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Unpacking the Foundational Dimensions of Work Integration Social Enterprise

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Abstract

Purpose The goal of this exploratory, mixed methods study was to develop and test a tool that identifies foundational dimensions of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) for use in empirical studies and enterprise self-assessment. **Method** Construction of the initial prototype was based upon review of the literature and prior qualitative research of the authors. A 20-item question pool with a four-point response scale was constructed to explore WISE business and employment practices, and strategies for worker growth and development. Three sequential field tests were conducted with the prototype – the first with five Canadian WISEs, the second with fourteen WISEs in the UK, and the third with 6 Canadian WISEs involved in an outcome study in the mental health sector. Each field test included completion of the questionnaire by persons with managerial responsibility within the WISE, and evaluative feedback captured through questions on the applicability and interpretability of the items. **Findings** Testing of the prototype instrument revealed the inherent diversity in the field, and the difficulty in creating questions that both embrace that diversity and produce uni-dimensional variables definable along a spectrum. A number of challenges with question structure were identified, and have been modified throughout the iterative testing process. **Research Implications** This study identified central domains for inclusion in a multi-dimensional WISE assessment tool. Further testing will help further refine scaling and establish psychometric properties. **Originality/value** This measure will provide a descriptive profile of WISEs across sectors, and identify WISE core dimensions for research and organizational development.

Keywords social enterprise; employment. measurement; instrument design

Article Classification Research paper

Introduction

Social enterprises – businesses that trade for a social purpose rather than for the accumulation of wealth for shareholders or investors (Borzaga & Defourny, 2001; Kerlin, 2013) – have received significant international attention in recent years. Work integration social enterprises (WISEs) are a particular form of social enterprise, with the primary aim of providing employability and integration-related opportunities for those who are disadvantaged within, or excluded from, full access to the labour market (Mandiberg, 2016; Nyssens, 2007). Also known as social businesses, social firms or affirmative enterprises, WISEs first came to prominence in Europe, where the establishment of social co-operatives in Italy arose as a response to the closure of many psychiatric institutions and asylums, a process that commenced in the 1970s and 1980s (Galera & Borzaga, 2009; Laratta, 2016; Thomas, 2004). The idea of providing employment and addressing workforce conditions which disadvantage many people, such as those experiencing mental health issues, physical disabilities, long-term unemployment, substance abuse/addiction, criminal convictions, high risk youth and a range of other complex and multiple disadvantages (Hazenberg, Seddon, & Denny, 2012; Jeffery, 2005; Lysaght, Jakobsen, & Granhaug, 2012; Vilà, Pallisera, & Fullana, 2007; Warner & Mandiberg, 2006) has since spread to other countries and continents (Spear & Bidet, 2005). WISEs can therefore be considered as a form of community economic development: they are constructed to take advantage of the particular strengths of people, to meet their unique needs and address work barriers (Mason, Barraket, Friel, O'Rourke, & Stenta, 2015).

However, this form of 'intervention' presents numerous challenges to researchers and to policymakers, particularly in terms of assessing their effectiveness and identifying best practices (see Roy, Lysaght, & Krupa, 2017). One difficulty encountered by researchers and policymakers alike is that there needs to be sufficient thought given to the unique context in which each WISE operates. WISEs can be highly idiosyncratic, with significant variation in

such things as the types and nature of employment offered, their social purpose, and their ability to be self-sustaining (Spear & Bidet, 2005). Moreover, there are distinct variations often between and within countries with regards to WISE policy and funding arrangements. Legal requirements and standards for WISEs do not presently exist in Canada, the United States, Japan, and many other countries (Mandiberg, 2016). There are, however, guiding principles for WISEs that have been developed in Europe. In order to be eligible for government support in Italy, for example, at least one-third of employees should have a disability or disadvantage in traditional employment, all workers need to be paid at least minimum wage, and the business needs to operate without any endowment (Warner & Mandiberg, 2006). Social Firms UK have also produced guidelines for what they consider to be best practice in the design of WISEs, on several different dimensions. Guiding principles such as these are not mandatory or universally applied, however, and identifying what is, and what is not a WISE, even if there *were* universally applied criteria, can be confusing and challenging. A key problem that arises relates to policymakers being able to identify who may or may not be eligible for identification as a WISE, and can be an especially controversial process when a shift in policy and/or legislation arises which explicitly favours the WISE model over other models of employment intervention. For example, in the Province of Ontario, Canada there has been a recent policy shift away from the use of sheltered workshops in employment services for people with disabilities, while there is interest in advancing the WISE option. However, no 'tool' presently exists to support policymakers in identifying WISEs, or best WISE practice, or to support organisations who wish to enhance their implementation of WISE with a view to better supporting their beneficiaries and securing wider legitimacy with policymakers, funders or other investors.

In this paper we present the first steps in remedying this central problem. Our paper is organised as follows: we first review the extant literature related to WISE classification, and past efforts directed to creating explanatory frameworks. We then explain the approach we have taken to

develop and test a tool designed to identify and assess the core foundational dimensions of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) for use in future empirical studies, and for the enterprises themselves to self-assess their compliance. We next present the challenges observed during the testing process, and explain how these have influenced the shape of the tool. We then discuss the implications of our findings, particularly in relation to our central contribution. Finally, we position this tool as providing an opportunity to begin the process of identifying how varying dimensions and practices of WISEs differentially affect the people they seek to support.

The Structure and Impact of WISEs

Most of the past research examining outcomes of WISEs relative to social, economic and health factors has been largely descriptive in nature. There is criticism that many of the studies are insufficiently robust and provide largely anecdotal evidence about the impacts of the organisation on individuals and society (Roy, Donaldson, Baker, & Kerr, 2014). Research concerning WISEs has focussed mainly on business development and sustainability (O'Shaughnessy, 2008; Petrella & Richez-Battesti, 2016; Secker, Dass, & Grove, 2003), incorporation models (Davister, Defourny, & Grégoire, 2004; Spear & Bidet, 2005; Vidal, 2005), public policy interaction (Cooney, Nyssens, O'Shaughnessy, & Defourny, 2016; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Kim, 2009), and the tensions between social and commercial goals (Battilana, Sengul, Pache, & Model, 2015; Jeter, 2017; Teasdale, 2012). There are several studies which research the impact of WISEs on the people they support (Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2010; Lysaght et al., 2012; Seddon, Hazenberg, & Denny, 2013; Warner & Mandiberg, 2013). These studies all focus on different groups, with different disadvantages, in different organisations, with different aims, in different countries. Because there is no common metric to clearly identify differences in WISE structures and approaches,

it is impossible to determine which approaches are associated with the outcomes realized by service users, or whether the results obtained are consistent with mission-based goals.

There have been two large scale projects examining the landscape of WISEs across Europe from an illustrative perspective. The first of these concerns the role of social enterprises in the European labour markets as part of the ELEXEEIS (L'entreprise sociale: lutte contre l'exclusion par l'insertion économique et sociale) project (Bidet & Spear, 2003). The main aim of this project was to collect and collate evidence concerning the number, size, scale and infrastructure of social enterprises across twelve countries in the European Union. In their survey and analysis of WISEs, Bidet and Spear (2003) provided conclusions that WISEs tend to rely upon a diverse range of funding sources which at times is unmanageable and hinders progress, and that some WISEs need support to manage their risks in the marketplace.

The second large scale descriptive project focused on the socio-economic impact of WISEs in Europe (PERSE) alongside the evolution of the organisations and their relationships with public policies. This study was carried out by various members of the EMES network across eleven countries and 150 WISEs (Davister et al., 2004). This work distinguished between four main modes of integration typical of European WISEs: transitional occupation, creation of permanent self-financed jobs, professional integration with permanent subsidies, and socialisation though productive activity. Within those four types of integration modes are different WISE formats that represent the plethora of structures that are specific to individual countries. Davister et al., (2004) note that the majority of the WISEs operate using one of these modes of integration, although there were others which operate using two or more modes. These modes are primarily descriptive in that they demonstrate the how WISEs integrate people through their activities, but not how they achieve this integration through their business practices and operational procedures.

Other research is similarly descriptive about the incorporation models of WISEs. Vidal (2005), for example, identifies two different types of Spanish WISE through her empirical work: Type A WISEs which are considered as intermediate or transitional companies and Type B WISEs which act as end employers. These types are not legal forms, and Vidal is quick to point out that the groups are not homogenous; in fact the WISEs are very heterogenous within Spain, Italy, and other countries and depend upon a multitude of other factors within the context. Studies such as those by Vidal (2005), Spear and Bidet (2005), and Davister et al. (2004) show that WISEs are a highly complex form of intervention, all with different interacting structural components.

A study by Bull (2007) used a qualitative "Balance" tool to measure the business performance of 30 different social enterprises throughout northern England. This measure used qualitative responses of participants to determine which enterprises were more business-oriented and which had a less structured, more social agenda. As such this "Balance" tool was an instrument used to categorize these Social Enterprises into social- and business-oriented structures. Four categories were highlighted in this tool: "A Learning Organization" (how the enterprise fosters employee professional development), "Internal Activities" (the social and physical structure of the work environment), "The Stakeholder Environment" (components of marketing that the enterprise must account for), and "Return – The Multi-Bottom Line" (the economic and social potential gains). These categories are not mutually exclusive, and it is clear that organizations employ a range of strategies over time. While it was found that these organisations put their mission and marketing first followed by their accountability and transparency, external market forces and competition also tend to be key drivers for employing different strategic priorities (Bull, 2007). Indeed, it is regularly recognised that social enterprises in general are inherently more complex than traditional businesses owing to their pursuit of multiple bottom lines: commercial, social, environmental and cultural goals. Moreover, as a sub-set of social

enterprise, WISEs face unique challenges in their pursuit of improved employment outcomes for those that are labour market disadvantaged. WISEs have been forced to pass on extra costs associated with the employment and training of people from a work disadvantaged group onto the consumer, philanthropic donors and the government in order to ensure survival and effectiveness in their social mission (Teasdale, 2012). How they negotiate this tension by mixing and spreading their resources is dependent upon the interaction between the different groups involved, a process which, in and of itself, can have an impact upon the trade-offs the organisations face (Battilana et al., 2015). With WISEs representing a special case in terms of social enterprises balancing social and commercial tensions, there is a need for specific measurements built around and by the WISEs themselves.

Tools such as the Work Environment Impact Scale (WEIS) have been used to measure the quality of WISE work environments in supporting the positive outcome of secure, ongoing employment for employees (Williams, Fossey, & Harvey, 2010), identifying the factors which can contribute to sustained employment within a WISE and finding that a work environment with a regular structure for tasks, support for those tasks and a cooperative team helped to support the wellbeing for individual illnesses. Potential barriers to future employment and the success of the WISE in achieving reduced marginalization has also been studied (Williams, Fossey, & Harvey, 2012) as have the perceptions of employers on the employability of WISE employees (Krupa, Howell-Moneta, Lysaght, & Kirsh, 2016), suggesting that although workers employed by social enterprises suffer from less disadvantage in the labour market than they might without this experience, they are not accepted at the same level as those with experience in the conventional workforce.

There is a gap between the more descriptive account of what WISEs can *be* and the social impact research concerning what WISEs can *do*. Filling that gap requires a way to uncover and explore the link between the two; in other words, how what the WISE *is* links to what the WISE

does. Establishing a tool which can codify WISE structure and processes will provide a resource to help evidence the ways in which WISEs impact workers and their communities. To address this gap and form the tool we explain the methods used in our research.

Methods

This exploratory study used a mixed methods design. The initial instrument structure was based on the self-assessment tool developed by Social Firms UK (2010), which presented a series of questions in three domains for emerging and established WISEs to consider and reflect on as part of development and/or internal review. Research conducted by the investigators led to the evolution of a revised prototype based on items from the original tool, new items that tapped additional concepts in each domain, and addition of a basic four-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree"). The three question domains relate to: the business form; employment practices; and worker growth and development.

The next stage of development involved sequential field tests of the prototype instrument - the first with Canadian WISEs, the second with WISEs in the UK, and the third in the context of a Canadian study of WISEs in the mental health sector. Each field test included completion of the questionnaire by one or more persons of responsibility in the WISE, and collection of evaluative feedback through questions on the applicability and interpretability of the items. Respondents also provided demographic information about the WISE (i.e. legal incorporation status, primary populations served, primary mission).

The first trial involved individual administration of the initial prototype across five Canadian WISEs serving multiple sectors, including mental health, intellectual disability, corrections, Aboriginal peoples, and homelessness. The WISEs were located in three Canadian provinces (Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia) and were purposively selected to allow for testing across diverse organization types and populations. The tool was administered verbally to WISE

managers by interviewers, who probed the responses to scaled responses to elicit information concerning the way each dimension was interpreted by the various respondents. Interviews were audio recorded, and the results summarized into a data matrix. Results were qualitatively analysed across respondents, with the range of item interpretations and key features being extracted and articulated relative to each item. Items were subsequently reviewed by the research team, and wording modifications made based on the feedback. A total of seven items were found to produce mixed interpretations among respondents. These were reworded, and one additional item was created.

The second field trial began with a single interview using the original prototype with the manager of a WISE in rural Scotland. The survey was then converted into an online questionnaire format and administered using Qualtrics. The questions for the online survey were modified based upon observations from the initial interview, and changes recommended by the Canadian field trial. The survey link was circulated to 96 Social Firms across Scotland using contacts details from the Social Firms Scotland members list. The link was sent out multiple times through different communication streams including nationwide newsletters, email lists and various forums. Fourteen organisations completed and returned the survey online, responding to the survey questions as well as providing comments on the tool itself. The data set was reviewed for any anomalies or missed items to determine whether the instrument offered a reasonable platform for respondents. The results of the review confirmed that the re-worded questions were more clearly understood than the initial field trial. Limited changes were made after analysing the new data set however it did provide justification and reassurance to proceed with the new questions.

Finally, the revised instrument was field tested with a group of six WISEs that were partners in a Canadian study of social enterprise outcomes in the mental health sector. In this trial, managers, and in some instances managerial teams, responded to the core questions, with the

investigators probing in detail their thinking relative to each response. Factors influencing their thinking and their question interpretations were recorded, as were observed discrepancies between team members. Data were recorded in a matrix that captured observations across sites, and the results were qualitatively interpreted by the research team to arrive at a series of conclusions and recommendations concerning development of a beta instrument.

Results

A number of challenges with wording or conceptual focus were noted at each stage of testing, which regardless of improvements to the wording prior to each trial, fell into common themes throughout the alpha test phase.

1. **Compound concepts within a single question** – In line with good item design, the authors attempted to create items that did not mix concepts. Some items revealed themselves to be multi-level during testing, however. For example, the statement *All paid employees receive market wages or are paid at or above the provincial minimum wage* was designed as an item addressing a core construct of fair remuneration; in testing, however, it became clear that a variety of wage structures were in place, that firms could answer "yes" relative to one aspect, but "no" relative to another, and that the implications were substantially different. Likewise, the item *Training positions are time-limited & directed towards full employment*, while initially thought to represent the single concept of limiting ongoing designation of workers as "trainees" was difficult to answer if, for example, the goal for all workers was full employment, but no specific time limit existed for the training phase.

2. **Unclear terminology**. With each test it became apparent that certain terms were either not understood by the respondents, or too broad for them to respond to within a single conceptual framework. For example, the term "fair market wage", which the first trial

demonstrated needed consideration separate from "minimum wage", continued to be problematic in the subsequent trials, due to uncertain interpretation by different respondents. The term "full employment" was also misinterpreted, with some interpreting this to mean full time employment, others community or regular employment.

3. **Lack of sensitivity to magnitude or degree.** Use of the Likert scaling allowed respondents to indicate degree of agreement or disagreement with a particular statement, but failed to differentiate well between business models on items that may hold particular relevance relative to outcomes, such as retention. For example, the item *At least 50% of the business's income is earned through sales of market-led goods or services* was initially misunderstood in terms of how this value might be calculated, many thinking of it in terms of business-led revenues only. When "*As opposed to through donations or grants*" was added, this appeared to clarify meaning, and yet the question still failed to distinguish between businesses that had up to 50% of income through sales (they could strongly agree with the statement) and those who had 100% of income through sales. In a similar way, when a question stated *All positions are open to people in a disadvantaged group* (a question intended to distinguish between those firms that have separate employment tiers for workers in the marginalized groups and supervisory staff) responses were subject to error based on the term "all", as well as respondent interpretation of the workforce structure - for example, basing the response only on frontline personnel, rather than the full workforce which included supervisory staff. Likewise, the question asking whether oversite of the business was by an external board or by independent structures within the business were difficult to answer if there was a mixed model.

4. **Issues related to relevance.** It was discovered that some concepts did not extend well across sectors. For example, in the mental health sector, the issue of training wages or stipends did not exist in the Canadian provinces where testing occurred, while this was a factor for those WISEs targeting people with intellectual disabilities. In the absence of a "Not applicable" option, respondents in the mental health sector struggled with questions related to sub-minimum wage, or length of employment in a training status. Similarly, the Scottish respondents all responded in the same way on many of the questions related to wage and hiring requirements, likely because they were irrelevant. Some respondents argued that provision of needed accommodations is an unnecessary question, due to this being a core purpose for the sector's existence, and the legal responsibility for all employers to provide reasonable accommodation.

5. **Responses dependent on relative knowledge**. Some responses, when explored in depth, showed that the ability of the respondent to provide a "valid" or informed response required knowledge of implicit standards in the WISE field, or employment in general. For example, a respondent may "strongly agree" that *Workers have the opportunity to make suggestions or otherwise contribute to decision making within the business*, but this emphatic level of agreement may not reflect the degree to which internal structures have been developed to support worker contribution. Respondents with very weak structures to this effect would choose the same response level as those where workers are engaged in regular evaluative processes, voting structures, etc. This and other such examples revealed the need for examples and behavioural anchors for questions.

In review of the item responses some unique factors that might speak to key fundamental differences between businesses emerged. For example, some organizations were more focused on employing a large cohort of marginalized employees at a training wage or incentive pay,

while others were focused on employing a smaller number of long term employees at minimum wage. Some of the agencies in the mental health sector spoke to the value of incorporating multiple businesses together within a single WISE, or even under the umbrella of a parent organization, due to the ability this afforded to subsidize financially weak businesses providing valuable forms of employment to people within their employee target group. These differences appeared to be indicative of fundamental variance in mission and values.

Discussion

This study revealed a great variety of organizational typologies, making even classification of each organization as a WISE difficult. The range of mission-related goals seen in the Canadian context were found to be at least equal in diversity to those uncovered by Bull (2007), yet seemed to defy a single classification. Several of the WISEs that participated in these studies reported operating not only a number of businesses under their organizational banner, but also a range of other services for the marginalized group in question, including supported employment programs, microfinancing options, personal counselling, advocacy, and family supports. For WISE managers who have a connection to these other agency-based activities, separating the WISE mission, goals, and operational structure appears to be difficult.

The conversations with managers revealed a general lack of understanding as to whether their organization qualifies as a WISE. To some degree, this confusion is due to the number of terms (i.e. social firm, social business, affirmative business, social enterprise, worker cooperative) used to describe what is largely the same type of organization, as well as the multiplicity of possible WISE profiles (Warner & Mandiberg, 2006). As a term that identifies social enterprises that have job creation and employment integration as a central focus, the term WISE may help to organize and define the sector – yet any measurement tool must be sensitive to

national, regional and sectorial differences in how these organizations have been construed historically.

Limitations and difficulties related to research in this sector stem from the fact that it is a highly complex form of 'intervention'. The intervention has several interacting components; each WISE presents unique differences in the design and delivery of the intervention; development and delivery of the intervention needs to be sensitive to the local context, and therefore cannot be standardized or externally manipulated; and there is inherent complexity in identifying the causal factors that link the intervention to outcomes. As Lara et al. (2011) point out, even the fidelity of established interventions becomes challenged when they are administered in real world contexts with a range of environmental constraints. Critical to moving this work forward is having a means of measuring and distinguishing the core dimensions of WISEs such that these features can be evaluated, both with respect to their fidelity to the purpose and philosophy of WISE and to their impact on outcomes.

The field tests have led to key refinements in the instrument, and informed use of the tool moving forward. A number of important findings support continued development. First, the scale items are perceived by WISE managers as valid and important features of WISE functioning that are worthy of inclusion, thus supporting the notion of face validity. With modification throughout the testing period, it appears that many of the items are reasonably reliable in terms of individual interpretation, based on the Canadian and Scottish WISE managers included in the trials. Second, the diversity of responses to many of the items that were captured appear to be reflective of real differences in WISE philosophical and operational functioning. Thus, the instrument shows early capacity to discriminate between WISEs on the several dimensions. Finally, the instrument has value as a self-reflection tool for business managers and developers, based on anecdotal feedback from those involved in the live testing.

Overall, this research is in early stages, and generalizability is limited by low sample size and high specificity of environmental contexts for each respondent organization. These limitations coincide with those experienced by past researchers in the field of WISE quality measurement (Roy et al., 2014). The review process has revealed a number of philosophical and practical issues requiring attention in moving to the beta instrument design. First, it is critical that the individual questions clearly identify the structure of the responding organizations relative to those dimensions that have been empirically (and often theoretically) identified as unique dimensions that may have an effect on outcomes. Evaluation of these items for criterion validity will be essential to the tool's value in future correlational and predictive studies of WISE impact. The tool must, likewise, be sufficiently broad in scope as to capture and embrace the inherent diversity in the field, and as the initial model suggested, organizational differences that are values-based (Social Firms UK, 2010).

Ultimately, the field must come to agreement on fundamental and indisputable principles that underscore good and defensible WISE practice. These might include structural factors that support fair and legal forms of compensation, accommodate differences in ability, and resist stigma while promoting social inclusion of workers. Beyond these agreed standards, strategies that the WISE uses to achieve common (i.e. reduced poverty, improvement on health indicators, etc.) and idiosyncratic mission goals can be appraised relative to a well-defined and differentiated set of dimensions.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This paper reports on the early stages of development of an instrument intended to categorize WISE organizations on central structural dimensions for use in research and program development. Instrument development will proceed with further refinements to the item response scales to add specificity. This is expected to both better define the internal consistency

of the tool, and enhance learning outcomes for developing organizations relative to the range of possible profiles observable across WISE models.

Establishment of a psychometrically valid measure that can codify WISE structure and processes will provide an important resource in advancing studies that contribute to theoretical understanding of how WISEs impact workers and their communities. The revised instrument will therefore be subjected to further expert review before undergoing broader field tests to establish psychometric properties. The final measure will advance outcomes research work in the WISE field by providing an indicator that captures the nature of individual WISE interventions for comparative studies. This work will ultimately ensure that minimum standards and a core set of principles drive the field forward.

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