

# The University of the West of Scotland-Oxfam Partnership: 'For a more equitable and sustainable Scotland'<sup>1</sup>

## Origins and Development

The UWS-Oxfam Partnership is a formally established relationship between the two organisations, underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding. The Partnership emerged as a result of collaborative research and policy development work between UWS staff and Oxfam and its community partner organisations, revolving around the development of Oxfam's antipoverty advocacy and campaigning in Scotland. This culminated in the 'Whose Economy?' seminar series in 2010-11<sup>2</sup>, which laid the basis for Oxfam's subsequent 'Our Economy' policy and strategy, published in June 2013<sup>3</sup>.

Meantime, in the summer of 2011, Oxfam approached UWS with the proposal of a formal partnership arrangement linked to the University's mission statement. This was positively received by the then senior management of the University, who indicated a willingness to provide some financial support for the initial development period. Over the next year, ideas and plans were discussed and developed and a rationale was elaborated which provided the basis for an application to the University's Strategic Development Fund for £50k, which was approved. A Memorandum of Understanding between the University and Oxfam was signed as part of a launch event in October 2012.

## *The Partnership comprises:*

- A Research and Knowledge Exchange, linking UWS academics with Oxfam and its community partners in collaborative projects of various kinds;
- The UWS-Oxfam Policy Forum, which brings all of these partners together with a broad range of external organisations from across all sectors of Scottish society (voluntary, community, government, public sector, NHS, HE), to discuss key questions and to inform understanding and engagement with both existing and emergent issues.
- A small-scale 'programme' of placements and work-related learning and volunteering opportunities, enabling UWS students to contribute to the work of Oxfam and its community partners, while learning and developing their experience and skills;

Notwithstanding a change in senior leadership at UWS, the University has continued to be supportive of the Partnership, and last year featured the work of the Partnership as part of an advertising campaign in the *THES*.

## Research and Knowledge Exchange

The key idea here has been to develop and deepen the University's engagement with communities in the west of Scotland, and at the same time to support in particular newer researchers into productive and potentially impactful collaborations, by linking to Oxfam's local community partners. In the process, organisations are supported in various ways, and experience and evidence is recorded, analysed and disseminated in different ways, to different audiences and for various purposes. But opportunities have also been taken to connect Oxfam to important experiences and developments in other communities, and to feed learning from that into Oxfam's policy and campaigning work.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://uwsoxfampartnership.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/whose-economy-seminar-papers-complete-series-188809>

<sup>3</sup> <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/our-economy-towards-a-new-prosperity-294239>

*Examples of RKE collaborations:*

- Receiving Refugees: What works and why? – looking at experience of Gateway Refugees in North Lanarkshire Council area.
- Tea in the Pot: A ‘great good place’ in Govan? – capturing the experience and contribution of a women’s drop-in centre and support service in Govan, Glasgow, and linking that to a discussion of language in ‘community empowerment’ and a critique of the language of ‘social capital’.
- Austerity and health in Ayrshire – looking at the experience of austerity and its relation to health in two Ayrshire communities across two periods of austerity.
- A Review of Local Social Cooperative Business Models and their Potential to Reduce Poverty – supporting Oxfam’s work by exploring the impacts of the co-operative business model in Scotland.

The Partnership publishes a series of Collaborative Research Reports, of which three are now in print and available on the website. Much of the work has been disseminated in other ways.

**The Policy Forum**

This meets three times a year. Over the first year and a half it operated almost as a kind of ‘committee’ which oversaw the ‘Partnership’ and which for part of the meeting had a policy/RKE discussion, focused on some themes or policy development issues. However, after evaluating its operation, the operation of the Forum has been reconceptualised as rather more of an ‘event’, and the running/oversight of the Partnership is now dealt with largely between Oxfam and UWS colleagues meeting around every six weeks.

*Recent events include:*

- July 2014, pre-Referendum event: “Addressing Inequality in Scotland” with Stewart Lansley (journalist) and David Bell (economist).
- November 2014, post-Referendum event: “Realising Social Justice: People, Politics and Policies” with Mike Danson (economist)
- March 2015, forthcoming event: “Decent Work: What are the minimum expectations people should be able to have of their employment, and how might those be achieved in practice?” with Stephen Boyd (STUC); Anna Ritchie-Allan (Close the Gap); Chris Warhurst, Institute for Employment Research, Warwick University.

There has been participation in these events from an increasingly wide range of organisations and agencies.

**Student Input/Benefit**

We have had some useful opportunities for students arising via the Partnership – in terms of volunteering, work-related learning, paid employment, project work, etc. Examples include:

- Computing students going out on placement with Oxfam and with community partner organisations to work on IT projects.
- A social science PhD student with a limited stipend getting long-term, paid employment with a community partner organisation which also provided a basis for her PhD fieldwork.
- Another social science PhD student volunteering at his local community radio station and drawing on UWS academic input to provide the station’s “Social Awareness Programme”.

- A group of business students working on business planning and IT with a community partner organisation trying to develop a sustainability strategy and plan.

### **Some issues, reflections and points of note**

A challenge has been keeping the thing going. Everybody except one person who was involved in setting the Partnership up moved on over the next year or so. Then Oxfam went through a major restructuring. Then UWS went through a major restructuring. The main person at UWS had a lot of other duties to carry out, and colleagues at Oxfam had a lot else on their minds and on their plates. We seem to have gotten through this difficult period now, with more 'human resource' available on each side of the Partnership, though still some way short of what we would like – and need.

It has taken persistence to get even basic things going at times, and a fair bit of trial and effort. There was one kind of 'car crash' of a Policy Forum meeting when we realised the format was wrong and had to change, and we got some feedback on that and reformatted.

There has had to be ongoing dialogue to develop understanding about who we are, what we are doing, how we are doing it, who contributes what, when and how, etc. Mostly that has worked out fairly well, but there have been challenges. One aspect of this has been around the content of research outputs.

The Partnership is based on a fairly collaborative and participatory view of knowledge production, and a fairly broad view also of what counts as evidence in the process of building knowledge. Almost all of the RKE collaborations to date have taken a qualitative approach – though there is no fundamental predisposition towards that.

The work, and broader engagement, of the Partnership has helped to support and to build some further research capacity within the University around the Partnership's areas of interest. NHS Health Scotland, who have participated in the Policy Forum from the beginning, have provided research funding for work around Glasgow's 'excess mortality', and the Scottish Community Development Council is to fund work around the future of community development in Scotland.

The development of the Partnership was an element in one of the UWS Impact Case Studies for its submission to Unit 22 in REF2014.

### **Key challenges for the Partnership include:**

- Sustainability
- Building 'presence'
- Scaling up and internal 'buy-in'
- Impact and policy influence

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