

Case Study – The National Health Service University

The NHS University (NHSU) was a part of the United Kingdom's National Health Service tasked with training NHS staff. It was originally proposed by the Labour Party in the lead up to the 2001 general election and was launched in December 2003 as a Special Health Authority. At its launch, its main aims were to improve the training of NHS staff by:

- Creating and improving opportunities for learning;
- Creating high quality learning environments;
- Leading research into future learning needs.

The organisation made progress on achieving these aims with the creation of a large number of different training programmes and the setting up of a training helpline for staff. But problems arose and, in September 2004, the NHSU was merged with the NHS Modernisation Agency to form the new NHS Institute for Learning, Skills and Innovation. The NHSU was officially dissolved on 31st July 2005, with its remaining learning programmes transferred to the Skills for Health organisation.

An internal inquiry into the NHSU was held and the report was recently released under Freedom of Information Act rules. It makes for very interesting reading.

Some of the most relevant findings of this inquiry for the possible establishment of a Civil Society University are summarised below.

Strategic purpose

The report examined closely the NHSU's strategic purpose and fit in the education and training system. This was considered to be complex and insufficiently clear and the matter was worsened by the quest for University title – see later. This lack of clarity of purpose produced a diffuse - and therefore less effective - drive towards delivery as well as complicating relationships with key stakeholders. The lack of clear boundaries between NHSU's role and that of other organisations in health education and training caused confusion and friction. This, in turn, created a difficult climate for the establishment of strong and effective partnerships with the stakeholders on which NHSU was crucially dependent.

Business model

NHSU lacked a clear business model. It wished to operate through a combination of Department of Health subsidy, other sources of funding (e.g. from the Learning Skills Council) and through charging for NHSU-badged courses. But there was no clarity over who would pay for NHSU-badged courses or what the charges would be. Nor was it clear to what extent NHSU was operating on a pure commercial basis, marketing its provision to health service employers, as opposed to reaching up-front agreement with Strategic Health Authorities on courses to be developed and then these organisations ensuring their use.

Engagement with stakeholders

Despite NHSU's efforts, it acquired a consistently poor reputation amongst stakeholders in the NHS, social care and education sector. The inquiry concluded that there needed to be a shift in NHSU culture and attitude to one which -

- Recognised the importance of identifying and listening to customers in the new NHS;
- Placed NHSU as a genuine partner within the NHS rather than an autonomous critical friend.

University title

NHSU priorities were influenced by its efforts to acquire a University title. Use of the “University” title is tightly controlled. NHSU, as it then operated, neither conformed to the standard criteria nor had the necessary track record. The report concluded that pursuit of University title by NHSU had been a distraction to the organisation, and added to the confusion felt by stakeholders:

It created a perception that NHSU’s prime aim was to be a provider of degree-level education, adding to the uncertainty about the organisation’s role;

It created suspicion that NHSU was “trying first and foremost to be a University, rather than getting on with the job”, undermining its credibility with key stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

The failure of the NHSU, in terms of its original objectives and expectations, provides some important lessons for the possible establishment of a CSU.

A CSU feasibility study must address the critical issues of strategic purpose and business model, not least by ensuring that strong relationships are formed with stakeholders from within the Third Sector and with prospective partner organisations – and ensuring that their needs and expectations are met.

The role and value of a University title must be critically examined as part of the feasibility exercise. The failure of the NHSU to achieve this status provides a note of caution but should not be regarded as an automatic disqualification of the aspiration.