another department. As a Business student, she was excited by the energy and creativity apparent within the sector and became particularly interested in the issue of branding and marketing within it. She is now embarking on a PhD at the University of Huddersfield specialising in this growth area and hopes that it will create work opportunities for her on completion.

In the meantime, the university prepares for another group of undergraduates in the autumn. In doing so it plays an important role in helping students understand the opportunities within the sector as it grows in size and importance. Social innovation – whereby we find new improved ways of delivering public services – is set to continue as a policy driver across Europe in the coming years. Consequently, it is increasingly important that young people understand the opportunities that this will present – both as employees but also as social entrepreneurs.