

Integrating Volunteering with the Curriculum: present initiatives and future possibilities

Isabel Cormack and Stavroula Konidari
Career Development and Employability Service
Student Services Department
London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

"Volunteering is a life-affirming experience. I supplement my university learning and improve my social, personal, communication and understanding skills". BSc (Hons) Human Nutrition student, London Metropolitan University

For the purpose of this paper, volunteering is described as an unpaid activity where someone gives their time to help a not-for-profit organisation or an individual to whom they are not related (Volunteering England, 2006a). The most up-to-date source of volunteering statistics for England is the Department for Communities and Local Government Citizenship Survey 2005, which found that 76% of people in England had volunteered formally (as a group activity) or informally (on an individual basis) at least once in the previous 12 months (*ibid.* 2006b). This is a high percentage and shows the important role that volunteering plays in England today. Volunteering is vital for the functioning of many charities, local organisations and community groups and as such it is important that provision is in place to encourage more people to volunteer.

UK Universities have encouraged students to volunteer for a number of years, more formally for the last five under The Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) and more recently the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). Volunteering benefits students and institutions in a number of ways:

- students become more active in their local community and enhance their CVs and employability skills;
- the ethos of volunteering is embedded within universities through the support of individual departmental projects involving voluntary organisations (Sullivan, 2004);
- institutions raise their profiles within the local community.

Universities recognise that volunteering is a very appropriate way for students to gain valuable work experience. In the Government's response to the Dearing report (1997), 'Higher Education for the 21st Century' it was recommended, that:

“... all institutions should, over the medium term, identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work, and help them to reflect on such experience” and agreed that: *“enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for Higher Education and that work experience can be very valuable in helping students to develop...”* (UK Government, 1998: Chapter 6, Section 5).

Graduate employers increasingly recognise the importance of volunteering and with the rise in the numbers of graduates and an ever-competitive labour market, co-curricular activities at university will become more important to allow students to stand out from their competitors. Students often do not recognise and reflect on the skills and qualities they have gained through work experience. The university has a duty to encourage students to access a diverse range of activities such as volunteering, and to use them as valuable learning experience through accreditation and other academic initiatives (Tallamy, 2005).

This paper considers the benefits and challenges that volunteering can bring to both students and staff at university. It also looks at embedding volunteering in the curriculum to encourage students to give their time in order to gain much needed skills.

Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering can play a major role in tackling some of the main issues currently facing universities and students can benefit from:

- increasing their employability and career management skills;
- gaining valuable work experience to enhance their CV;
- putting academic theory into practice in a work environment, encouraging them to reflect on what they have learnt;
- increased motivation, confidence and self esteem.

Additionally, many people volunteer as a purely altruistic act, simply because they want to give back to, and feel more integrated in their local community and increase their feeling of well-being.

By encouraging students to volunteer, universities are also raising their profiles within their local communities enabling them to develop better links with business and community networks.

Gaining career management skills through work experience

According to the Employer Satisfaction Survey carried out by the University of Central England the 12 most important skills that employers are looking for are:

“willingness to learn, commitment, dependability/reliability, self-motivation, team work, communication skills, drive/energy, self-management, desire to

achieve/motivation, problem solving ability, co-operation, commercial awareness” (www.prospects.ac.uk)

These skills can all be gained through volunteering, particularly when students are given the opportunity to reflect on their experience. Voluntary work related to their field of interest will enable students to put what they have learnt into context and better equip them with skills for planning their career following graduation. It will also enable them to become more realistic, which will be of benefit when applying for graduate jobs.

If the type of voluntary work is not directly relevant to their career area of choice, students can still gain a variety of competences and the ability to articulate their transferable skills enabling them to compete more effectively for graduate employment. Students can also gain knowledge of the way organisations operate and an insight into the world of work. Additionally they can have the opportunity to meet and network with a wide range of people who could offer advice and assistance in their future job search. Volunteering also shows an employer that students have initiative, motivation and a community spirit (Tyldesley, 2007).

Employers are very interested in students who have interests outside their studies. Research amongst over 200 of the UK’s top businesses, carried out on behalf of the charity TimeBank (by recruitment agency Reed Executive, 2001), found that three quarters of employers prefer to recruit candidates who have undertaken voluntary work and over half think it can be more valuable than paid work. Employers will look particularly favourably on candidates who have volunteered with charities, an area where competition can be very fierce. Student Volunteering England illustrates this further:

“Nowadays employers are looking for the candidate who is prepared to go that little bit further and experience of volunteering can provide that evidence”. Alan Jeffs, Head of HR, British Heart Foundation (Student Volunteering England website).

"Volunteering provides graduates with an invaluable set of skills and competencies which can not be rivalled by other experiences, even in the commercial sector” Rebecca Martin, Graduate Manager, The Co-operative Group (*ibid.*).

Volunteering can be very flexible as, unlike other forms of work experience, time commitment is usually easily negotiable. Although reliability is important the flexibility regarding when and for how long you volunteer greatly benefits students, particularly when there are conflicting demands already imposed on their time. At London Metropolitan University there are large numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds, some with unconventional qualifications which are not easily recognisable by employers, and therefore the need for skills development, and work experience is essential. Through volunteering, students from non-traditional

backgrounds are often able to gain vital work experience in their chosen career area, which they may not be able to obtain in the general labour market due to the competition from other students at more established universities. For example, a student studying IT who wants to work for a blue-chip company may not be able to gain experience in an IT company however may easily be able to volunteer for a charity's IT department (setting up a particular system or designing their website) and this will look just as good on their CV. Also, gaining valuable work experience can be problematic for certain groups; an example would be students with disabilities, who may already face challenges in accessing opportunities in the labour market. Volunteering is an innovative way of increasing confidence as well as skills development in these groups to help them compete with other graduates.

Putting learning into practice - reflective learning

Students' academic studies can benefit from voluntary work experience especially when they are given the opportunity to reflect on what they have learnt. 'The Art of Crazy Paving' (Speakman, Drake & Hawkins, 2001) promotes volunteering as an organic learning experience that hones continuing personal development, planning and self-reflection (Harvey, 2003). This is not a new idea and the most established theory is that of David Kolb's model of Experiential Learning. The model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests out new ideas and concepts through experience and modifies them as a result of the reflection and conceptualisation (Kolb, 1984). The reflection is then assimilated into theory and finally new ideas are tested in new situations. It is not sufficient to just have an experience without reflection, as it may be quickly forgotten or the learning potential lost. This highlights the importance for universities to provide options for students to apply their experience and knowledge in the form of accredited modules and in other areas of their academic course, allowing them to test out theoretical learning in a real life setting.

Personal Development Plans (PDPs) should also be promoted as an essential tool for students. Lee Harvey (2003) states that learning from work experience is effective if:

“it is meaningful; there is an intention to derive learning from it; it is assessed or credited; the quality is monitored; it adds to a work experience portfolio or there is a process for articulation and reflection (Harvey et al, 1998)” (Harvey, et al, 2003, p.37)

In addition to the benefits for the student who is volunteering there will also be knock on benefits for peers on their course as the students will be able to provide a useful insight and share what they have learnt. Lecturers are able to draw on the experiential knowledge of students and make what is being taught more real. For example, experiences or critical incidents gained through volunteering can be fed back to the course in the form of case studies which can be incorporated into coursework assignments, resulting in increased academic achievement.

Challenges Facing Student Volunteering

For all the benefits of volunteering, it is also important to look at some of the barriers to engaging students in volunteering.

Research conducted by Swansea University among students who had volunteered found that the majority reported no negative aspects (McCracken, 2006) and most interestingly, many of the volunteers expressed regret at not taking fuller advantage of the opportunity. This positive response from students who have actually volunteered unfortunately can not be mirrored for those who have not. There are considerable challenges facing students who want to volunteer but also for universities trying to encourage students to volunteer. One of the main issues facing students today is the introduction of student fees, and the need to subsidise them by pursuing paid part-time jobs during their time at university. This obviously has a knock on effect for volunteering as students additionally have to juggle their studies with part-time work and, often, family life. Even though students might well benefit more from volunteering than from part-time paid work, in terms of the skills they will gain, they are unable to do both and invariably choose the latter. International students are particularly affected as their working hours regulations mean that voluntary work is deducted from their quota i.e. they are only allowed to work 20 hours per week which they often prefer to use in paid employment.

Time commitment in itself causes problems. Many students who are studying and working or even just studying have little or no time to take part in extra curricular activities. Hard-to-reach groups such as disabled students, single parents and those from minority ethnic communities will also have additional barriers to engaging in the whole student experience. Priorities are constantly changing for students, hence volunteering which is not clearly part of or related to their course will obviously be of lower priority.

An Academic Approach to Volunteering

“Experience of work should not be regarded as something that is intrinsically beneficial. On the contrary it is the learning that comes from it which is important (Harvey et al, 1998)” (Harvey et al., 2003, p.36).

Volunteering has been shown to provide students with enormous benefits, which enable them to stand out from the crowd upon graduation. However, it is important to look at effective ways of encouraging students to volunteer. If the student is encouraged to volunteer by their lecturers they will be more likely to take part. Having the support of academics and careers staff is vital to the sustainability of volunteering at university. Student support services rely heavily on referrals from academics and therefore by linking volunteering closer to the curriculum we can be sure that key messages are reinforced and students will gain access to necessary information and opportunities and realise that it is a valuable learning experience.

As Harvey *et al* (2003, p. 37) argue:

“If ‘non-traditional’ forms of work experience are to be maximised for their learning opportunities, then students need some kind of structure and support so they can reflect upon and articulate the learning”.

Encouraging students to take up an accredited option for volunteering including a reflective element and to apply theory to practice, will not only enable them to gain credits for the work, but will also assist them with their learning, course, grades and career options. Similar options that can enable this are work placements and the production of a personal development portfolio (PDP).

UK universities have varied ways of linking volunteering to the curriculum, with some offering a combination of options such as:

- elective modules in volunteering with compulsory elements of experience (University of Northampton)
- compulsory modules in volunteering for certain degree courses (University of Northampton)
- modules that are broader in context such as ‘Citizenship’ and others that are narrower such as ‘Arts for Health’ or ‘Street Law’ (Staffordshire University).
- social sciences based courses which require an element of volunteering as part of their placement modules (Staffordshire University).

These options encourage students to build both their profile, community understanding, employability skills and link them to academic knowledge, intellectual enquiry and critical thinking (University of Wolverhampton). Most options will also be accompanied by formal lectures and a number of assessments.

London Metropolitan University, too, has options for accrediting volunteering. The majority of undergraduate degrees allow students to take a 15-credit *Professional Placement* module in level 2 or 3 and opt for a voluntary placement provided it is a minimum of 25 days in length. Students are required to attend a series of sessions on topics such as skills development and CV writing. The requirement for assessment for this module varies between courses but always requires at least one piece of reflective writing. Students can also seek accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). APEL gives students the opportunity to have their prior work experience assessed and counted towards their degree. Since this learning has not been previously assessed, a claim for APEL credit involves the submission of a piece of work (such as a report or portfolio), which is assessed by a tutor.

There are other modules in the University that involve volunteering such as the module, *Managing Community and Voluntary Sector Organisations* (GI2030), which focuses on the control side of management accounting and deals mainly with budgeting, standard costing, learning curves and transfer prices. Students must have

personal experience of working within a community or voluntary sector organisation to complete the module successfully, however it is not essential that the experience is gained while studying the module.

The most recent addition to the module portfolio directly related to volunteering is the introduction of Elective Studies in Citizenship. This comprises of two modules: *Voluntary Action - Learning in Communities* (SC3C05C) and *Rights, Social Justice and Diversity* (SC2C67C and SC2C67N). If both modules are passed successfully the student receives the transcript mention 'Elective Studies in Citizenship'. *Voluntary Action – Learning in Communities* is a Certificate-level module and requires students either to be undertaking or have undertaken some form of voluntary or participative activity. The *Rights, Social Justice and Diversity* module is an Intermediate-level module and provides an underpinning understanding of communities and citizenship and ensures coverage of the key themes of justice, diversity, rights and inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates that there are real benefits for students who volunteer, specifically in enabling them not only to gain valuable transferable skills but also to put theory into practice, therefore enhancing their learning experience. Students also stress the employability benefits:

"Committing to office-based volunteering makes you better prepared for your first job in the 'real world'" BA (Hons) Events Management and Marketing student, London Metropolitan University

"I feel that this experience has opened my eyes to the career world. I'm feeling positive about my chances after graduation and excited about the future." BA (Hons) Business Information Technology student, London Metropolitan University

Universities recognise these benefits but also face considerable challenges when trying to encourage students to take part in such activities, particularly when they are extra curricular. Linking volunteering to the curriculum in the form of accredited modules and encouraging academics and careers staff to sell the benefits to students will lead not only to more students taking up the opportunities and reaping the rewards but also to the University gaining greater recognition from having higher skilled and more motivated and aware students. It will also help the university to raise its profile within the local community, building links with local businesses and community networks.

The Career Development and Employment Service will be carrying out more research into this area, in particular looking at the diverse range of students who choose to volunteer and their motivations for doing so as well as the differences in cultural attitude. The researchers will also be linking up with the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DHLE) to find concrete evidence that volunteering does indeed enhance the chances of gaining a job after graduation. It is

hoped that this research will increase the incentive for students to volunteer and further justify the need for integrating volunteering with the curriculum.

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Biographical note

Isabel Cormack is the Student Development Manager, and *Stavroula Konidari* is the Volunteer Co-ordinator, for the Student Development and Volunteering programme ('Reach') within the Career Development and Employment Service at London Metropolitan University. Email: i.cormack@londonmet.ac.uk