

## Volunteering and learning in HE: exploring and acknowledging student experience

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### Abstract

This small-scale study seeks to gain understanding of the experiences and learning opportunities presented by students' participation in a volunteering project at a post-1992 city university. The participating students were all drawn from an undergraduate programme in the field of special educational needs (SEN). This research focuses on the development of students' professional confidence, personal skills and subject-related understanding in the context of considering the values and benefits of student volunteering. Pre-volunteering ( $n = 32$ ), mid-point ( $n = 23$ ) and post-volunteering ( $n = 26$ ) questionnaires were completed by participating students. In-depth interviews were also conducted following the 12-week volunteering period ( $n = 6$ ). Statistical analysis of questionnaires was carried out using SPSS analytics software, facilitating the production of tables and charts, while open-ended responses and in-depth interviews were analysed by hand and coded using themes. The findings of the study support the linking of volunteering activity to higher education (HE) programme outcomes to facilitate accreditation and recognition for students.

**Keywords:** volunteering; higher education; learning outcomes; accreditation; professional skills

### Introduction

Volunteering has grown in status and credibility since 1997, supported and encouraged by successive governments' policies. David Cameron's 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office 2010) emphasised community enhancement and social responsibility through volunteering, while research commissioned by Community Service Volunteers suggests that

3.4 million people in the UK have been inspired to volunteer following the success of the 'games makers' in the 2012 London Olympics (CSV 2013). Given the increasingly competitive job market, and the high level of voluntary action among students (Brewis et al. 2010), the potential learning and educational benefits of volunteering in the higher education (HE) sector deserve further scrutiny. In particular, students wishing to train as teachers are required to have some education-based experience, with volunteering in local schools or education environments encouraged by many HE institutions and required by others (see Prospects 2013). Yet voluntary work, like internships, may not be an option for those students with limited resources in terms of time and money, potentially denying the benefits derived from volunteering from being accessed by more marginalised groups (Brewis et al. 2010). A solution to this issue is to incorporate voluntary work within accredited learning on HE programmes (Donahue & Russell 2009), but the beneficial outcomes of this require clarity.

It is argued by Morgan (2008: 18) that the high profile of volunteering has led to an increased normalisation and acceptance of the benefits of voluntary work in the search for employment in a competitive environment. Evidence also suggests that organisations that use volunteers place a particularly high value on HE students for the specific skills, knowledge and enthusiasm that they can offer (Brewis et al. 2010: 3). Furthermore, post-1992 university students are more likely to engage in volunteering in order to increase their own confidence, professional knowledge and self-discipline for the purpose of enhancing employability (ibid: 8). Yet, while a consensus of opinion concludes that the linking of volunteering to taught and accredited learning increases the impact of the experience for the students (Allen et al. 1994; Ockenden 2008; Donahue & Russell 2009; Brewis et al. 2010), other evidence suggests that the association between participation in voluntary work and educational credits may limit the appeal (Cox 2002; Ellis 2005). Davis Smith & Locke (2007) go as far as to suggest that unrealistic claims about the effectiveness and values

of volunteering may undermine the very action itself and result in a backlash from policy-makers. If, as suggested by both the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE 2010) and Donahue & Russell (2009), volunteering should be endorsed and promoted by university staff, and students should be given training in volunteering, then the benefits for students in such volunteer action need to be evidenced and articulated.

This small-scale study considers the learning and experiences of undergraduate education students in a post-1992 city university participating in a volunteering project. The research focuses on the development of students' personal and professional skills and seeks to identify conceptual learning linked to the programme of study. Pre-, mid- and post-volunteering questionnaires were completed by participating students, and in-depth interviews were conducted with a representative sample following completion of the 12-week volunteering period.

### HE students and volunteering

The Dearing Report (1997) made a link between volunteering and widening participation within universities, emphasising the value of work-based learning for non-traditional HE students. It is argued that university-based volunteering enables students to apply theoretical learning, transfer and develop skills (Buckingham-Hatfield, 2000) and that it enables students to engage in the local community, improving knowledge and awareness of social issues (SVE 2006). Meanwhile, Low et al. (2007) found a range of benefits for volunteers, which include empowerment, the development of skills for employability, professional and personal identity and an increase in confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, Brewis et al. (2010) identify that student experiences of volunteering have a positive impact on their personal development, skill acquisition and employability. Workplace skills, networking and experience can enhance student CVs (ibid: 8). Additionally, benefits for universities themselves are identified in the establishment of community links and engagement in local issues (CoBaLT 1999). With such lofty claims being made for the benefits of volunteering, it may be considered surprising that it is not a more central feature of all university programmes. This leads, therefore, to consideration of what constitutes *volunteering*, as opposed to *work experience* in the field of student learning. This is particularly pertinent within the field of education, where school-based experience carries a high value in obtaining places on teacher training routes.

Rochester et al. (2010) identify the commonly held perception that volunteering activity takes place predominantly within the domain of social welfare, in formal, structured organisations and that the motivation for activity is essentially altruistic. It is emphasised that while this 'non-profit paradigm' (Lyons et al. 1998; Rochester 2006) dominates discussion of voluntary action, there are alternative, heterogeneous, perspectives on volunteering. However, this dominant paradigm serves to problematise the issue of student volunteering, particularly where it is associated with learning and linked to the development of skills. The incorporation of volunteering within university programmes must, by definition, question the altruistic motivation for participation, thereby altering the perception of volunteering and blurring the distinction between work experience and voluntary participation. An interesting outcome of an online survey by the Directory of Social Change (Hayes 2011) reveals that when organisations were asked whether £10,000 cash or the equivalent in volunteer hours would be more beneficial, 91% of respondents identified the money as giving more benefit to the organisation. Reasons provided included having enough volunteers, a lack of skills brought by volunteers and a greater need for physical resources. This may suggest that altruistic motivations alone are not enough, and that volunteers need to be able to demonstrate that they also have skills to offer an organisation; something HE students are potentially well placed to achieve.

### To credit or not to credit?

It is identified by Brewis et al. (2010) that lack of time, funding and opportunity are commonly cited as reasons for students *not* engaging in voluntary activities. Similarly, the need for students to engage in paid work during their studies and the costs incurred through unpaid work, such as the need for a Criminal Records Bureau check, travel and covering childcare expenses, are also identified as barriers to student volunteering (NCCPE 2010). Raising the profile of volunteering through linking activities to programme outcomes is a potential means of addressing such issues. Morgan (2008: 17) identifies this type of volunteering as 'learning-linked'. However, it is important to be able to identify the learning that has taken place through volunteering activity.

There is a wealth of evidence identifying the benefits to universities of supporting students in volunteering and advocating the endorsement and promotion of voluntary work by university staff (Ockenden 2008; Donahue & Russell 2009; Brewis et al. 2010; NCCPE 2010). It is suggested that the barriers to voluntary

participation are overcome by linking volunteering to study, subject area and career. Allen et al. (1994) identify an increase in the autonomy of students through a shift in role from passive recipients of knowledge to active learning and help-giving through volunteering activity. The skills and competences that can be gained outside traditional learning are recognised and accreditation for voluntary work is increasingly common (Brewis & Ponikiewski 2004). However, there are limitations identified too. In addition to the blurring of lines between volunteering and work experience, there is some evidence that students may be reluctant to take on the additional workload of evidencing skills gained through volunteering in order to gain credit (Cox 2002). It is also necessary to identify the outcomes of voluntary work as being of equal or greater value to taught learning which students 'pay for' through their fees. If volunteering is to be accredited within HE programmes, then the learning, values and benefits need to be articulated by the universities themselves.

### Defining volunteering

This small-scale study was embedded within a larger evaluation of the ICICLE Project, an inclusive community learning co-development project led by the Rix Centre for innovation and learning disability, and funded by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). This project identified the surge in use of social media (Boyd and Ellison 2008) from which people with learning disabilities are often excluded (Kennedy et al. 2011). The aim of the ICICLE Project was to combine technologies with teaching and learning approaches to enable learners with various disabilities to identify individual goals, gain knowledge and develop independence through the practice of 'multimedia advocacy'. The project purposefully engaged volunteers to explore how they might fit into new models of local adult learning provision. Volunteers were engaged as part of the project's goal to develop new mixed models of formal and informal learning and support circles for adults with disabilities in the community, facilitated by the use of the internet and social media. Volunteers were invited to become 'buddies' in the development of learners' independence and community participation using various web-based tools, which were trialled and refined as part of the project. The project website can be seen at [www.klikin.eu/icicle](http://www.klikin.eu/icicle).

This funded project offered undergraduates studying special education the opportunity to participate in volunteering as part of a core placement module. The module itself requires students to engage in a

professional educational environment in order to reflect on the development of personal and professional skills. The profile of students on the programme generally meets the criteria of non-traditional students (Association of Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE) 2012), thereby encountering the issues identified by Brewis et al. (2010) and NCCPE (2010) that non-traditional students are discouraged from volunteering by time and financial constraints. Many students on the programme work part-time in educational establishments and the placement module can be incorporated within their working arrangements. In this respect, participation in the NIACE project was identified as volunteering rather than work experience, as students were required to offer their time in a voluntary capacity in an area related to, but not directly reflective of, their course of study. However, it was emphasised that participation was linked to study and that learning would take place through the volunteering rather than on-campus teaching. The project focused on adults with learning disabilities within a community educational environment, with an emphasis on the development of multimedia skills for learner independence.

So while fully meeting the requirements of the accredited module, volunteering offered students an opportunity to participate in a very different aspect of special education, one that required them to participate as a 'volunteer advocate' to an adult with learning disabilities. The Open University distinguishes volunteering as activity which allows the student to give something back to society through providing skills and time, while work experience does not usually offer community benefit (Open University 2008). This provides the salient difference between those students who completed the placement module by seeking the permission of their work settings, and those opting to take part in the NIACE volunteering project.

### Method

All participating students in this small-scale study chose to undertake the voluntary work as part of the core placement module rather than school-based experience. Training and induction was provided for students to find out about the project and enable them to make an informed decision to participate. Further training and feedback sessions were offered midway through the voluntary work and at the end of the 12-week project. At each point, students were offered the opportunity to complete anonymous questionnaires, but this was not compulsory and it was made clear that these were not linked to the completion of the accredited module. For this reason, the number of

returned questionnaires varied at the start, mid- and completion points (32, 23 and 26). A further 6 students participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews following completion of the project.

The questionnaires collected information on previous volunteering activity (start point) and the likelihood of further participation in voluntary work (end point). They also measured students' self-rating of confidence in, and enjoyment of, volunteering experiences and were designed to measure participants' rating of their own personal and professional skills at the beginning, mid-point and end of the project. In particular, the questions focused on students' changing perceptions concerning support for learners with disabilities and the development of learner independence. These were identified as important areas for knowledge/skill development in relation to the programme learning outcomes. The use of further open-ended interviews provided an opportunity for clarification, examples or explanations to be obtained.

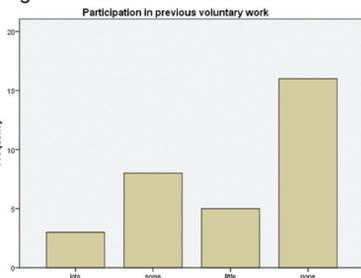
**Analysis of data**

Statistical analysis of questionnaires was carried out using SPSS, facilitating the production of tables and charts. Inductive coding was used to analyse the interview transcripts, whereby the process of classification was based on the data (Strauss & Corbin 1990). A framework of categories was developed, based on the questionnaires and derived through the review of empirical and theoretical literature. Representative quotes from participating students are provided to illustrate findings. However, it must be noted for the purpose of discussion in this paper, only a small sample of the data is considered.

**Findings and discussion**

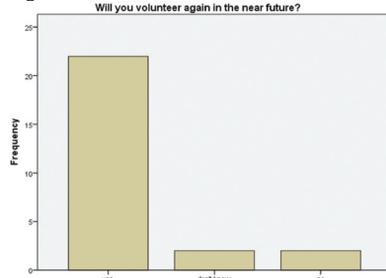
Students' participation in previous voluntary work varied, with half never having volunteered before the project. Of those who had participated in volunteering, it was largely restricted to school-based 'help' with activities such as listening to children reading (n = 14).

**Figure 1**



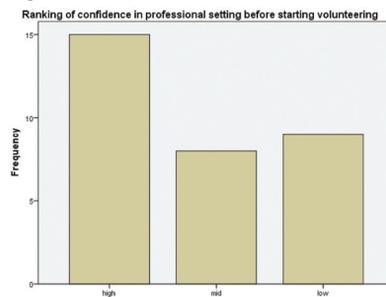
However, by the end of the project, the majority of students anticipated further participation in voluntary work (n = 22). Reasons provided included finding the experience rewarding, the development of personal/professional skills and relationships formed with 'buddy' learners.

**Figure 2**



The increase in participants' likelihood of future volunteering might be assumed to be linked to their enjoyment of the experience, yet the data reveals a more complex picture. At the start of the project, half of the participating students reported feeling high levels of confidence in their professional skills (see fig 3). Yet, at the mid-point of the study, reported confidence levels had dropped considerably (see fig 4), only to rise considerably by the end (see fig 5).

**Figure 3**



The mid-point questionnaire and feedback sessions indicate that students experienced a dip in enthusiasm and confidence. Interview data related to this theme reveals that the normalisation of experience may account for the drop in confidence midway through the project:

*Emma; vol 1: 'it was sort of coming to be a bit like "oh I sort of done this already"'.*

*Emily; vol 2: 'it was staff members that were adding to his [MultiMe] page it wasn't him personally adding it... there's only so far that you*

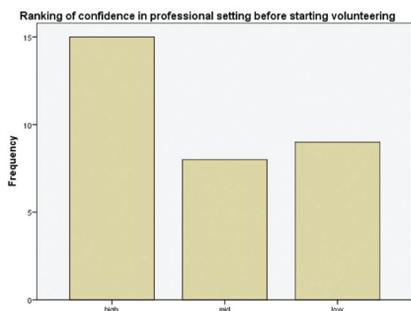
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*can try and engage somebody if they are not interested'.*

Anonymous; vol 5: *'one Friday we were stuck in the centre which was quite disappointing'.*

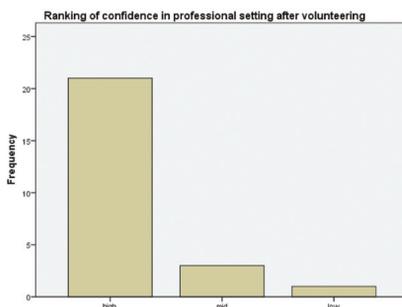
After the initial induction and learning about the multimedia support, the volunteering experience required participants to repeat activities with their learning buddies. It was at this mid-stage that the volunteers reported a fall in confidence (see fig 4), pointing to what Small (1996) identifies as a dip in interest in instructional situations when it is difficult to locate learning. It can be suggested that, as HE students, the volunteers may have an expectation of learning being linear and constructed. Placement learning, by its very nature, is likely to be less easy to identify during the process itself, pointing to the importance of reflective learning.

**Figure 4**



As such, this mid-point dip in professional confidence can also explain the overwhelming increase in confidence reported by volunteers at the end of the study. Elkjaer (2005: 535) explains that such tentativeness is resolved in workplace learning 'when the situation is no longer experienced as uncertain'. By the end of the project, following completion of the reflective assessment (but before results of assessment were known), volunteers reported high levels of professional confidence (see fig 5). This may indicate the importance of reflection on practice, or 'the psychological examination of the learning process' (Cairns & Malloch, 2011: 4) and therefore strongly supports the process of accreditation through the assessment of reflective learning. It was through the process of assessment that students reflected on the volunteering experience in order to examine the learning processes.

**Figure 5**



Little & Harvey (2006) conducted a study of students' learning through volunteering and found that the development of personal and professional skills and confidence are the major features of workplace learning. The theme of professional skills and confidence was used in the analysis of interviews and was found to be a strong and repeated focal point of the volunteers' reported experiences at the end of the project. Although this might be partially explained by their focus at this time on the reflective assessment, nevertheless responses articulate some of the detail of the growth of professional confidence.

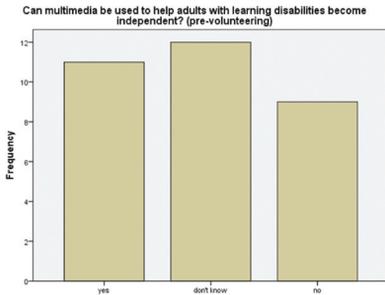
*Emily; vol 2: 'sometimes you are working with people that don't have verbal communication and I have had no experience of alternative means of communication until I went to the centre and found that one of the users relies on sign language... it was a combination of what he was teaching me and what I was learning looking at myself... and that sort of influenced me and I really want to take a course in sign language after my degree'.*

*Jodie; vol 3: 'yeah, ehm, it's confidence really, 'cos I wouldn't really have been confident before doing the sort of stuff I've done at the base... being able to be part of a team but also an individual when I needed'.*

*Anonymous; vol 5: 'I met many people, I learned a lot, I gained experience and I changed my view of people with disabilities... they are not, like, needy, they just need someone to support them in achieving their goals, so it's like I thought I would go there and would have to do things for them, but actually it's about promoting independence'.*

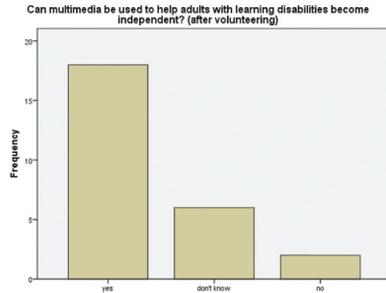
While these findings support Little & Harding's (2006) study, further evidence for the impact of volunteering on the developing understanding of students is found in their comprehension of 'independence' in adults with learning disabilities. Prior to volunteering, the majority of students were either unsure or felt that multimedia could not be used to help adults with learning disabilities gain independence (see fig 6). As students studying on the special education programme, it may be assumed that the participants were inclined towards supporting learners; indeed, much of the taught programme focuses on pedagogical support for learners. This may account for the volunteers' preferences for personal support and interaction rather than independence through IT at the start of the project.

Figure 6



However, the experience of volunteering brought about some change in these views by the end of the project (see fig 7). This change in thinking is significant; it represents a concept-shift in the volunteers' understanding of 'independence' and, as such, may be taken as evidence of the learning that took place during volunteering. Davis Smith (2000) suggests that, increasingly, the internet and other forms of technology allow excluded populations to become included in society by creating new ways of taking part; a point that the volunteer students appear to have come to recognise through experiential learning. While traditional lectures may be able to introduce such ideas, this provides an example of Rutherford & Ahlgren's (1991) assertion that meaning is constructed by connecting new, real, experiences to learning. In identifying their personal concept-shifts through reflective assessment, students met learning outcomes in a way that would be difficult to achieve through traditional HE teaching. This is reflective of recommendations that HE programmes should be designed to allow maximum access and validity, recognising that learning takes place through work processes (TLRP 2009).

Figure 7



A paired-samples t-test was used to compare students' ranking of 'wanting to gain professional skills' through volunteering at the start of the project and their likelihood of volunteering again at the end of the project.

A paired samples t-test indicates a significant association between the pre- and post-volunteering experience:  $t(24) = -3.161, p = 0.004$  (see table 1). This demonstrates that students seeking professional skills through volunteering at the start of the project are likely to volunteer again, suggesting that volunteering has been a positive experience and that professional skills have been gained. This recognises the significance of different, less formal, learning opportunities that can be utilised in formal learning processes within HE (TLRP 2009). Further evidence is available from the interviews, considering the theme of developing professional skills and confidence:

*Emma; vol. 1: 'I have experience now... everything in terms of experience helps you.'*

*Jodie; vol. 3: 'I'd consider going down that career path once I finish uni... I wouldn't really have been that confident before to do some of the stuff I've done with the base.'*

*Maria; vol. 5: 'I definitely improved in communication and tech skills, I was able to take on new advice and improve things that I already had.'*

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Table 1

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	I want to gain professional skills - I am confident to volunteer again	-.52000	.82260	.16452	-.85955	-.18045	-3.161	24	.004

### Conclusions

This study provides evidence to suggest that students experienced a range of learning opportunities through volunteering. This is not, perhaps, unexpected; in 1990 NIACE recognised that volunteering can provide individuals with recognition for their skills and learning, can help to motivate them in their training, provide them with opportunities to learn, progress, grow personally and can give 'currency' in the world of work (NIACE 1990). However, by linking these outcomes to accredited learning, students were able to gain tangible recognition and academic reward for these learning processes. The study identifies that experiential learning can be linked effectively to programme outcomes, allowing students to develop competent behaviours within a professional environment and to identify their learning. By linking volunteering to HE credit, the issues of time and associated financial considerations encountered by non-traditional students (Brewis et al. 2010) can be overcome. Furthermore, the limitations suggested by Morgan (2008), that HE students are deterred from volunteering by the need to link their experiences to their programme of study, are negated when this process is facilitated by programme tutors.

An example of academic learning is identified in students' perceptions of the nature of support. Initial assumptions about the need for personal support for disabled learners shifted to a recognition of the value of multimedia use in developing independence. Through volunteering in this project, students encountered new and challenging manifestations of 'support' which altered their understanding. The accredited process of reflection allowed this to be identified and articulated, and thus recognised, within their programme of study.

The limitations of this small-scale study are acknowledged. There is no comparison of outcomes between students undertaking volunteering activity and those on traditional school-placements, as it was never the intention to make direct contrasts.

It is worth noting, however, that assessment results were evenly distributed between volunteering students and school placement students. It is also recognised that a longitudinal study would be required to consider the longer-term impact of volunteering on employability and career choices. But such limitations notwithstanding, the outcomes identified in this study indicate that the volunteering experiences of students were positive and readily related to academic learning and the development of professional skills. As such, the value of volunteering is established and the benefits of linking learning to programmes of study through accreditation are identified.

**The authors acknowledge and thank NIACE for funding the ICICLE Project which enabled this study to be conducted.**

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