Placement with JUST West Yorkshire - Madeline-Sophie Abbas

Summary

The project undertaken was working on a book entitled ‘The Big Society: The Big Divide?’ that JUST were publishing which engaged with the Coalition Government’s Big Society agenda, particularly in relation to racial equality and its impact on the voluntary and community sector (VCS). I was given responsibility for all aspects of the book including reviewing the chapters and submitting revisions to contributors, editing the chapters, negotiating a contract with the publishers and working with them to submit copy, and deciding on section headings/chapter order. I also submitted a chapter for the book ‘The Good, the Bad and the Big: The Paradoxes of the New Social Contract,’ which looked at the new commercial terms under the Big Society and what this might mean for the VCS. I also wrote the foreword and the postscript for the book and advised on the content for the introduction.

Research carried out

I did a lot of research around the Big Society and the Good Society which involved looking substantively at all the key government literature and speeches, as well as literature produced by the voluntary and community sector. I also researched the reception in the media. This research enabled me to contextualise the debates for the foreword and postscript and provided me with a lot of material for approaching my chapter and for drawing out the arguments when reviewing contributors’ chapters.

Impact/outcome

The book is to be published in the upcoming weeks and I am still working with JUST West Yorkshire along with Runnymede Trust on the book launch which is expected to be in November. It is planned that the book will be circulated amongst the voluntary and community sector and will be used to influence policy-makers and government officials in the hope that they will consider some of the points raised in the book and the possible impact of the Big Society agenda in terms of the organisation of the sector/funding and social outcomes relating to equality issues. I have negotiated a marketing and distribution agreement with the publishers which includes writing a press release, notification of the title to all relevant trade book databases and library and academic book wholesalers, as well as uploading title information on Gardners, Bertrams, Amazon and other online retailers, and stocking titles on consignment with UK wholesalers.

As a result of the placement, I was asked by JUST to be a board member for the organisation which I have taken up and which has given me greater insight into racial justice issues at the grassroots level. I have also been able to make contacts in the field which has enabled me to access research participants and to complete the remaining half of my fieldwork in one month which was great!

Key learnings

- Learnt a lot about the Big Society and the Good society (having read basically every document produced on both!), both in conceptual terms, but also in practical terms in relation to the
voluntary and community sector. I learnt how quickly the context is changing with new government documents and policy being introduced and how quickly organisations have to respond.

- Learnt a lot about the VCS (including terminology!) and how different groups operate and engage with policy, including ways in which organisations are having to re-structure and the type of work that is performed including responding to key policy changes, campaigns, community organising etc. and some of the key debates that they are involved in.

- Learnt a lot about the practicalities of publishing such as finding a publisher, negotiating contracts, marketing and distribution, timescales, and preparing copy which also made me learn about the technicalities of formatting documents (which will be useful for my PhD document!)

- Learnt a lot about the editing process - reviewing articles, working with contributors, and the immense task of making sure that style is consistent throughout a document, particularly endnotes, references, chapter headings etc. I put together a style sheet but this was not always followed so there was a LOT of work to correct this which I now realise takes a lot of time!

- Since being asked to be a board member, I have learnt more about how such organisations work and what types of research and debates they are involved in which has enabled me to continue my involvement at the grassroots level.