

The Case for a Civil Society University - a PrimeTimers Inquiry

A Preliminary Report

In October and November 2006 PrimeTimers sought to arrive at an initial assessment of the support for establishing a new civil society university. The following preliminary report is based on 15 interviews with leading representatives from a diversity of Third Sector organizations.

Overall respondents moved from a degree of cautious interest to very considerable enthusiasm for the idea in the course of the interview. There was general readiness to lend support and overcome obstacles in its way. Overwhelmingly the main hurdle at each stage is seen to be funding. We are confident that the idea is compelling enough to attract financial support and we are seeking that now.

Eight questions took interviewees through stages in the development of the CSU idea, culminating in a single scaled question and request for advice on the next steps. This report follows the sequence of those questions.

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1. PrimeTimers wants to explore with you the merits of founding a civil society university. We want it to have a distinctive mission and structure appropriate for the third sector, to raise its performance standards, and to be independent of both government and business. Do you think this is an idea worth pursuing?

Yes 10 Not Sure 5 No 0

“A university institution to recognise and promote civil society must be independent of government and business if it is to be a genuine expression of the evolving capabilities of civil society.”

“We would be opposed to a “ghetto” type of CSU which limits the interaction of sectors.”

“... uncomfortable with the term ‘third sector’ as indicating a priority to business and public sectors, ... ‘civil society’ better recognises its role as underpinning the rest of society. A CSU would be a public recognition of the importance of civil society.”

“... it is important to maximise what currently exists.”

“This sounds a bit big.”

“... if the main purpose is to act as a vehicle for people within the sector to enhance their leadership development skills, then this is worth doing.”

“There is a huge need for training in the 3rd sector, which is probably true of all sectors, and I suspect that it is the small charities that tend to lose out. ... Despite this even the large charities miss out on opportunities.”

“It would also be useful to extend training to volunteers, since people often switch between paid and unpaid work. The portability of skills is important.”

“...a debate about what constitutes civil society and it is broader than the third sector.”

“The third sector is growing and becoming more diverse and must increase its skills sets if it is to rise to the challenge ... skills development within the sector arises late – both in organisations and for individuals.”

“The government drive to improve standards has to be one of the levers.”

Our comment

What emerges is the sense of emergent individual needs and the struggle of the third sector to assert its autonomy and distinctive requirements. In this respect the university idea has a healthy historical record in matching intellectual standards to new social requirements and no one raises doubts on this score.

- 2. We have some ideas on how a CSU could work. Thus:**
- a. It could network training and education bodies in the 3rd Sector and universities to provide credits towards CSU degrees. Could this work?**

Yes 13 Not Sure 2 No 0

“The Bologna agreement provides a European foundation for credit based lifelong learning. Mobility of labour will be enhanced by mobility of credits between learning institutes. CSU could make an important contribution here.”

“I like the idea of accessibility and that it is not trying to reinvent something that is already in place and working.”

“Probably – but a great deal of research is needed into what is currently out there and who the CSU would be aimed at.”

“Integrity and quality must be the watch words and in this regard one important consideration is who will accredit the CSU, who will give it legitimacy?”

“It would allow choice while working.”

“a combination of the OU and accreditation model would serve the 3rd sector the best.”

“a CSU would potentially stand a chance of being more accessible to those with disabilities and this could strengthen the case for its existence.”

“... learning should be able to start at a very basic level and move up a skills escalator which can take years with people being able to step on and off as their circumstances change.”

“The notion of embedding civil society in parts of the academic sector that have not been reached so far is appealing.”

There would need to be an internationally recognised system of credits.”

Our comment

The alacrity with which respondents develop this idea is striking. It shows the deep affinity between the drivers of the third sector and the notions of lifelong learning. A learning society endorses innovation in its educational institutions.

b. It could offer something quite new for a university – courses and accreditation for organizations, to meet the demand for high standards in the sector. Is this worth pursuing?

Yes 13 Not Sure 1 No 1

“What we have come to realise is that a large amount of effort is needed to organise such accreditation, so the notion of an external body, dedicated to this function, makes more sense.”

“There seems to be great potential for this idea. It should include volunteers. In fact charities are often engaged in a great deal of training of both staff and volunteers, without recognising this, or being given recognition for it.”

“There is a lot of mobility within the sector and the portability of the credits gained from in house training would create a greater sense of career progression for the sector.”

“Sounds weird. Don’t think civil society needs accreditation and basically success depends on meeting standards in the wider world.”

“This is definitely worth pursuing and is similar to the City and Guilds courses.”

“First, it would provide organisations with a form of validation for their in house courses. Second, it would provide commercial opportunities because it would open up the internal market for training in the 3rd sector.”

“The XXX runs a number of in-house courses and spend quite a lot of money on them. Staff attend these but when they leave, as inevitably they do, they don’t get any credit for this training with their new employer. If the CSU could fill this gap it would add the benefit of portability. Individuals would then be motivated and encouraged to build up credits throughout their careers which would have a value with their new employer.”

“... this would make a significant contribution to raising professional standards.”

“A CSU must set consistent standards in order to achieve credibility, and accreditation is one way to achieve this.”

“It would, however need to be more innovative than what exists now.”

Our comment

Respondents usefully run with this idea and put their own gloss on it in several directions. Manifestly it connects with current developments in their own experience, and there is an understanding of the need for innovation in this regard.

- c. Its teaching staff would all be part-time and free to work elsewhere. Courses could be based in workplaces as well as in colleges. Experiential and distance learning would be normal. Could this work?**

Yes 14 Not Sure 1 No 0

“Why a concern that all teachers are part-time? Why constrain things in this way?”

“I like the concept of workplace courses and teaching staff who have other jobs as this all supports an outward facing CSU.”

“The courses would need to be highly practical. These methods of working are now familiar to many people. It would give opportunities for learning to people who don’t currently have them.”

“... many organisations are trying to become “learning organisations” ... the establishment of a CSU which might accredit their courses would enhance this process.”

“This is similar to the concept that [this large campaigning organization] is developing.”

“ ... been a tutor in the early days of the OU ... it had taken them time to adapt to the fact that teaching vocational courses, for example to nurses, required a different type of teacher than the more traditional academic courses. It would be very important that the balance of staff is achieved.”

“This style has to be the way forward. Young people (the Ipod generation) will transform the way in which they learn and connect and will expect learning tools to meet their needs.”

“This is exactly the sort of learning that [this major trade union] is advocating.”

“ ... the CSU should investigate the experience of community based learning”

“ This method is necessary in order to reach a diverse audience.”

“...it could afford to be experimental in course content and delivery and actually overtake some of the traditional ways of learning. It should aspire to be a beacon for other sectors.”

Our comment

Again there is a general understanding of and welcome for innovative patterns of employment, and though the claims of full time staffing are represented, most understand that the part-time emphasis favours the integration of learning, experience and employment in the sector.

d. CSU research would contribute to the knowledge and values base of the sector as a whole, encourage free exchange of data and operate on open space principles. Are these realisable aims?

Yes 12 Not Sure 2.5 No 0.5

“... it should pioneer new methods of knowledge dissemination, including e.g. using Creative Commons licensing approaches to course materials.”

“If the CSU could act as a form of clearing house or advice centre to identify the best researchers for the work that organisations want to commission, then this would be a very useful service.”

“If a CSU could scope out and map what is being carried out and by whom, then it would make it easier for funders to direct their investment in research.”

“... the whole business of sharing best practice is very problematic within the third sector.”

“The CSU could be a focal point and commissioner of research that would enhance learning about the 3rd sector.”

“This is essential – without this it could not be defined as a university.”

“... whilst there are gaps in learning, what would a new entrant add?”

“A research function is necessary in order to give the institution credibility, especially since its biggest challenge will be to establish its own credibility alongside existing universities. The CSU doesn’t want to attract only the students rejected everywhere else!”

“... it should pioneer new methods of knowledge dissemination, including e.g. using Creative Commons licensing approaches to course materials.”

Our comment

The diversity of views here probably reflects the differing degrees of distance from existing universities, but awareness of research potential is obvious. Research can operate at many levels and the third sector could contribute to overall university research output by adopting collaborative and participatory models of research that inform the sector and contribute to wider understanding of how society works today.

- e. **CSU would start in the UK, but its scope would aim to be international in relevance and participation, to engage with and represent global civil society. Is this likely to happen?**

Yes 9 Not sure 6 No 0

“A British CSU should certainly engage with global civil society and promote the case for a global civil society.”

“I think there is a hunger for global knowledge and networking.”

“... we would caution the CSU becoming too UK-centric. [This major international NGO] does have frustrations that most charities in the UK do not have a global perspective. We would also need to be careful that the UK does not try and impose its view of the world in others. There is also a practical point which is that it will take considerable effort and time to create a CSU and it would be important for it first to work well in the UK. Thereafter a step-wise approach to going international would be favoured.”

“Civil society concepts vary greatly in different countries. The UK seems to have evolved very differently from many other countries and better understanding of the structures elsewhere would be useful.”

“... whilst on the face of it there is a case for going international, the CSU idea would need to be proven first in the UK.”

“...if the CSU had an international dimension this would bring a much needed perspective. ... too much of the work of the UK 3rd sector was inward looking and insular ... the work carried out in the USA into wrap around children’s services which were very innovative and challenged many of the presumptions that underpinned the UK’s approach to child care ... in Europe there were equally different approaches which remained hidden to the majority of UK providers ... an international approach would add to the credibility of the CSU and of the 3rd sector generally.”

“...[This] is the largest charity in the world that specialises in those with XXX difficulties. In a more global world ... they would be encouraged to take a more international view and the CSU would reflect this trend.”

“... if the meaning of civil society within the UK can be defined clearly there is scope for international transfer, provided there is no colonialism in this approach.”

“It has to go beyond the UK.”

“Civil society in its broadest sense ... is international”

“... there was much going on outside the UK from which the UK could learn.. community development and community finance as two examples. ... how easy would it be to create an internationally respected institution? The USA would take some persuading that a UK academic institution could take on this mantle.”

“It has to be international in order to gain validity. The international aspect will be a core strength, grounded in diversity of cultures and environments. Civil society is international because the issues and the case studies are global. An additional virtue is that a global concept might be more attractive to wealthy philanthropists.”

Our comment

These responses are a very good reflection of the local/global dilemmas that hold across all sectors. While being responsive to local community and national needs it is also essential to absorb international experience and contribute to meeting global challenges. The balance is there.

- f. CSU would be founded by a consortium of 3rd Sector organizations and universities, receive initial core funding from them and foundations, and look to regular income from student fees and from accreditations. Could independence be assured in this way?**

Yes 2 Not sure 12 No 1

“Some kind of endowment and then generation of surpluses within a social enterprise corporate structure would be needed. Maintaining independence would be an ongoing challenge but founding funding and chartering will be critical here.”

“You need a strong business foundation to get this really going.”

“At [this major international NGO] we are very parsimonious with spending on training and personal development. We have struck some very good deals with organizations like XXX. The economic viability of the CSU therefore would need careful consideration.”

“It might be difficult to persuade universities to give up some of their income to “benefit” from CSU accreditation ... universities had become very competitive and protective of their positions and a CSU would not be welcomed if it resulted in income reduction.... it would be difficult to get 3rd sector organisations to part with their cash so the ongoing funding model would need careful thought and planning. Who would be willing to pump prime the idea? ... not convinced that Government would be a provider.”

“Maybe a major philanthropic foundation would be prepared to contribute.”

“I can appreciate how this model would guarantee independence but it ran the risk of excluding large swathes of the 3rd sector that would not have the resources to contribute to the work of the CSU. This could seriously impair the takeoff and potential viability of the CSU. Were there foundations or philanthropists who would welcome the opportunity to be very visibly associated with a CSU? Would government money compromise independence? [... in fact] government investment could enhance the credibility of the CSU.”

“... this funding model is the only one that would work but ... Government would and should be encouraged to invest in the concept provided they don't try and control it. [There might be] a gripe by the large charities about subsidising the small and less efficient organisations.”

“It should be as loosely associated with Government as possible ... The same principles apply to associations with business – the structure must be owned by civil society.”

“There has to be some central Government responsibility. If the CSU concept doesn't fit within a wider agenda then it may be seen as elitist. The CSU also has to have some

accountability to the state. Government involvement indicates a stamp of approval and a blessing in respect of their third sector agenda.”

“... if the CSU could be shown to get to hard to reach groups, such as the disabled, Government would readily want to fund it and this type of ongoing funding from Government would be acceptable.”

“The idea is fantastic, but ... it will require a great deal of money. If it is seen as the latest Government idea it will fail because it will be burdened with targets. Maybe we should set up a social enterprise/community interest company model to give it a broader base with a wider source of investment.”

Our comment

This is the big issue. However great the enthusiasm and sense that a public good has been identified there is considerable scepticism that funding would be forthcoming. However this is not a different problem in kind from funding in general for the third sector and the finessing of government and business contributions while securing adequate independence is unavoidable. Moreover there are plenty of ideas about ways forward.

3. Given the discussion we have already had, are there ways in which you believe a CSU could be useful to your own organization?

Yes 12 Not sure 2 No 1

“Accreditation of the XXX courses we provide is important. A CSU would be a powerful source of accreditation.”

“There is a paucity of high quality offerings in this regard.”

“It would greatly help the work of [our] volunteers in their capacity building work if they could participate in CSU learning. It could strengthen their potential.”

“She thought it would help with Investors in People accreditation.”

“... can't see where the students would come from.”

“First, [this leading national charity] is always trying to evaluate trends that affect the 3rd sector, whether this is to do with economics, demographics, or public policy development. The CSU could be the authoritative voice for this. Second, [we] would welcome knowledge based courses for staff development eg in fundraising. Third, it would enhance understanding of the complexity of leadership roles and into the professionalisation of charity management.”

“...the accreditation of courses such as those run by [this leading charity] for its own staff would be generally beneficial because they would add to the notion of building a career within the sector.”

“[This major trade union] would encourage members who work in the third sector to engage with it, and would also work with third sector employers. 4000 third sector organizations employ our members.”

“It would provide staff with personal development given that as a small/medium organization for progression are not plentiful.”

“We would like to create an organisation attractive to graduates and in order to do so training needs to be included.”

Our comment

This is impressive. It is not just a public good; nearly all find ways in which the CSU would be useful to them. It gives cause for optimism on the funding issue.

4. How important do you think it is for this proposal to be developed further?

Vital 2.5 Important 7 Possibly Useful 5 Inessential .5 Time wasting 0

5. If you feel these ideas are worth pursuing, what do you think our next steps ought to be?

“Develop draft objects and articles of association.”

“A good structure and consortium is necessary to take forward and a sound business plan right from the start.”

“ ... support of Government and some serious corporate backers would significantly enhance its chances of survival.”

“Research what is already out there in order to understand complementarities.”

“Talk to existing providers.”

“Do some more modelling around the concept. Start talking the concept up. Try to get the mainstream media interested.”

“Put the information together in a prospectus ... seek government support ... speak to ACEVO and NCVO ... find a sponsor ... remain alert to those who want to hijack or derail the idea.”

“a group of interested individuals should be convened ...[including opponents], should include academics and purchasers of the end products.”

“a difficult question – perhaps we should seek an academic lead ... like the potential of other people in the sector apart from the established names being involved”.

“get political buy in ... talk to the TUC ... talk to people working at the front line ... small organizations as well as large.”

“make sure the need is clearly defined Concept of a CSU better than the narrower idea of a university for the Third Sector.”

“Raise some seed funding to pay for bringing together the research that supports the idea.”

Our comment

Together these make a very useful set of leads. PrimeTimers has been working around all of them. Key issue for us is prioritising them in relation to our own resources.

6. Explore at end how far personal support might extend

“Interested in being a founding member and an active participant (teaching and research).”

“Prepared to support, potentially provide infrastructure expertise in social enterprise, network of others.”

Possibly in the future, but would not want to put name forward publicly at present.

Basic attitude sceptical.

Very interested intellectually in participating in thinking around such a concept, even if subsequently concluding it is unnecessary.

A lot more interested in the idea than when agreeing to be interviewed. Would be willing to give support.

Would like to keep talking and share points of development going forward

Very interested in keeping in touch as our ideas develop.

“Personally delighted to be involved, and certainly to be kept informed.”

“I can support the project with resources (staff, contacts, expertise.”

“I’d be interested in helping with the above”.

Our General Comment

The keen interest and broad support for a civil society university shown by our respondents encourages us in the belief that this is an idea whose time has come. These are key respondents selected for their experience and knowledge of the third sector and include senior executives of mainstream charities, foundations and social enterprises, consultants, representative sector organizations, trade unions and academics.

We thank all who have given so readily of their time and feel the best way to show our gratitude is to ensure that we learn from what they have told us and that it informs the next stages of our work. We will keep all in touch with our progress.