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Building Bridges: developing community-university linkages in Cardiff and neighbouring localities

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Background

This paper presents data from the early stages of an on-going recent research project into the links between a 'new' (post-1992) university in Cardiff and an area of considerable socio-economic deprivation within the immediate hinterland of that university. Community-university links are an important element in a wider strategy of 'multi agency partnerships' which form a core element of the New Labour project. As Adamson (2003 p144) notes, such partnerships are viewed as a means to enhance community regeneration and increase levels of educational attainment. However, it is also noted that universities must transcend traditional models of practice, stating that,
Whilst the majority of universities have developed 'widening access' initiatives in response to pressures such as the Dearing Report, few have become engaged at community level through direct partnership working.
Calls for change by Universities in terms of greater flexibility in access to learning such as those advocated by the Welsh Assembly Government (2007p23) in order to facilitate widening participation with a focus on social justice in response to changing social and economic conditions such as a decline in semi skilled manual employment, can encounter what Clark (2004 p169) classifies as an institutional 'inertia' that contradicts ' the emerging realties of the 21st Century, matching the contention by Nemeth (2008 p85) that 'lifelong learning is still not a core issue in the institutional reforms of many universities.' The issue of university community links has become all the more ppressing in policy terms given a recent statement by Jane Hutt AM, Welsh Assembly Government Education Minister, who has called for a better matching of local need and demand, and building greater opportunities to widen access and improve progression to higher education.

Research Questions

In the light of the above background, the study will report upon the results of the pilot stage of a longitudinal action research project which has the intention to develop permanent community-university links between University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) and organisations devoted to community regeneration and development. The research study aims to address the following research questions:

• To investigate practitioner perceptions of their own learning needs with regard to community regeneration practice;
• To investigate practitioner perceptions of existing provision
• To investigate barriers to accessing that provision
• To investigate practitioner perceptions of means to overcome barriers

Methods

The study takes the form of multi-methods action research project. The purpose of the overall research project is to develop and implement learning provision and knowledge transfer projects. The research design is divided into two main components. The first stage is the development of a multiple case study approach within the UWIC hinterland to enable an identification of issues and needs within that locality. This involved the initial distribution of questionnaires among a range of organisations engaged in community regeneration/development within the Cardiff hinterland. After analysis of the questionnaires the second stage was to seek insights into the perceived value of community - University partnership working held by practitioners engaged in community regeneration. The data collection strategies involved focus group and face to face interviews.

Frame

the analytical reference points for the study are social capital and social regeneration theory.

Research findings

preliminary findings from the pilot stage of the research project have indicated time constraints and mode of provision to be the major issues that present themselves as barriers. With regard to mode of provision, it was found that forms of distance learning and 'bite-size' segments of learning were the favoured types of provision among community regeneration practitioners. A further finding from the pilot phase was that a 'learner identified' curriculum designed to suit the bespoke needs of learners served as an incentive to engage practitioners. A further initial finding , based upon the development and delivery of non-accredited learning materials, was the consideration of prior academic achievement and differentiation.