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Researching together: Abertay University's collaborative Research Volunteer Scheme and its student-staff partnership evaluation

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Reader notes

- A 'student as partners' approach successfully underpins our undergraduate research volunteer scheme.
- Successful partnerships require a structured approach, with clear communication about expectations and roles.
- Student 'partners in research' learn from the collaborative co-construction of knowledge.
- Research projects enabling a greater degree of co-creation were seen to provide the greatest mutual benefits.

Keywords

research education collaboration; students as partners; research volunteer experience; partnership evaluation

Introduction

Engaging students in research programmes is beneficial, students gain valuable experience, develop core skills and form collaborative working practices with staff and with each other (Madan & Teitge, 2013). The Research Volunteer Scheme (RVS), a collaborative research initiative for students and staff, has run at Abertay University, Scotland since 2006 and at the

time was not typical in the UK sector. The RVS continues to successfully run and has expanded over the last 15 years covering all academic schools in the University. Increased participation by staff and students across the years demonstrates this to be a robust and enduring collaborative activity. Initially conceived by two colleagues in Psychology, it continues to be self-managed by academic staff, working with undergraduates. It is open to all academic staff across the University who want to take part and involves students across all years of study. Each year, staff advertise research opportunities/projects to students to launch the scheme, and students apply for specific collaboration opportunities from a list proposed by staff (see Table 1 for examples). While we assume the usual benefits of participation (see John & Creighton, 2011), we wanted to further explore the nature of the collaboration and its meaning for participants in the scheme. Central to this exploration was the staff-student partnership we specifically created to do this. This case study outlines the scheme itself and the findings from our partnership project.

RVS for students at Abertay University

The current iteration of the RVS involves a tried and tested format. There is a RVS co-ordinator who oversees the scheme and completes the associated administration. Within subject areas, individuals co-ordinate a local version of the scheme, and contact staff to solicit relevant projects. Templates for project descriptions are provided (title, staff, brief details/tasks, approximate contribution), along with completed exemplars. Projects are collated and evaluated for suitability, and ethical approval is gained. Once collated, projects are advertised to students who are invited to apply. Applications involve students ranking project choices, and crucially involves a 300-word statement outlining their motivations to take part. Student applications are evaluated and students are assigned to projects based on their interests. Upon completion, they receive certification and a profile of experience (outlining, for example, specific training, experience and skills gained).

The RVS hosts a variety of collaborative projects, ranging from a typical research assistant model (where students assist staff with specific tasks) through to co-working, acting as co-researchers (see Table 1 for examples).

Type	Student Role	Degree of potential partnership/collaboration
Students as partners: staff/students collaborate to achieve the project	Students and staff are co-investigators, collaborating on all aspects of the project	Full partnership potential (see Cook-Sather <i>et al.</i> , 2014)
Assistance/Collaboration: problem/area defined by supervisors but actual project to be co-designed by student participants	Researching specific areas, generating ideas, more aligned with the PG student model	Research team member, possibly akin to a junior researcher role, more autonomy than the previous projects
Dissemination: Science Fair Demonstrators	Co-worker, acting with staff members and/or in student teams	Design of task and implementation is usually collaborative
Research Data Generation: Data Collection, Lab tasks	Carrying out tasks, may or may not be directly supervised but usually trained and supported	Limited a lot of the time but there may be some choices, and some supervisors ask the student to research the area and present alternative methods etc.

Specific Task Undertaken: Review literature, Transcription, Coding	Conducting the review –some autonomy on topic/search possible	May be limited, often chosen by students returning home during the summer, contact periodically via email
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Table 1: RVS – example project types and degree of potential collaboration.

The RVS team at Abertay University

In our RVS model, collaboration is essential: throughout our careers we have valued working with others acknowledging collaboration as a powerful way of harnessing the potential of individuals, creating new and exciting synergies. Key to our ethos is the decision that this scheme would be one of partnerships for mutual benefits. Research has highlighted the issue of power and hierarchy within a university setting, especially between staff and students (e.g., Marquis et al., 2019) and we were careful to create a structure with clear expectations and guidelines (see Table 1). This included term time limits - and ensuring that skills learned and work carried out were formally recorded on students' Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) which accompanies their degree certificate.

A recent collaborative project involved an evaluation of the RVS itself. Our team developed, designed and conducted the evaluation project and analysed the data together. Frequent informal meetings allowed us to exchange ideas, discuss the project and prepare to disseminate the information. Meeting regularly as a group and brainstorming ideas allowed us to get to know each other and work much more collaboratively.

Method

The aim of our evaluation was to investigate perceptions of working together within the RVS project from both student and staff perspectives. Four student researchers and two staff members worked on the project. The students designed two interview schedules based on previous empirical research on student research experience (see for example, Davidson &

Lyons, 2018). Questions asked to students and staff included motivation for participating in the RVS, what they hoped to gain from participation and reflections on working with staff/students. Participants were recruited via an advert on the University's intranet, and through meetings with other staff and students participating in the RVS.

Eleven students and four staff were interviewed face-to-face, and seven staff and eight students completed interview questions online. All participants had experience of the RVS. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps. The research team read through all transcripts, making coding notes. Initial codes were examined, reflected upon, combined, and refined and thematic maps were developed and consolidated in an iterative process. In this case study, we focus on the 'Working Together' theme. The other themes not directly related to collaboration (e.g., enhancing employability, developing research skills, increasing confidence), will be discussed elsewhere.

Findings: Working together

'Working Together' covers aspects of collaboration, mutual benefit, and perceptions of what students and staff gained from their partnerships, whatever form their research projects took.

Overall, the RVS was seen by participants as authentic collaboration from its inception, and this is summed up by *Staff 3* who reflects the cooperative ethos:

Examples in other institutions with research volunteers ... where I suppose students were taken advantage of, so students were perhaps keen and naïve and would do lots and lots of stuff sometimes to the detriment of their own work. [RVS] was going to be supportive and also be useful for the student and for the staff member so that both parties were winning.

This view was shared by *Staff 4* and *Student 19* as something more than the experience gained:

It's a real two-way thing, students get experience and staff get help and support with research projects.

It did influence me as a team member as I learnt to collaborate with different people and to share responsibilities and tasks according to everyone's strengths and limits.

This also reflects the view that there was a clear sense of partnership, chiming with Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) definition of SaP. This is supported by *Staff 2*, illustrating that the RVS enables the sort of breaking down of barriers suggested by Bovill (2017):

I felt I was part of the team. It wasn't just that they were joining working with me, I was joining working with them. So, we were a team...

This was also highlighted across many student interviews, where participation created a sense of inclusion, community, and involvement, confirming participants' identities as collaborators within the team, making them partners in their own education rather than mere consumers (Gravett et al., 2019). The opportunity to co-construct knowledge and engage in authentic aspects of university academic practices empowers students' academic development and identity.

This transformation was outlined by a number of students describing how they felt part of a collaborative team and community, and this is summed up by *Student 3*.

There's more of an understanding in a collaborative sense and I feel from working with supervisors ... that it's more of a relationship you have with them, that it's working together with them on a project, not they're going to tell you what to do...

The collaborative nature of their RVS project also helped increase their confidence:

Confidence would probably be the right word, to have ownership of a project and ... collaborate with other people and do it together... (Student 3).

Whilst on the whole the experiences were positive there were responses that suggested “students did not participate fully” or that staff email communication was not engaging. This emphasises the need for a meaningful partnership to have mutual effort, good communication and clarity of roles (Martens et al., 2019). It is also essential to address issues and power imbalances early on, and establish a strong community for a sustainable and successful partnership (Healey et al., 2014). We feel that our open but structured approach to true partnership has been central to this, good practice is to set out the parameters for cooperation at the start and create an on-going dialogue between partners.

Conclusion and recommendations for practice/praxis

The RVS is a robust and long-lasting co-curricular programme that is academically focussed and collaborative; that facilitates the formation of valuable partnerships between staff and students; and is scalable and portable. As reinforced by our evaluation, it has a positive impact not only relating to research skills and experience, but it also enhances competence and confidence aiding students now, and in the future. A vital component for this is the enactment of SaP principles, namely that students and staff work together in a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship. To quote one staff member, where students are co-creators and co-constructors of the study, “that works especially well” which represents the higher end of Bovill and Bulley’s (2011) ladder and epitomises key elements of a successful approach.

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