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**"Crossing boundaries and building capacity in Social Enterprise research: The nature, focus and planned work of the ESRC Social Enterprise Research Capacity Building Cluster of the Third Sector Research Centre"**

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Title:-

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**Abstract**

Social Enterprise has been a growing phenomenon in the UK and this has been both recognised and supported by the UK government. The importance was acknowledged in research terms when a Social Enterprise Research Capacity Building Cluster was created as part of the Third Sector Research Centre funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Office of the Third Sector and Barrow Cadbury Trust. The work started in October 2008 and continues to develop.

The Third Sector Research Centre is a major initiative to develop research capacity and a knowledge base. Social Enterprise has been seen as critical especially in the context of delivery of public services. The measurement of the impact and innovation potential of social enterprise is a key target. Also practical research activity is to be encouraged by particular features of the cluster. The public sector associations of the cluster bring possibilities for research activities which have clear boundary spanning significance and impact.

The paper will explain the background and operation of the Social Enterprise cluster and draw out the key characteristics which, in addition to industry supported PhD work includes Knowledge Transfer Partnerships – a UK development which enables Universities to work closely with sector organisations to typically develop products or services. The Cluster also has innovatory aspects in terms of short research projects using ‘vouchers’ and the exchange of staff between the university and the third sector through placement opportunities.

The initial work of the cluster will be described and the lessons learned so far explored. The cluster will run for 5 years and so the paper will also describe the governance and plans for the cluster and proposed dissemination activities. Conclusions will be drawn on the approaches of linking academic research with practitioners, encouraging boundary spanning activities and creating the linkages and relationships that allow researchers engage with social enterprises. The paper will invite academic and sector comment to inform the cluster work.

## **"Crossing boundaries and building capacity in Social Enterprise research: The nature, focus and planned work of the ESRC Social Enterprise Research Capacity Building Cluster of the Third Sector Research Centre"**

### **Introduction – The Third Sector Research Centre and Social Enterprise Cluster**

This paper provides an account of the background and development of a significant ESRC initiative in England and Wales . The initiative is part of the Third Sector Research Centre which has been created as a partnership which involved the ESRC, The Government Office of the Third Sector (OTS) and some funding by a foundation – The Barrow Cadbury Trust. The Third Sector Research Centre had associated ‘clusters’ which involved a number of mechanisms which had previously been used in other contexts but were brought together in a relatively prescribed fashion with a focus upon the Third Sector. One particular cluster had a specific focus on Social Enterprise and it is this cluster which is the target of this paper.

The nature of the constituent parts of the Cluster will be addressed but for the benefit of a non-UK academic audience it is useful in this introduction to set out the background of the constituent parts.

CASE studentships for PhD study were originally set up under the aegis of Science and Engineering and the ESRC website notes that the term actually means “Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering”<sup>1</sup>. However they have migrated to a wide range of subjects which would be hard to justify as located purely in science or engineering faculties. Hence the use of CASE studentships in the Third Sector is not, in itself, something which should excite particular comment. However the major focus on CASE studentships in the clusters does represent a significant commitment of this resource. A CASE studentship requires an organizational (non- university) partner for whom the research is relevant and the partner has to make a cost contribution to the

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk> (accessed 10 Aug 2009)

research. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP's) are a well established part of the landscape in the UK. They are described as:

“..a UK-wide programme to encourage business/knowledge base collaborations. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships help businesses and organisations to improve their competitiveness and/or productivity through the use of the knowledge, technology and skills that reside within academic institutions”.<sup>2</sup>

The use of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships as the quote indicates envisages that they involve commercial organizations which operate in a competitive environment. Unlike CASE PhD studentships KTP's are not for public sector organizations. The model is quite strongly rooted in industry and the assessment and approval process involves a strong commercial orientation. The application process is not dissimilar to that which would be undertaken for commercial funding. The project has to show clear outcomes which can be monetarised and demonstrate a payback on the funding invested within a given time frame. The model has been described as well suited for product development and perhaps less well suited to service based innovation. It is not at all suited to purely research focused outputs and indeed such proposals would almost certainly fail.

KTP's would appear to – prima facie – to be a somewhat unusual vehicle for third sector projects which are not, by definition, purely commercial. However there had been some limited usage of them by third sector organizations prior to the cluster. The organization commitment (both in terms of actual financial contribution and organizational commitment) is quite considerable. On the other hand the KTP proposal is highly specific to the declared needs of the organization.

A KTP involves the employment of an Associate who has both a University and a workplace supervisor. Typically they will run for 2 years and a measure

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ktponline.org.uk/> (accessed 10 Aug 2009)

of success is whether the Associate continues with the partner organisation. The focus is upon the transfer of practical knowledge which has a clear and measureable benefit to the partner. The KTP website suggests a perceived benefit to the university in terms of application of knowledge and the development of teaching materials. Perhaps significantly the dissemination of knowledge through publication is not a focus on the KTP website. However it is seen as a welcome part of the outcomes of the work.

The other aspects of the cluster( which represent a much smaller proportion of the actual resource investment) are the vouchers and the placements. The Vouchers offer the possibility for organizations to commission small research projects of a scoping nature. Their use in the cluster is not new – there had been usage of them for small and medium enterprises in previous projects. However it was the first time they had been used for third sector organizations. The placement element was conceived to enable funding for staff in social enterprises to spend time in a university sector or vice versa. Placements were not new to the ESRC and indeed were a factor in some PhD work.

Social Enterprise was regarded as a worthy focus for the cluster in part because of some scoping work which had been undertaken by Peattie and Morley (2007). This identified a range of issues and set out a potential research agenda, The government concern ( as set out in a range of publications ) was that on the one hand it sought greater involvement by the third sector particularly in the arena delivery of public service. However on the other hand it was perceived that there was a lack of clear evidence of the outcome and impacts of such involvement. Justifications of third sector involvement often were based on concepts of 'doing good' often accompanied by limited or anecdotal evidence.

The Social Enterprise model was viewed as having the potential to bridge this divide between activity and outcome. Social Enterprises were , by their nature, seen as well suited to public service delivery. The evidence base was however limited and the cluster could enable social enterprise to become

more effective and also furnish the knowledge base through the range of interventions as set out previously . Cabinet Office of the Third Sector. 2006

The engagement of the academic sector with social enterprise in the UK had been demonstrated through the emergence of a specific journal (The Social Enterprise Journal) which had migrated from being hosted by a sector body - Social Enterprise London – to being located in a University context (Liverpool John Moores University). An annual Social Enterprise Research conference had been established which had, to some extent, succeeded in bringing researcher and practitioners together. Nonetheless these ‘green shoots’ need to be supported by the resourcing and duration which the cluster offered. The cluster enabled a focus upon the need to bridge academia and practice identified by Peattie and Morley (2007) There was a clear challenge to develop a wider knowledge base with an expectation that this would provide the evidence base which was hitherto seen as lacking. Public service delivery by social enterprise was explicitly a major part of the agenda.

In itself social enterprise represents a boundary spanning mechanism with its focus upon both social impact and also income derived from trading activities ( which would include service delivery by contract). The elements of the cluster also involved an implicit ( often explicit) expectation of boundary spanning between the academic and practical worlds. Such boundary spanning has been the subject of academic debate and investigation. Richter et al 2006

Universities themselves often profess to have an impact on their communities and , particularly in the UK, this has been expected of them by government. The former Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University often described a community focused university as very much a social enterprise organization. The cluster activities offered a considerable synergy with the professed mission of many universities to have a positive impact in their local community.

## **The background to Social Enterprise**

The interest in Social Enterprise in the UK has been dated back some 10 years.<sup>3</sup> Pearce, in a well known book, set out the popular stall for Social Enterprise in the UK context (Pearce 2003). It has now acquired a particular UK legal form in the shape of the community interest company. However many social enterprises are registered charities and this has can lead to some dispute over definition and boundary (Lyon and Sepulveda, 2008).

In academic circles the use of formal definition it has been tracked back in the USA to the Harvard Business School Social Enterprise Initiative in 1993. The OECD produced a significant report in 1999. (OECD 1999). The academic research in this area of work was associated with the formation of the European based EMES network which led to an extensive amount of academic output. (Nyssens 2006, Borzaga, C. and Defourny, J. 2001) Defourny and Nyssens identified the emergence of the concept in Italy and see it as having associations with the co-operative movement. (Nyssens 2006) Italy was also an early developer of a co-operative law which recognised this new form of trading entity.<sup>4</sup>

Social enterprise has been the subject of considerable interest in the USA (Alter 2006, Austin et al 2006, Young 2008). The use of the term social entrepreneur especially in the USA context has sometimes served to add further dimensions to the research debate (Nicholls 2006). However despite all this activity and interest (or possible because of it?) there are definitional difficulties associated with social enterprise which have been well described in the landmark paper by Peattie and Morley (2008).

In the UK context the Government has taken a considerable interest in social enterprise and it has come to occupy a major part of the policy agenda. (Cabinet Office 2006) Though social enterprise has been seen as key to the

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<sup>3</sup> HM Treasury. 1999. *Enterprise and social exclusion*. London: HM Treasury National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Policy Action Team 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Murdock A - Entries on Social Enterprise and on EMES in *International Encyclopaedia of Civil Society* ( Ed Anheier , H et al ) Springer Pub. Forthcoming 2010

engagement of the third sector in public service delivery it has also been linked to wider government agendas in respect of social and environmental outcomes. Where social enterprise is seen as different to other third sector approaches has been in its perceived espousal of a business orientated approach.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Social Enterprise Cluster in the Third Sector Research Centre**

The Scoping Report which led to the ESRC Third Sector Research Centre identified the particular need for research and drew attention to the ‘dearth of facts and figures’ and suggested that there was a lack of official data on the sector.<sup>6</sup> The report also indicated that the data set of NCVO Almanac (at the time of the scoping report) did not address the emergence of social enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly the Scoping Report made specific recommendations in respect of social enterprise stating that it should constitute an important part of the remit of the Third Sector Research Centre. Hence when the invitation for bids for the Research Centre and its associated clusters was published, one cluster was clearly identified as having a social enterprise focus. Perhaps significantly no other designation was made for any of the clusters at that time.

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<sup>5</sup>Cm 7189 HM Treasury and Cabinet Office (July 2007) The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration : final report

<sup>6</sup> Scoping Report available at:  
[www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current\\_funding\\_opportunities/Third\\_Sector\\_Centre.aspx](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/Third_Sector_Centre.aspx) (accessed 26 July 2009)

<sup>7</sup> Note: This has been significantly addressed in the more recent edition of the NCVO Almanac

## **Formation and key elements in the bid**

The formation of the partnership between Middlesex , Durham and London South Bank University came about as a result of a clear perception of the respective strengths which the different partners brought to the bid.

Middlesex and Durham Universities had strong doctoral and research strengths and London South Bank University had particular expertise in Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and also a long experience and tradition in the provision of sector specific education. London South Bank University had also hosted the UK Social Enterprise Research Conference for 3 years.

The cluster bids involved four components but the funding was not equally apportioned across them. It can be viewed in funding terms as a table with 4 very unequal legs. The precise nature of the cluster elements is described in the appendix. (See Appendix 1)

The largest element is the CASE PhD studentships which represented about 54% of the cluster funding. This was followed by the Knowledge transfer partnerships which represented approximately 36%. Placements represented about 6% and the vouchers less than 4%.

It is important to note we felt that the bid requirements on the funding apportionment across the cluster elements gave little room for manoeuvre in the construction of the bid. In our bid we did propose that some of the Knowledge Transfer Partnerships could be of a shorter duration than the 2 years which was then the norm. We felt that the relatively high organisational contribution in cash terms of a 2 year KTP may prove a problem for smaller organisations.

As is often the case with tight criteria we found that there was a degree of flexibility which could be discussed after the bid had been awarded. However there were also some unforeseen issues around the proposed shorter KTPs. The bid was prepared with a number of organisations offering commitments to both CASE PhD support and short and long KTP's. However it is important to note that these commitments were not in any way legally binding upon the organisations concerned. They were not direct parties to the Cluster bid at the point it was submitted.

## **Setting up the cluster**

The Commissioning Panel, in awarding the cluster asked for further information on certain aspects. In particular we were asked to provide an implementation plan which covered aspects of, inter alia, co-ordination and dissemination.

The cluster set up an Advisory Group which linked with the Reference Group for the Third Sector Research Centre social enterprise stream. The Advisory group included both leading social enterprise researchers both from the UK and abroad as well as people representing sector bodies.

## **Operation of the aspects of the cluster**

The geographical dispersal of the university partners represented an asset in that it offered national coverage. However it also posed a certain challenge in terms of co-ordination. We found that conference calls were both useful and necessary. Nevertheless two co-ordination meetings have taken place this year (in January and June).

## **The first priorities**

An initial focus was almost inevitably upon the CASE studentships. A PhD running to schedule takes 3 years and typically can take longer. In order to move 9 such studentships through successfully within 5 years of the clusters start it was essential that some began quickly. Only CASE accredited universities could take lead responsibility for the CASE studentships which meant that the onus rested on Durham and Middlesex. However the cluster envisaged that supervision experience would be gained sufficient to enable LSBU to be involved in one of the latter studentships.

The second priority was the Knowledge Transfer Partnerships. Several potential organisations had been identified in the bid document. However the process of application for the KTP's was no different from that of regular KTP bids. This involved quite detailed document preparation with two stages of approval process. A clear business case had to be made and 'research based' justifications would be unlikely to succeed. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships had been widely used for small and medium sized commercial

enterprises and the lexicon owed much to industrial origins driven by product development.

The vouchers and placements needed to have specific procedures developed and here we found that the experience of another University (Aston) was very helpful. A simple form was developed for both vouchers and placements derived from that used by Aston University. There were concerns about whether the voucher activities might attract VAT and here the research orientation of the cluster was seen as a benefit.

### ***CASE PHD studentships***

An excellent start has been made with 3 PhD studentships having already commenced and a further 2 scheduled to start shortly and a sixth one seeking agreed . This paper does not give the space to cover them in detail but the table below sets out the summary data. The PhD research from these initial studentships will serve to develop a body of research based evidence in a number of key areas for social enterprise. As they are CASE based this means that the research topic has already been identified as important by key sector organizations (who have been required to furnish tangible financial support to enable them to be set up.)

**Table 1 CASE PhD Studentships**

| University | Organisation               | Subject  | Student         | Status        |
|------------|----------------------------|--|-----------------|---------------|
| Middlesex  | UnLtd                      | Older social entrepreneurs   | Bianca Stumbitz | Started       |
| Middlesex  | Ethnic Minority Foundation | Ethnic related SE and 2012 Olympics  | Sara Calvo      | Started       |
| Durham     | One North East             | Squaring the Challenge: Reconciling Business and Ethical Goals in Social Enterprises | Micaela Mazzei  | Started       |
| Middlesex  | Development Trust Assoc    | Peer Learning and Innovation   | Maria Irurita   | To Start Sept |
| Middlesex  | Crisis                     | Social Enterprise and Employment   | Recruited       | To start Oct  |

|        |        |   |                 |               |
|--------|--------|---|-----------------|---------------|
|        |        | Opportunities for Homeless People   |                 |               |
| Durham | Acumen | The role of social enterprises in the experience of unemployment and worklessness | Janice Metcalfe | To start Oct. |
|        |        |   |                 |               |

It is worthy of mention that two of the PhD students (Sara Calvo and Bianca Stumbitz) have already presented papers at a leading Social Enterprise Conference (EMES in Trento, Italy in July 2009). These and other PhD students will hopefully form a cadre of new researchers who will be able to bridge between the academic and the practical world.

## **Knowledge transfer partnerships**

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships are with partners who wish to develop particular products or services. Therefore the partner organisations are identified where the KTP has been agreed and formal advertisements have been placed. The KTPs involve Associates who work to a brief which has been tightly agreed at the outset with a project plan set out in detail on a month by month basis. This perhaps distinguishes KTP's from PhD research where the scheduling and format of the work is not so closely set out prior to the arrival of the student.

The KTP's are very closely tied to specific and timed outputs and there is an explicit business plan attached which sets out the return to the investment. The expectation that the Associate might naturally move onto permanent employment with the KTP partner also is in contrast to the expectation of a PhD student ( though CASE students may also move to similar employment)

The process of KTP approval may derive some advantages from the apparent incompatibility with the 'not solely commercial and non manufacturing based ' setting of the social enterprises. The KTP assessors have shown that they are both aware of the need for flexibility to enable the model to transfer to the social enterprise setting. This has often involved a number of iterations and adjustments. The experience so far has been of a significant amount of 'give and take' on the part of all stakeholders.

However the original proposal of 'shorter' kTPs' has taken time to be resolved. The RNID/RNIB KTP was originally intended to be such a short KTP. However it quickly become apparent that – in order to progress the application – the 2 year format would be needed. The partnership with RNIB was a way to enable this to happen. The amount of funding commitment for a full KTP is potentially a major obstacle for many social enterprises ( which are often small organisations with limited available financial resource).

The possibility that KTP's can be funded outside of the cluster also raises the option to refocus the cluster resources. Some KTP's could be sought through the 'normal KTP' route.

**Table 2 Knowledge Transfer Partnerships**

| University | Partner                       | Area of focus                     | Status                                      |
|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| LSBU       | RNID/RNIB                     | Measurement of impact of services | Fully Approved                              |
| LSBU       | Major SE Umbrella             | Social investment                 | At final stage                              |
| LSBU       | Recycling SE                  | Service development               | At initial stage of application development |
| Middlesex  | SE                            | Environmental sustainability      | At final stage                              |
| Middlesex  | Westminster Childrens Society | Franchising and kitemark          | Agreed                                      |
| Middlesex  | Fair Trade organisation       | Fair trade                        | At initial stage of application development |

## Vouchers

Middlesex has completed two vouchers which will start with Action for kids and Social Firms UK.

Further ideas for a voucher are being proposed with Ethnic community a Chinese community group (Middlesex)

London South Bank University is processing a voucher application from Mosaic – a social enterprise in Waterloo which works with homeless and offenders to produce specialist products (mosaic pavement slabs and wall mosaics). Discussions have been taking place with a social enterprise working with young people but issues over legal form of registration need to be addressed. (The organisation is working in other countries and plans to

start in the UK but was not legally registered here at the time of application)

### **Placements**

The Placement aspect is still evolving. The aim of such placements is to bridge between the university and the social enterprise but there is a clear expectation that a placement will lead to outputs whether in the form of a publishable piece of work or a contribution to knowledge.

There is a proposal for an LSBU researcher to spend time with a social enterprise focused on social return on investment. A key element of any placement is the expectation of a clear tangible output (ideally in publishable form). Discussions have taken place with a number of possible organisations and an article in a sector magazine is being prepared to encourage inquiries and take up of this aspect of the cluster.

### **Lessons from the cluster so far...**

The most advanced aspect of the cluster is the PhD studentships and this is to be expected given the duration of PhD research. Though it has been generally possible to recruit suitable PhD researchers it is noteworthy that in one case it has been necessary to re-advertise. These PhD students are critical to the development of a new generation of social enterprise focused researchers. The ability to attract a new generation of researchers to social enterprise commissioned research gives much ground for optimism about the longer term impacts of the cluster. The subject matter of the PhD research has been identified as critical by the sponsoring organisations and this should give it impact and validity.

The knowledge transfer partnerships are in some respects mechanisms which have been developed for the private sector and which are being adapted for the social enterprise and third sector. However –especially in the format of the application and possibly in the outlook of some of the evaluators – they betray their origins. For organisations where the outcomes are not easily translatable into commercial language it represents a challenge and typically a need to master new lexicon. However the evidence to date is that there is a

high degree of willingness on all sides to enable it to happen. Also – since social enterprises are defined as trading orientated – the commercial aspects of the process are not necessarily inappropriate. However it does require flexibility, persistence and significant commitment of organizational resource. The delay in getting agreement for shorter KTP's (now hopefully resolved) presented a major problem for one KTP applicant. It was resolved by forming a partnership with a similar organisation. The fact that there appears to be a possible growth of the KTP resource by accessing funding outside of the cluster budget means that this element of the cluster should have sustainability and growth potential

The voucher and placement aspects are less developed but we expect them to evolve over the next year. An aspect of this is simply the challenge of communicating the possibilities to the sector and working out mutually suitable partnerships and exchanges. Conceivably this may be linked to the development of dissemination activity.

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## **Appendix : Cluster Components**

### **CASE Studentships**

CASE PhD studentships are jointly funded by ESRC and partner organisations who contribute £4,000 a year and have a role in directing the PhD research.

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### **Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP's)**

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships involves collaborative research where typically smaller social enterprises put in one third and ESRC/OTS will pay two thirds. This can allow a social enterprise to triple any research funding it has. The annual cost for an organisation of a 2 year KTO is about £20,000-£35,000 depending on the size of the organisation.

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### **Placements**

Placement activity would be directed to enable practitioners from social enterprises or academics to acquire new skills and techniques. The placement budget would pay for up to £7000 in salary costs and have certain time and duration expectations

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### **Vouchers**

Vouchers would enable social enterprises to commission projects to a value of £3000 from the partner Universities and to access particular knowledge bases. The objectives would be to provide opportunity for researchers to carry out research determined by a social enterprise, build relationships with social enterprises, increase the capacity of the academic partners to respond to the information needs of social enterprises and introduce smaller social enterprises to the benefits of external research.