

“PrimeTimers”

business inspired solutions for the third sector

What Kind of University for the Third Sector?

Professor Martin Albrow, Dr Mary Chadwick and Brent Thomas

PrimeTimers floated the idea of a civil society university a year ago in our ‘Agenda for Change’. Since then we have explored it with a cross-section of third sector organisations and academics. We have discovered ready acceptance of a model that links high quality training in the sector with existing academic institutions.

Such a university could overcome the fragmented nature of the third sector and provide connectivity both nationally and internationally. It would not replicate a bricks and mortar institution, in line with the NCVO’s suggestion in September of an ‘open university for the third sector’ to redress the sector’s lack of dedicated skills and training support. This was their response to the Government’s review of the role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration.

We too have found that employers in the sector want networked training provision. But there is also a general sense that the sector lacks the obvious linkages with the university system that the state and business enjoy, and this contributes to the fact that the sector does not present itself to graduates as a place where careers can be built.

However training is one thing, higher education another, and universities will not welcome a training course university. Potential students too will want the authentic university experience, one that engages with their values as well as enhances their skills. For these reasons our view is that the third sector must embrace the idea of civil society if it is to provide the basis for a new university.

There is a case for a new institution that connects the diversity of knowledge interests in the third sector. It can empower and enhance the standing of third sector workers and confer the same levels of prestige that state and business employment enjoys. So far, so good. But if we rest the case there it fails to measure up to the requirements for a university and sells the third sector short. A university for the third sector will fail unless it is based in values common both to the sector and to the university world.

For the new university to make a distinctive contribution it will need to provide a forum for the value debates of our time. ‘Civil society’ is the preferred term in most of the world where non-state, non-business public activities challenge the assumptions of wealthy organizations and ruling classes. In a post socialist world it has become the code for claims for social justice and social responsibility. It includes environmental, feminist and human rights movements, but also the demands of religious and ethnic minorities.

1st Floor Downstream Building 1 London Bridge London SE1 9BG
t: 0845 456 3885 • f: 0845 456 2538
w: www.primetimers.org.uk • e: info@primetimers.org.uk

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above

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Explicit value commitment and conflict has become a sign of our time. Civil society is that arena where advocates of innumerable diverse causes exercise their rights to free association and speech, raise consciousness and mobilize public opinion to pressurize both state and business. It is from the same source that the voluntary organizations of the third sector derive their inspiration and energy. Yet they fail to make the obvious connection this has with educational aspirations.

Staff training and personal development has not been a priority in the sector. One large humanitarian agency told us of its parsimony in this area even though its global reach required it to meet a shortage of developing country staff able to fill leadership roles. But the origins of the first world charities in plugging the gaps in Western welfare systems mean they still wrestle with the relics of a culture of drawing on unqualified volunteers.

Organizational culture in the third sector lagging behind the contemporary value climate is the reason why a civil society university is an idea whose time has come, not just here but elsewhere, for instance in a Council of Europe conference in September 2005, and in a submission of the Permanent Forum of Civil Society Organizations to the Organization of American States in December 2005. This worldwide interest justifies the UK in taking a lead, building on its proud international record of innovation in higher education.

A civil society university at this historical juncture can make an important declaration about higher learning for our time. It will require advocates of values to submit them to universal tests of intellectual integrity, reasoned debate and scientific research. It will shape the frame for the development and transfer of technical knowledge.

The third sector is also civil society, and we hope this government in its laudable desire to promote its standing will not lose sight of the autonomy which is essential to it. Universities always defend their claims to academic freedom, and there is a profound affinity between this and the claims to autonomy from state and business that civil society asserts. For this reason the establishment of a civil society university cannot be just a human resource issue, but an educational initiative in the most comprehensive sense.

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Notes: Martin Albrow, Mary Chadwick and Brent Thomas work for PrimeTimers, a social enterprise promoting cross-sector transfer of people, ideas and methods. They advanced the concept of a Civil Society University in ‘Agenda for Change’, a document arising from the PrimeTimers Conference of autumn 2005. PrimeTimers has been inquiring into the support for the idea and recently gave a briefing to the Cabinet Office Third Sector unit.

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