

Towards a model of successful volunteering in a health context; a qualitative study of university student experiences

Iain Williamson PhD, Hawthorn 0.17A, Division of Psychology, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH iwilliamson@dmu.ac.uk

Diane Wildbur PhD, Hawthorn 0.13, Division of Psychology, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH dwildbur@dmu.ac.uk

Katie Bell MSc, 3.38 Edith Murphy House, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH, Katie.bell@dmu.ac.uk

Judith Tanner PhD, A Floor, Queen's Medical Centre University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2UH, Judith.tanner@nottingham.ac.uk

Hannah Matthews, MSc, Centre for Technology Enhanced Health Research, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Coventry University, Priory St., Coventry, CV1 5FB Matthe94@coventry.ac.uk

Student volunteering is increasingly part of the zeitgeist of modern Universities as they seek to demonstrate their commitment to ensuring the health, well-being and employability of their students, and contributing to the public good. However, research in this field remains limited. In this study individual interviews were used to explore 50 British University students' experiences of volunteering within a health setting. Forty-five participants reported positive experiences of sustained volunteering whilst five were recruited specifically because they had stopped volunteering earlier than they had intended. Using grounded theory, a three phase model was developed which comprises five themes capturing key elements of the development and maintenance of student volunteering. Phase one - 'Getting involved' outlines the 'motives and catalysts' for students starting to volunteer. Phase two - 'Maintaining commitment' includes three components ('Making connections' 'Developing resilience' and 'Keeping the balance'), which represent important ingredients in sustained volunteering participation. Phase three - 'Reaping the rewards' focuses on the benefits of volunteering identified by participants in relation to employability and self-development. We discuss our findings in relation to how successful volunteering enhances key components of psychological well-being: and facilitates 'flourishing' among student volunteers. The findings provide valuable insight into the motivations, behaviours and rewards that contribute to the initiation and sustaining of student volunteering. Further, they have implications for Universities involved in initiatives which include the training, mentoring and support of student volunteers.

Key Words: volunteering, university students, psychological well-being, grounded theory, interviews

As in several other countries increased participation in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (Wilkins and Burke, 2015), combined with recent Government-led and public health directives have fuelled a revitalised research focus on institutional health and well-being and the potential role Universities have in promoting the well-being of both their students and the communities in which they are located. For example, the Government-sponsored *Healthy Universities* initiative aspires to create an environment that enhances the health, holistic well-being and sustainability of all its stakeholders by creating institutional cultures that enable people to achieve their maximum potential, or to flourish (Dooris et al., 2014). The notion of 'flourishing' in educational settings is captured in Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being, which briefly describes the contribution of five key elements (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) to positive mental health; notably through the development of positive emotional and cognitive coping strategies (cf. Norrish et al., 2013).

Universities have considerable potential to both influence and promote health and well-being, and act as catalysts for societal change as they provide the setting for a number of life transitions for students of all ages; thus having the opportunity to positively influence the skills they develop, their well-being and their contribution to society (Macneela and Gannon, 2013). Effective programmes are likely to be complex, multi factorial and involve activity in more than one place (Stewart-Brown, 2006). Thus, volunteering may be one of many ways to achieve *Healthy Universities* outcomes through contributing to the development of green, healthy, multi-dimensional environments for study and wider life experience. For example, there are increasing opportunities for the development of student volunteering as part of the HE curriculum, and for volunteering to no longer be viewed as a standalone

endeavour. Indeed, documented alliances between leading charities and certain universities, are paving the way for more widespread pedagogic and strategic developments (Bell et al., 2015). Such developments provide Universities with an opportunity to respond to the needs of students and local residents and businesses (Anderson and Green, 2012; Darwen and Rannard, 2011), while promoting their commitment to the health and well-being of their students, employees and the broader community. The current research therefore explores the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students at a number of British universities, who volunteer in the context of disability and chronic health difficulties.

Previous research investigating the effects of volunteering on health and well-being with various cohorts shows that it can reduce morbidity and mortality (Brown et al., 2009), improve volunteers' self-ratings of health (Piliavin and Siegl, 2007) and buffer the effects of stress on their health (Poulin, 2014). Volunteering has also been shown to increase people's ability to cope with their own ill-health (Coppa and Boyle, 2003), increase their chance of adopting healthy lifestyle choices and practices (Ramirez-Valles and Brown, 2003) and decrease the frequency of depressive symptoms, and hospitalisation (Yuen et al., 2008). Furthermore, volunteering has been shown to have positive effects on various indicators of psychological well-being and related concepts including self-esteem, sense of purpose and quality of life (Poulin et al. 2014; Yeun et al., 2014; Casiday et al., 2008). Such physical and particularly psychological health benefits may however be contingent on the commitment to volunteering, with some research demonstrating that people who volunteer at least 100 hours annually report the greatest benefits (Luoh and Herzog, 2002; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003), and appear to 'flourish' both within and beyond the volunteering role (cf. Seligman, 2011).

Data from the UK's National Union of Students (Ellison and Kerr, 2014) estimated that 725,000 British students (nearly a third of the student population) engage in some volunteering annually with an average of 44 hours participation per year. Of that sample, 78% said that they give their time because of a desire to improve things or help people and 66% aim to develop skills for work. Many reported

that feeling part of a community was highly important. Compared to students who elect not to engage in voluntary work, students who volunteer are more likely to study life sciences, have an existing caring role (i.e. informal caregiving to a family member because of illness/disability), live in the parental home and engage in paid work during term time (Holdsworth and Quinn 2010). Young adult volunteers are vital to the current and future operations of non-profit organizations, and yet students are a particularly under-utilized and under-researched segment of potential volunteers within this age-group (Francis, 2011).

Various theories have been developed which aim to explain individual differences in volunteering. Holdsworth and Brewis (2014) suggest that volunteers bridge the needs of the community with individual reward and recognition in mind. This conceptualisation is supported by the economist investment model which focuses on the notion of exchange benefits (Hackl et al., 2007). The model assumes that in exchange for the volunteer's time, volunteers receive training and acquire skills which in turn enhance their human capital (ibid). Supporting this view, a more recent systematic review reported motives to volunteer were a combination of what volunteers could give to others, and what they can get for themselves (Hallett, et al., 2012). Indeed, the notion that the motives of student volunteers are a mix of altruistic and egoistical drivers (Brooks, 2002; Hustinx, 2001; Rehberg, 2005) has received support from both international (Smith et al., 2010) as well as cross-cultural comparison studies (Handy et al., 2010). Therefore, considering student motivations as potentially altruistic, reciprocal or semi-altruistic may provide a more in-depth explanation of the reasons underlying volunteering and the experiences that volunteers have previously had.

It is also argued that students' motivation to volunteer may be underpinned by particular functions and norms, therefore suggesting that recruitment strategies may need to consider positioning volunteering as the 'normal' thing to do (for example, the inclusion of volunteering as a curriculum-based activity) rather than focusing on the functional benefits of volunteering (Francis, 2011). More sociologically derived explanations surrounding motives to volunteer have proposed that volunteering

may be(come) habitual as volunteers may be motivated by other volunteers, their University, or a sense of social commitment to the wider community (Clarke et al.,2007). Therefore, students may not necessarily be driven by goal-orientated motives, but rather acknowledge volunteering as a social phenomenon, involving the development and maintenance of social relationships and positive interactions among individuals, groups, and organisations (Hustinx et al., 2010).

The extent to which volunteering enhances employability is an interesting question, Volunteering has also been shown to improve or facilitate the development of new skills, build Curricula Vitae, extend networks and gain experience (DirectGov, 2012). More general research has linked volunteering with the development of job specific skills (Hirst, 2001; Cook and Jackson, 2006), soft skills such as communication and team work (Newton et al., 2011) and civic skills including fundraising (Musick and Wilson, 2008).

However, although research into the motives and benefits for students who volunteer is now fairly well developed, there is relatively little consensus regarding theoretical perspectives which explain or predict their sustained volunteering. Understanding these factors and the strategic role volunteering can have within a University setting could increase the effectiveness of the institution, and improve the experiences of the individuals concerned; as well as contributing to the public good. Therefore, the aim of this study is to use a qualitative approach to explore the motives and experiences of university student volunteers who engage in volunteering in a health context and particularly to understand how they manage and maintain their volunteering.

Method

The study utilised semi-structured interviewing which permits flexibility and facilitates the elicitation of rich and in-depth experiential data. A grounded theory approach influenced data collection and

analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Data were collected in a number of waves, and phases of data analysis and collection were integrated. This facilitated appropriate piloting and refinement of interview schedules and selection of appropriate participants through application of the principles of theoretical sampling (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2012). There was consensus amongst the research team that theoretical saturation had been achieved after 45 interviews had taken place and a robust model which identified salient processes within 'successful volunteering' had been produced. We subsequently interviewed five student individuals who had ceased volunteering prematurely (in relation to their intentions) and therefore represented 'negative cases' (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2012) in order to test the validity of the model further.

Participants

All 45 participants included in the main study were 18 years old or over and either undergraduate ($n=38$) or postgraduate ($n=7$) students studying at a British University. Participants were volunteering or had undertaken regular voluntary work within an area relating to chronic illness, psychological difficulties or disability within the twelve months prior to the interview. Forty-five student volunteers were recruited (mean age =24.0 years, $SD= 9.51$, 10 were male) and came from six different Universities located in England or Wales. All participants were UK or European Union citizens and the sample was ethnically diverse. The nature of volunteering tasks undertaken was varied which reflects activity in the sector. On average an individual participant volunteered for 7.2 hours each week. Eligible participants were recruited through a series of strategies including newsletter advertisements, e-mail requests by the National Union of Students or through snowballing methods. All organisations have been anonymised and all names are pseudonyms.

An additional five student volunteers (from two different Universities) were recruited towards the end of data collection in order to examine their accounts against the emerging model. Similar strategies

and sources were used to ensure comparability of the two groups. This group was similar to the main sample in terms of ethnic diversity and age (mean = 24.2 years) but all were female undergraduates. Average estimated weekly volunteering was 8.6 hours a week.

Procedure

The interview schedules consisted of series of open-ended questions and were developed to begin with descriptive and less demanding questions, in order to build rapport before considering abstract and more challenging aspects of the interview. Prompts and probes were used sparingly and participants were encouraged to outline and discuss their own priorities. Most interviews (n=48) took place face to face either on a University campus or in participants' homes. Two took place using Skype software.

Full ethical approval was granted by the lead University and the principles of the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) were followed throughout the study. Participants provided written consent and were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded. We recruited participants in five waves (including an initial pilot wave and the final wave of negative cases) between October 2013 and January 2016. We are confident that that both data and theoretical saturation were achieved.

Analytical strategy

All interviews were transcribed in full prior to analysis and the data analysed using grounded theory. This method provides a flexible and useful research tool, which provides a rich and detailed summary of data (Charmaz, 2014). Initial data analysis was completed by two of the authors. The analysis was

subsequently refined and audited with the rest of the research team. This facilitated the credibility and confirmability of the analysis presented (Cassell and Symon, 2011)

Following line-by-line coding, individual theme tables were developed for each of the first 30 participants to ensure that all transcripts were analysed individually and in-depth in the first instance. This allowed for a clear understanding of reoccurring themes throughout each participant's interview. Theme tables were then analysed across participants in order to produce a series of super-ordinate thematic maps. Thematic clusters were labelled and divided into further subordinate themes which again were appropriately titled. Using the constant comparison method an initial model was developed which captured common elements and processes. Thematic content for those themes selected for discussion was subsequently confirmed to be present within at least half of the transcripts to ensure that the themes were suitably representative. In all cases this was exceeded considerably. The remaining 15 interviews were used to acquire further data and to test and refine the model. The team remained open to new themes emerging during the latter phases of analysis but this stage primarily involved more minor modifications being made to the model.

Five of the key processes identified were selected for inclusion in the version of the normative, temporal model presented here, which we argue captures key elements of sustained student volunteering. Data from the five interviews with volunteers who had discontinued their participation were subsequently used to interrogate the model and a small number of quotations from these interviews have been included to demonstrate this as recommended by Henwood and Pidgeon (2012).

Analysis

Our analysis is framed around a three phase model comprising five themes which we developed from the data. In the first phase '*getting involved*' we explore the motives given by the participants for

undertaking volunteering and the catalysts that led them towards certain sorts of volunteering. In the second phase '*maintaining commitment*' we offer three themes which represent some of the 'active ingredients' in sustained volunteering participation. These include *making connections* in which volunteers describe requiring emotional and empathic support from peers, *developing resilience* where volunteers find themselves in testing situations to which they learn to adapt and *keeping the balance* where participants describe the challenges around resisting emotional over-attachment and meeting other competing demands; also the strategies they develop to fulfil volunteering responsibilities alongside other obligations. In the final phase '*reaping the rewards*' we focus on two themes – the ways in which participants report a holistic sense of enhanced well-being and self-transformation and the ways in which they felt that volunteering added to their employability. We outline each of these themes with a series of anonymised verbatim quotations from across the data corpus and also present the model schematically below.

Insert Figure about here

Phase 1

Getting Involved: Motives and Catalysts

This phase demonstrates how a range of both egotistical and altruistic motivations influence students becoming involved in volunteering and shows how certain catalysts are typically required to make the transition from 'non-volunteer' to 'active volunteer'. Consistent with previous research, motives reported were varied, including other-focused elements such as humanitarianism, and ideas around reciprocity alongside self-benefit from volunteering (Hallet et al., 2012). Motives were typically multiple and inter-woven rather than discrete as can be seen in the account of an undergraduate student who volunteered in a nursing home for older people with various chronic health difficulties:

"I thought it would just look really good on my CV and I've never worked in that field before so I just really wanted to experience it for myself ...and actually I was really close with my grandma when she was around so it was quite heartfelt." (Participant 39).

Motivations for commencing and maintaining volunteering often shifted over time for some participants. Participants appeared to be aware of the potential tension in these differing explanations, with some prioritising different motivations over others and most managing to find a balance between them.

"When I first started, it was mainly for the experience but after I had completed the first week I realised that I really enjoyed working with children and like finding a way to help them." (Participant 19)

"Autism has always been something that I have felt particularly connected to, I've got a relative who has Asperger's... but I also like the fact that it, from an employability aspect, it looks good." (Participant 28)

For some, the motivation to volunteer was described through more selfless motivations.

"The main motivation for me, the reason why I have done volunteering in the past is to give something back and help people that are less fortunate than I am." (Participant 8)

Interestingly, this was asserted to be the 'right reason' to volunteer by some participants who rejected the commodification of volunteering:

"When you choose to volunteer it shouldn't be for yourself it shouldn't be 'I need this many hours', 'I need to do it for a job', you should think I want to do this for them; I want to help someone else." (Participant 19).

For some students, experiences within their own family (especially around ill-health or disability) shaped the nature of the volunteering activity they wanted to become involved in and because of these experiences they expressed a need to reciprocate. Several participants who volunteered in the

area of cancer support outlined the catalyst of their personal experience as having witnessed the benefits provided by the voluntary and charitable sectors.

“Recently my grandmother was diagnosed with blood cancer. And before that my aunty had breast cancer and my uncle died of mouth cancer...so I have kind of seen what Charity X does as well. I thought it would be good to give back.” (Participant 1).

However, for many students the decision to become involved in volunteering appeared to be driven mostly by what volunteering could provide for them. In line with the investment model (Hackl et al., 2007), many chose to start volunteering because of the perceived benefits they thought they would gain although these benefits were also varied – for some participants, volunteering provided opportunities for self-development, or for ‘road-testing’ potential contexts for future paid work whilst for others volunteering was very much a commodity for future career enhancement.

“It’s for the experience to see how it is volunteering with cancer patients and the process of what people go through, and that’s my motivation. It is something new for me.” (Participant 4).

“I wouldn’t want it to waste my time... I was trying to get whatever I could to give me that edge” (Participant 35).

For one man who helped out at a football club for young people with severe disabilities, the experience enhanced his sense of self-esteem:

“I think it a matter of self-fulfilment I would be lying if I said I didn’t do it for myself. It creates a sense of awareness so you see life from a different perspective so being able to see able children and you see the smile and their sense of fulfilment when they are going out they’re kicking a ball around it’s soothing but when you see a disabled child going out there and indulging in the same activities it’s beyond what words can describe.” (Participant 33)

Phase 2: Managing Volunteering

This second phase demonstrates three key themes that appear to be pivotal in sustaining successful volunteering.

Making Connections

Most participants made reference to the importance of establishing positive working relationships with fellow volunteers. The attachments formed between volunteers and the clients and service-users were often discussed through powerful metaphors:

“You form a bond with them and they become one of your own in other words but as well as other colleagues who have volunteered you form a circle and it feels like it is a circle of trust neither of them are there for their own agendas or they don’t have their own reason to be there. So it is us more than I’s.” (Participant 33)

However, in addition they also recognised that volunteering teams which include students often change their membership with quick succession and noted that this can be disruptive

Some participants felt that if a sense of cohesion was missing within the team then this could affect their ability to volunteer and the people they were helping:

“If you’re put into an environment where you just don’t click with the people that you’re volunteering with then it doesn’t work.” (Participant 16).

“It’s quite unsettling as a volunteer when your team constantly changes around you.” (Participant 13)

The stability of supportive teams is especially important as many participants stated that their fellow volunteers were their main coping resource because they were reported to be able to understand and empathise with the nature of the particular volunteering activity. Other key support systems such as supervision were also highlighted as something integral to successful volunteering although many

volunteers noted little in the way of mentoring or supervision and to date, there is limited research investigating these aspects of the volunteer experience.

“The people I work with are my main sources of support, the volunteers, because they are going through the same experience.” (Participant 1).

“And I think the support that we get at Charity X is very good because they give very good supervision and you get the sense that they want to look after you and I think that’s really important.” (Participant 13).

An absence of such perceived support from peers and/or supervisors led to a sense of isolation and abandonment and was mentioned as a reason for dropping out by some of the participants who had prematurely discontinued their volunteering activities:

“I know you shouldn’t really need that much support you’re just volunteering but I think it would be nice sometimes if people just check in and say are you alright, is everything going ok? Rather than just being dumped there... I used to finish at six and then sometimes six o’clock came and there was no one around that I could go to and say I’m going now.” (Participant 49).

However, for most of our participants accessing work through the University meant that a support network for the students was automatically enabled, dealing with many of the barriers and ‘red tape’ that students often face when trying to become involved in volunteering; particularly with children and others considered vulnerable. Participation via the university also appeared to make volunteering more accessible and expedient:

“I think it’s good because it’s instant. Through University X you do the training and it’s a real fast track way to sort of get out there and volunteer straight away. It’s a direct way of doing it and it’s a lot quicker than it would be if you had to go and do it through another agency.” (Participant 6).

Developing Resilience

This theme highlights how many students coped during their volunteering experiences. Coping styles and strategies varied between participants but effective coping developed over time and required some immersion in new or challenging situations. When faced with such situations, participants reported that changing the kind of interactions they had with clients and adapting within this role often helped:

“What I found difficult was working with kids with cerebral palsy and Down’s syndrome; I didn’t always understand how to let them cope. I had to kind of adapt myself to their environment.” (Participant 19).

Consistent with previous research, one consequence of the efficiency with which University-based volunteering schemes operate is that many participants reported that they were put into challenging situations early on in their experience (Haski-Levanthal and Bargal 2008).

However, the accounts suggest that these rites of passage were seen as necessary for their initiation into the realities of volunteering:

“You literally get thrown into the deep end so when I finished my training they were like ok go and hold a session next week. But I think that’s why I like it. I think it’s a bit of a challenge I like to prove that I can do it.” (Participant 30).

“I wasn’t really ready for the verbal abuse that came with the job so it’s something I had to learn quite quickly but once I got the hang of it and how it’s like, I carry on.” (Participant 37).

These experiences allowed many students to develop resilience to the demanding and emotional challenging elements of volunteering. Many students coped by developing a ‘matter of fact’ attitude to difficult situations and as a result of this appeared more resilient to similar situations that might arise in future volunteering roles.

Managing negative emotions and disappointing outcomes also demanded the development of a pragmatic and resilient approach to the more challenging aspects of volunteering:

"I think you just have to take them on, as in your always gonna have to deal with things that you don't want to. But it's a learning curve." (Participant 16).

"You kind of just have to, in a harsh way, just get over it, and move on." (Participant 19).

The link between volunteering and resilience has also been explored by other theorists (Resnick et al, 2013). Indeed, some argue that a lack of role or personal identity can affect psychological well-being by increasing negative affect and reducing resilience (Greenfield and Marks, 2007). Volunteering, which has been shown to have a positive effect on psychological well-being (Brown et al., 2008; Poulin et al., 2014) may act as a way of increasing confidence and therefore fostering resilience especially in emerging adults as they develop their identities

Keeping the Balance

This theme highlights some of challenges students reported when talking about their volunteering experience. For most of the participants this involved balancing their volunteering commitments with academic, familial and/or the emotional demands discussed above. Nearly all of the students reported that balancing volunteering with different commitments was one of the main challenges and these in turn may act as barriers for future volunteering. For most students balancing volunteering with academic commitments was often the most difficult:

"The main challenge is trying to find the time to volunteer, especially being a third year student." (Participant 8).

For others, particularly more mature students; balancing their time volunteering with time spent with their own family was reported as a challenge:

"I have a sick daughter, so there are times when I know that the pressures at home are just such that I'm not available emotionally to work on the helpline and I've called in on a couple of times and just said no, I need a bit of time at home." (Participant 13).

Remaining emotionally balanced and not allowing themselves to become overly involved in the lives of the people they were helping was another challenge that many reported:

“Not getting emotionally attached, especially since it (cancer) has been in my family. You can’t attach yourself to that person because there are going to be so many people that you have to help.
(Participant 1).

“Friendships I have developed with the residents, I feel I’ve grown quite close to them, some of them, as family, which makes it hard for deteriorations and when they move on.” (Participant 23).

For others, commitments within their own personal or family life meant that volunteering within highly emotional environments was not always possible:

“I think that I have a responsibility to make sure that I’m safe on the service and if I feel that I’m not strong in myself then it’s irresponsible to go in and try to do work when you’re either not going to listen or be inappropriate.” (Participant 13)

Phase 3: Reaping the rewards

This final phase further demonstrates how volunteering was often talked about as a commodity or resource by many interviewees. Students reported the ways in which they felt volunteering enhanced their employability and the ways in which they experienced increased well-being. Volunteering appeared to give the students a sense of purpose and most reported feeling a range of positive emotions as a result of their volunteering commitments (Seligman, 2011)

“Happy, you feel like you are doing some good, so the emotions you feel are almost a sense of fulfilment for doing certain things for people. And when you reflect back, I think I am quite lucky to be here.”
(Participant 8)

“At a personal level, I think I quite like that feeling of efficiency and meaningfulness, to be purposeful.”

(Participant 13)

Tellingly, a lack of perceived dividends and a mismatch between costs and benefits typically led to termination of volunteering, as outlined by one of the students who discontinued her involvement:

“I don’t think I got anything out of this... If anything I was just run down by the end of it, it was quite hard work. I wasn’t expecting so much” (Participant 49).

In contrast, for many participants, volunteering provided a range of benefits. Some felt that it had bolstered their self-image and their perceived standing within their community:

“It provides me with more of a sense of identity because the moment you feel as though you have become a role model that becomes your identity. So whereas for instance people would have known me just as Fazal, I am now becoming the person that helps disabled children and I think I think that identity grows with time the more I commit myself to volunteering.” (Participant 33).

Previous research shows a significant relationship between volunteering and employment in terms of moving into employment, job retention and progression (Paine et al., 2013). Similarly, students perceived volunteering as an opportunity to improve their own employability skills and wider self-development. For example, students felt that volunteering increased their employability in general:

“It’s given me the experience I really wanted and it helped me get a job there. For me it was a really positive experience and I would do it as long as I had to.” (Participant 35).

For mature female students who had returned to education having raised families, documenting volunteering was believed to offer some compensation to a recruitment system viewed (despite protective legislation) as ageist:

“I think that I am less employable because I’m getting old but I’d like to think that by volunteering I’m maintaining evidence that I’m still employable.” (Participant 13).

Another benefit of volunteering reported was the development of 'soft' skills. These included communication skills, confidence and time management. In line with the Investment Model, volunteers appeared to acquire skills which in turn were perceived as having a positive effect on their later development, academic achievement and employment (Hackl et al., 2007).

"I've learnt communication skills and I've learnt confidence as well because I never used to talk before, I used to be shy." (Participant 4).

"I can now talk in large groups of people, I am more confident with that. Public speaking was definitely one issue I had before. I also have really good time management skills now because of organising things. I think I have always been a team leader but a team player not as much. I think I have become more of a team player now." (Participant 1).

Students highlighted the importance of the real world experiences they gained from volunteering and how this changed their perspective and challenged previously held stereotypes:

"I have this different perception of the world to others because I've had more experience with different people." (Participant 15).

"Just looking at life in general in the sense that you look at people and their situations differently as well, it kind of reduces the negative." (Participant 16)

In summary, the current analysis presents a three phase model for the successful student volunteer journey. Phase one highlights why a student may become involved in volunteering and demonstrates the often changing nature of their motives. Phase two recognises a range of factors that concern the management of volunteering and shows the importance of support systems, coping mechanisms and balancing volunteering with other commitments. Finally, phase three emphasizes the rewards that student volunteers can gain from their experiences, particularly in relation to what one participant described as *"happy vibes"* (Participant 44) and perceived improvements in their employability prospects.

Discussion

In this closing section, we discuss the findings further in relation to extant theory and research, and consider implications and applications. We also discuss limitations within this study and areas for future investigation and finally the reflexivity of the researchers and how we believe our positions and experiences may have influenced data collection and analysis.

This evidence is the first of its kind to present a model of 'successful' student volunteering. Some previous research has shown that students are motivated to volunteer altruistically or for reciprocal benefit (Wakelin, 2013), yet the current findings reaffirm that these motivations are more commonly interwoven and most participants appeared to be comfortable juxtaposing reported motives of compassion and concern for others with the self-benefits of perceived enhanced employability. The importance of sustained peer and social support is also evidenced. Comparable to previous research, volunteering was associated with enhanced reported well-being (Aknin et al., 2013) and although volunteering and prosocial behaviour have been linked with greater life satisfaction and positive affect in older age (Kahana et al., 2013), to our knowledge this is the first study to demonstrate the benefit of increased well-being within a student population using qualitative data. Finally, our evidence provides a detailed account of how students perceived volunteering to positively affect their employability prospects.

Alongside previous findings, our analysis shows how volunteering has the potential to enhance students' well-being across several domains. As we noted earlier, one useful model for considering these benefits is the PERMA model of well-being (Seligman, 2011), which has been demonstrated to accurately assess student well-being (Kern et al., 2015). Our evidence suggests that volunteering facilitates development of the five key and inter-related elements described by the model as essential to promoting a sense of well-being, and allowing individuals to flourish. The accounts contained evidence of positive emotional experiences accrued as a result of volunteering, engagement at both individual and community-based levels, the relationships that students build with fellow volunteers

and indeed, their 'clients', a sense of meaning and purpose in the volunteer role, and the accomplishment that stems from 'a job done well.' As volunteering during university or college years has also been shown to predict later adult well-being (Bowman, 2010), an argument can be put forward for the importance of encouraging more students into volunteering work. Thus, and despite the current socio-political climate of austerity, Universities that utilise and instil the importance of volunteering and community engagement will be investing in the well-being of their students and their future contributions to society.

Many participants talked about their early experiences of volunteering in relation to feelings of "*being chucked in at the deep end*" (Participant 3) and saw this as a key rite of passage. Reported resilience often developed through adapting their role and obtaining a pragmatic attitude to the emotionally demanding situations they may have experienced early on. This supports the notion of the development of positive emotion and cognitive coping strategies advocated by the PERMA model (Seligman, 2001), in addition to theories of emotion/action focused coping, in that participants showed an ability to focus on their own emotions or eliminate or control stressors as a way of coping (Lazarus, 1966). The development of resilience to the challenging situations within volunteering in younger volunteers may be a fruitful avenue for further investigation. Although volunteering has been shown to increase resilience in older participants (Klinedinst and Resnick, 2014), it would be interesting to explore this further within a student population.

The participants in our sample were sourced from six different institutions and engaged in a wide variety of activities with service-users across the lifespan, who had many different disabilities and long-term health conditions. This suggests that the transferability of the model, especially to the British system of higher education is fairly strong; although it should be noted that average weekly volunteering was substantially higher than reported in recent British surveys (Ellison and Kerr, 2014).

Future research that illustrates how student volunteers grow and develop is arguably warranted to understand these processes even more thoroughly. Rather than the single interview method utilised

in the current study, research of this nature might benefit from the employment of a short-term, qualitative, longitudinal approach where participants keep a regular diary or journal over an extended period of volunteering. Previous research has shown that students are typically comfortable keeping such reflective diaries and this method can reveal a deeper and more context-sensitive understanding of particular situations and how people respond to them (Travers, 2011).

Our findings also have several implications for health education professionals who are involved in the recruitment, supervision and support of student volunteers. Firstly, being more fully aware of the importance of social support within student volunteering can inform volunteering recruitment, retention and satisfaction. Our data, for example, highlight the importance of social support within volunteering; particularly the role of training and supervision within the development and on-going support of student volunteers. Evidence shows that training of volunteers can be empowering to volunteers as well as a strategic recruitment and retention tool, by increasing the confidence of volunteers and their sense of achievement (Mui et al., 2013). To date there is very limited research evaluating student based volunteering services. One fruitful avenue for attention may therefore be to explore further the development and evaluation of mentoring schemes for new and less experienced student volunteers by more established peers. Many students benefit from participation in peer-mentoring for aspects of their academic life (Glaser et al., 2006), yet there appears to be little published work into the effective components of peer-mentoring or buddying schemes around student volunteering.

Understanding more fully what drives students to engage and maintain volunteering could also help aid recruitment. In keeping with most recent work, our data suggest that motivations to volunteer vary within and between individuals (Hallett, 2013). For some participants there were often perceived 'right' reasons to volunteer, implying that self-gain from volunteering was not always acceptable. Explaining the employability and well-being benefits of volunteering may show that gaining personally from volunteering is in-fact common and could impact on the training and supervision tools used with

volunteers; especially as schemes which foster and credit student volunteering become more embedded within University curricula, and there is more systematic evaluation of these (Bell et al., 2015).

This research was conducted and written up by a team of five individuals, comprising three experienced academics and two PhD candidates. Three of the team had previous experience of volunteering in a health and welfare context. Two members of the team carried out most of the interviews which meant that some of the authors were more distant from data collection processes than others. However, all members of the team were involved in the development and refinement of the analysis. The varied nature of our prior experience and involvement in the research yielded several benefits. Our team comprised a combination of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Langdrige, 2007) to the phenomenon being scrutinised and allowed us to apply both hermeneutics of empathy and scepticism (Finlay, 2009) to analytic processes especially around theme confirmation. Some members of the team have also been involved in co-ordinating student voluntary work and are therefore generally positively oriented to the expansion of student volunteering schemes in the British University sector. However, as we have acknowledged here not all students report positive experiences around volunteering and further research on the psychological and/or practical consequences for ex-volunteers who discontinued their activities much earlier than they had intended would be useful.

Funding

This work was supported by Macmillan Cancer Support

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who contributed to the research and Caroline Fearne for her administrative support throughout this study.

References

Aknin, L. B., Barrington-Leigh, C. P., Dunn, E. W., Helliwell, J. F., Burns, J., Biswas-Diener, R., . . . Norton, M. I. (2013). Prosocial spending and well-being: Cross-cultural evidence for a psychological universal. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, doi: 10.1037/a0031578

- Anderson, P., & Green, P. (2012). Beyond CV building: The communal benefits of student volunteering. *Voluntary Sector Review*, doi:10.1332/204080512X649388
- Bell, K., Tanner, J., Ruddy, J., Astley-Pepper, M., & Hall, R. (2015). Successful partnerships with third sector organisations to enhance the healthcare student experience: A partnership evaluation. *Nurse Education Today*, doi: 10.1016/j.nedt.2014.12.013
- Bowman, N. A. (2010). The development of psychological well-being among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, doi: 10.1353/csd.0.0118
- British Psychological Society (2014). *Code of human research ethics*. Leicester: British Psychological Society.
- Brooks, A. C. (2002). Can non-profit management help answer public management's "Big questions"? *Public Administration Review*, doi: 10.1111/1540-6210.00177
- Brown, S. L., Smith, D. M., Schulz, R., Kabeto, M. U., Ubel, P. A., Poulin, M., . . . Langa, K. M. (2008). Caregiving behavior is associated with decreased mortality risk. *Psychological Science*, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02323.x
- Casiday, R., Kinsman, E., Fisher, C., & Bambra, C. (2008). Volunteering and health: What impact does it really have? Report to Volunteering England. Project report. Volunteering England; 2008.
- Cassell, C., & Symon, G. (2011). Assessing 'good' qualitative research in the work psychology field: A narrative analysis. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8325.2011.02009.x
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd edition). London: Sage.

Clarke, N., Barnett, C., Cloke, P., & Malpass, A. (2007). Globalising the consumer: Doing politics in an ethical register. *Political Geography*, doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.10.009

Cook, P., & Jackson, N. (2006). Valuing volunteering. *A Route to Professional Development: Views from VSO Volunteers and Managers*. Victoria: Chartered Management Institute.

Coppa, K., & Boyle, F. M. (2003). The role of self-help groups in chronic illness management: A qualitative study. *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, doi:10.1071/PY03026

Darwen, J., & Grace Rannard, A. (2011). Student volunteering in England: a critical moment. *Education+ Training*, doi: 10.1108/00400911111115717

DirectGov (2012) Volunteering while looking for work. Retrieved from: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/employment/jobseekers/lookingforwork/dg_10033053.

Dooris, M., Wills, J., & Newton, J. (2014). Theorizing healthy settings: a critical discussion with reference to Healthy Universities. *Scandinavian journal of public health*, doi: 10.1177/1403494814544495

Ellison, F. & Kerr, L. (2014). *The student volunteering landscape*. London: National Union of Students.

Finlay, L. (2011). *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world* West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons.

Francis, J. E. (2011). The functions and norms that drive university student volunteering. *International Journal of Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, doi:10.1002/nvsm.390

Glaser, N., Hall, R., & Halperin, S. (2006). Students supporting students: The effects of peer mentoring on the experiences of first year university students. *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 27, 4-19.

- Greenfield, E. A., & Marks, N. F. (2007). Religious social identity as an explanatory factor for associations between more frequent formal religious participation and psychological well-being. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, doi: 10.1080/10508610701402309
- Hackl, F., Halla, M., & Pruckner, G. J. (2007). Volunteering and income: The fallacy of the Good Samaritan? *Kyklos*, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6435.2007.00360.x
- Hallett, C., Klug, G., Lauber, C., & Priebe, S. (2012). Volunteering in the care of people with severe mental illness: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, doi: 10.1186/1471-244X-12-226 [doi]
- Handy, F., Canaan, R.A., Hustinx, L., Kang, C., Brudney, J.L., Haski-Leventhal, D....Zrinscak, S. (2010). A cross-cultural examination of student volunteering: Is it all about resume building? *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*,. doi: 10.1177/0899764009344353
- Henwood, K. & Pidgeon, N. (2012). Grounded theory. In Breakwell, G., Smith, J. & Wright, D. (eds.) *Research methods in psychology* (4th edition, 461-484). London: Sage
- Hirst, A. (2001). *Links between volunteering and employability*. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills .
- Holdsworth, C., & Brewis, G. (2014). Volunteering, choice and control: A case study of higher education student volunteering. *Journal of Youth Studies*, doi:10.1080/13676261.2013.815702
- Holdsworth, C., & Quinn, J. (2010). Student volunteering in English higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, doi:10.1080/03075070903019856
- Hustinx, L. (2001). Individualisation and new styles of youth volunteering: An empirical exploration. *Voluntary Action*, 3(2), 57-76.

Hustinx, L., Cnaan, R. A., & Handy, F. (2010). Navigating theories of volunteering: A hybrid map for a complex phenomenon. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5914.2010.00439.x

Kahana, E., Bhatta, T., Lovegreen, L. D., Kahana, B., & Midlarsky, E. (2013). Altruism, helping, and volunteering: Pathways to well-being in late life. *Journal of Aging and Health*, doi: 10.1177/0898264312469665

Kern, M. L., Waters, L. E., Adler, A., & White, M. A. (2015). A multidimensional approach to measuring well-being in students: Application of the PERMA framework. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, doi: 10.1080/17439760.2014.936962

Klinedinst, N. J., & Resnick, B. (2014). Volunteering and depressive symptoms among residents in a continuing care retirement community. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, doi:10.1080/01634372.2013.867294

Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Lazarus, R. S. (1966). *Psychological stress and the coping process*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Luoh, M., & Herzog, A. R. (2002). Individual consequences of volunteer and paid work in old age: Health and mortality. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 43 (4) , 490-509.

MacNeela, P., & Gannon, N. (2014). Process and positive development: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of university student volunteering. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, doi:10.1177/0743558413510968

- Morrow-Howell, N., Hinterlong, J., Rozario, P. A., & Tang, F. (2003). Effects of volunteering on the well-being of older adults. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, doi: 10.1093/58.3.S137
- Mui, A. C., Glajchen, M., Chen, H., & Sun, J. (2013). Developing an older adult volunteer program in a New York Chinese community: An evidence-based approach. *Ageing International*, doi: 10.1007/s12126-012-9160-5
- Musick, M. A., & Wilson, J. (2008). *Volunteering: A social profile*. Indiana: Indiana University Press
- Newton, B., Oakley, J., & Pollard, E. (2011). *Volunteering: Supporting transitions*. London: National Young Volunteering Service
- Norrish, J. M., Williams, P., O'Connor, M., & Robinson, J. (2013). An applied framework for positive education. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 3(2), doi:10.5502/ijw.v3i2.2
- Paine, A. E., McKay, S., & Moro, D. (2013). Does volunteering improve employability? Insights from the British Household Panel Survey and beyond. *Voluntary Sector Review*, doi: 10.1332/204080513X13807974909244
- Piliavin, J. A., & Siegl, E. (2007). Health benefits of volunteering in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, doi: 10.1177/002214650704800408
- Poulin, M. J. (2014). Volunteering predicts health among those who value others: Two national studies. *Health Psychology*, doi:10.1037/a0031620
- Ramirez-Valles, J., & Brown, A. U. (2003). Latinos' community involvement in HIV/AIDS: Organizational and individual perspectives on volunteering. *AIDS Education and Prevention : Official Publication of the International Society for AIDS Education*, 15(1 Suppl A), 90-104.

- Rehberg, W. (2005). Altruistic individualists: Motivations for international volunteering among young adults in Switzerland. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Non-profit Organizations*, doi: 10.1007/s11266-005-5693-5
- Resnick, B., Klinedinst, J., Dorsey, S., Holtzman, L., & Abuelhiga, L. S. (2013). Volunteer behavior and factors that influence volunteering among residents in continuing care retirement communities. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, doi:10.1080/02763893.2012.754820
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Smith, K.A., Holmes, K., Haski-Leventhal, D., Cnaan, R.A., Handy, Fe., & Brudney, J.L. (2010). Motivations and benefits of student volunteering: Comparing regular, occasional and non-volunteers in five countries. *Canadian Journal of Non-profit and Social Economy Research*, 1(1), 65-81.
- Stewart-Brown, S. (2006). *What is the evidence on school health promotion in improving health or preventing disease and, specifically, what is the effectiveness of the health promoting schools approach?* Health Evidence Network report, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.
- Travers, C. (2011). Unveiling a reflective diary methodology for exploring the lived experiences of stress and coping. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2010.11.007
- Wakelin, D. (2013). What motivates students to volunteer at events? *Event Management*, 17(1), 63-75. doi:10.3727/152599513X13623342048185
- Wilkins, A., & Burke, P. J. (2015). Widening participation in higher education: The role of professional and social class identities and commitments. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.829742

Yuen, H. K., Huang, P., Burik, J. K., & Smith, T. G. (2008). Impact of participating in volunteer activities for residents living in long-term-care facilities. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, doi:10.5014/ajot.62.1.71

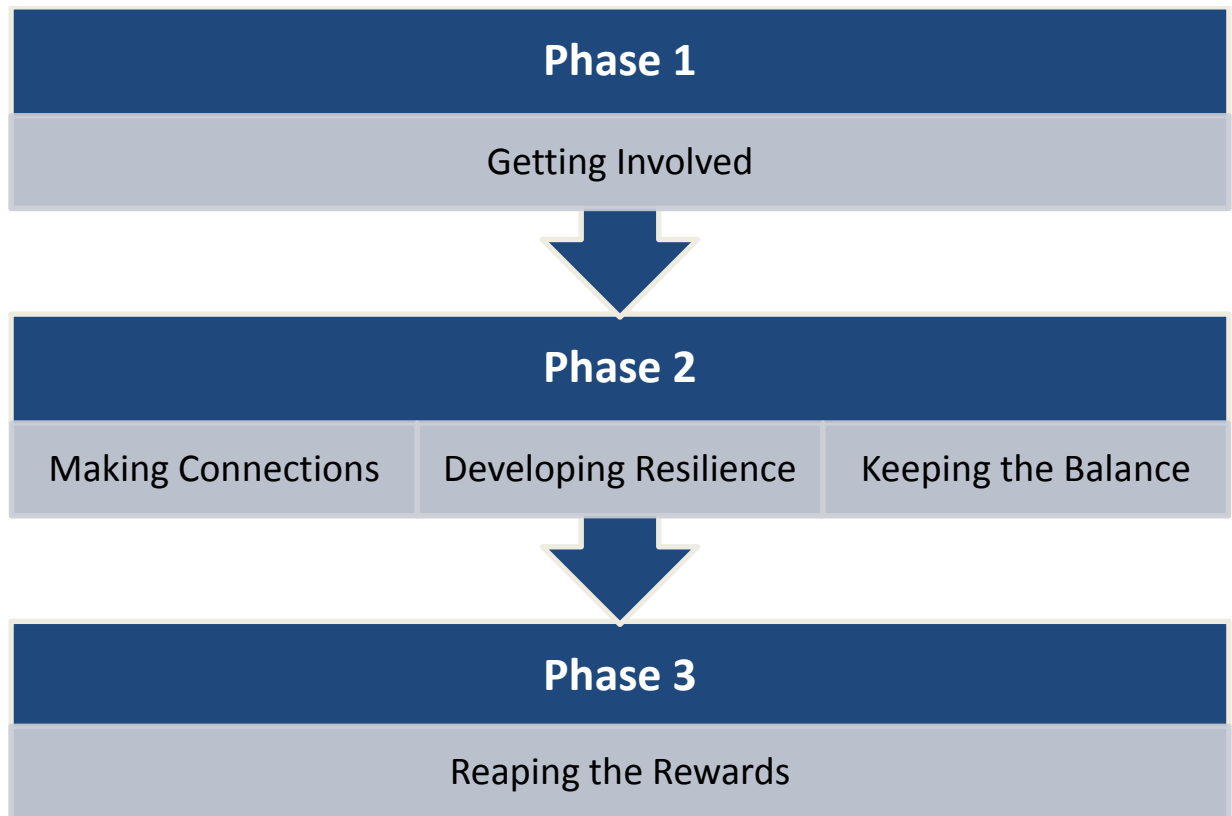


Figure 1: Model of the development and maintenance of the successful student volunteer

