

## **VALUE Network – Employability Sub-group Final Report**

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<http://www.valuenetwork.org.uk/html/employability.htm>

### **Introduction – Contextual Overview**

The subgroup discussed, within the context of volunteering- University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) interaction, the wide range of stakeholders that the ‘employability’ theme can cover:

- Volunteers
- Employed managers of volunteers
- Employers who encourage their own employed staff to engage in volunteering
- In some cases volunteers are helping give employment opportunities to third parties e.g. refugees, offenders in prison, those who are illiterate

Discussion also led us to adopt the following definition of **Employability**:

“The combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their career.

**Comment:** employability of individuals depends on (a) personal attributes (including adequacy of knowledge and skills); (b) how these personal attributes are presented in the labour market; (c) the environmental and social contexts (i.e. incentives and opportunities offered to update and validate their knowledge and skills); and (d) the economic context.”

**Sources:** based on Scottish executive, 2007; The institute for employment studies, 2007. Included in cedefop 2008 update

For further details of our discussion and amplification of this term – see the Glossary section below.

We also identified a number of themes the group would explore further over the life of the project:

- An overview of valuing LLL and volunteering within the context of employment, looking at the various stakeholders (e.g. trade unions, employers, volunteers, the state, universities).
- Looking at needs/ expectations of volunteers (with particular reference to employability issues) for learning opportunities in universities especially in the UK.
- ULLL needs of employed managers of volunteers in UK

### **Dissemination / Exploitation Activities – a reflection (includes a review of potential also)**

Our original plan (specifically focusing on the subgroup theme) had identified dissemination / exploitation opportunities including:

- Contact and engaging in dialogue with other actors in the field – e.g. Decision makers, supporters, interested parties, stakeholders and end users of the resources.

This could include Volunteers, Employed managers of volunteers, Employers supporting employee volunteering, ULLL practitioners

- Pinpointing authors of articles / websites with specific interest in this area – asking them to be listed the website as experts or provide relevant resources, and engaging in dialogue with them.
- Identifying attendees for the project's final conference in Turkey

We have followed up this plan and dialogued with individuals, who have sourced articles, and are acting as experts for VALUE (and these resources are now on the main VALUE resource pages or on the employability subpage) and also may potentially attend our final conference. And we have also actively engaged wider audiences in the discussion as follows:

The subgroup ran a workshop at the main VALUE network meeting on (November 2009), which was also open to the EUCEN 38th Conference attendees in Jonkoping, SE. Questions for discussion were given to participants as follows:

- a. The different motivations for engaging in volunteering related to employability i.e. different motivations and needs at different stages of a person's career, their age or level of employment/ unemployment. For example the different needs of younger people (e.g. recent graduates) and mid-career volunteers. How can ULLL respond - e.g. range of flexible part time study options essential? What is on offer?
- b. Do other stakeholders in the employability equation 'value' volunteering and ULLL e.g. employers, trade unions, the state etc? What are the issues in challenging the 'instrumental approach' by other stakeholders e.g. to qualifications for volunteers by the state.
- c. How do companies engage their staff in volunteering? What are the implications for ULLL support of this?

The detailed discussion that arose in the workshop can be downloaded from the website and is also attached here as **Appendix A**. Further reflection on the points raised can also be found in the section below re key issues.

A presentation was made at UaLL (UK University Association for Lifelong Learning) Annual Conference, Oxford, UK on 15 March 2010 regarding our subgroup theme. The presentation and group discussion notes can be downloaded from the website. Issues identified from the discussion included:

- In UK HE the issue of financial resources drives the ULLL agenda. One way to secure government funding of ULLL for the voluntary sector may be to stress to UK authorities the economic impact of volunteers (i.e. their considerable unpaid contribution to civil society and the employability benefits of volunteering through developing skills for/in employment). But is this a dangerous instrumental approach that fails to recognize the life-benefits of volunteering that cannot and should not be measured in terms of economic impact?
- the factors that motivate adult learners to volunteer. Swansea University encourages adult learners to volunteer to enrich their learning experience in addition to developing employment related skills. However feedback suggests that most learners focus on the latter more instrumental motivation. Are the two motivations compatible?

In-depth discussions such as these maximise not only dissemination but also exploitation opportunities as they encourage workshop participants/ peers to focus on some of the underlying issues, critique findings to date and then reflect with their own colleagues back in their workplace about the issues involved.

A presentation to the 6<sup>th</sup> ICCE Continental Coach Conference, December 2010, by the NL partner InHolland and his volunteering colleague from NOC\*SNF addressed the issue of learner motivation (re learning opportunities for coaches in Dutch sport unions) – see the NL partner dissemination records and also the subgroup and bibliography webpages for the resultant paper.

## **Summary of activities / resources**

### ***Meetings***

The subgroup has met four times, twice linked to partner meetings:

- The **first** meeting was in Leuven, BE on 25 March 2009.
- The **second** meeting in Jonkoping, SE on 5 November 2009
- A **third** meeting held in Amsterdam, NL on 29 April 2010 continued the debate and exchange of experience/ information.
- The **fourth** meeting was in Lille, FR on 16 November 2010

Notes from all meetings are downloadable from the webpage.

### ***Webpage resources***

Resources specific to this subgroup theme have been posted on the page:  
<http://www.valuenetwork.org.uk/html/employability.htm>

Developed over the life of the project, they include:

- Glossary of relevant terms
- Bibliography of specific articles/papers that relate to the subgroup theme
- Relevant websites
- Reports on the subgroup activities and findings

A list of our bibliography and webpage resources is attached as **Appendix B**.

### ***Glossary of Terms***

The following terms, of particular relevance to the theme of **employability** within VALUE, have been extensively discussed and a definition provided for each:

Competence

Employability

Learning Triangle.

For the definitions and discussion of these terms please see website or **Appendix C**.

The employability subgroup also considered some terms that would be useful to include in the main VALUE glossary and these can be found on the website and also in **Appendix D**.

## **Reflections on key issues**

Throughout the work of the subgroup we have identified and discussed a number of thematic issues, and involved a wider peer group in the reflection.

### ***Motivation of volunteers: What do volunteers want out of ULLL (in terms of employability)?***

We noted that there are different social phenomena / different motivations influencing this issue.

Firstly it is important to note that not all volunteers will be interested in ULLL or employability as part of their volunteering. However, economy-wide there is an increasing emphasis upon skills development and the accreditation of these skills. Many volunteers will want to accredit and validate the skills they have developed in their volunteering roles. Crucially ULLL offers transferable, recognisable and highly valued accreditation and validation for this learning. However, a key challenge for ULLL is to preserve the flexibility and informality of so much volunteering that is valued by volunteers.

Individuals' motivations for volunteering in many cases may not be employment-related, e.g. maybe someone is unable to work (through long-term ill health; migrants; refugees), but even if this is the case what they gain through volunteering is likely to affect their employability in a positive way – so it impacts on employability even if this isn't their prime motivation.

Different groups of volunteers may place different emphasis on certain wants and hopes for ULLL. For example:

- Age: Younger volunteers tend to place a greater emphasis upon employment-related skills development and thus accreditation.
- For those in employment -Stage of career: The needs will differ between unemployed volunteers and those in very senior positions.
- The previous experience of tertiary education: Those who have already received a degree may be looking for something with added value and may be more 'fluent' and comfortable in academic settings.
- The nature of the volunteering role: Some roles will be much more amenable to ULLL (e.g. volunteer manager) than others (e.g. a befriender)

It is also worth noting here the motivation of Volunteer Managers (these may be volunteers themselves or paid members of staff). There has been an increased focus on professionalisation and formalisation of volunteer management practices over the past decade or so. This has increased the training needs of volunteer managers and there is a clear role for ULLL. For example, a survey of the skills and training needs of volunteer managers carried out in England by IVR, showed that 29% of volunteer managers had taken a university or college course leading to a qualification. The qualitative aspect of the research showed that volunteer managers value the credibility and rigour of ULLL but want more flexible offerings in order to advance their knowledge and employability. ( Brewis, G., Hill, M. and Stevens, D. (2010) *Valuing Volunteer Management Skills* IVR, London –available on the subgroup webpage).

### ***Motivation of other stakeholders the wider context – employers, trade unions, government (national and local) – an instrumental approach?***

We have discussed the motivation of employers, e.g. there is some experience in NL about why employers value validation of volunteering – increased employability of staff; recruitment; professionalization of the volunteer. It can also be about being perceived to be a good employer through facilitating this. Indeed employer-supported volunteering (ESV) has seen a strong increase in England between 2001-2009/10. Research from the UK suggests that the motivation of employers for supporting this activity is mixed between human resources (i.e. the development of employee skills), public relations (i.e. improving the brand image of the company through volunteering) and corporate social responsibility (i.e. genuine engagement with community needs). To be supported by employers ULLL for volunteering should aim to meet these various aims. The NL colleague reported on a 2005 programme that collected case studies on validation of prior learning across 11 member states in the EU. One of the findings was that employers' interest in this validation was to professionalise their volunteers. But only Short cycle programmes were preferred, unless government or other external pressures (such as laws requiring volunteers to be equipped to function in their role) required otherwise. The group noted that the motivation and level of interest of employers in volunteering and ULLL was under-researched.

Other work in the subgroup had identified that some governments take an instrumental approach – e.g. in Romania the government wants volunteers to have qualifications to practise in some sectors but is not that interested in the education/learning involved. So in Romania there are some certification requirements from the state for the voluntary sector, in order to provide certain services. Emphasis is on competences/skills being accredited but not on the aspect of deeper knowledge.

Another example - When volunteering is 'required' by the state is this really volunteering? In the UK, for example, after some time unemployment benefits can decrease if the individual does not undertake some kind of unpaid work (New Deal) or citizenship applications can be fast tracked (Immigration and Citizenship Bill) for volunteers. Imposing volunteering isn't really volunteering at all – how does this affect the quality of the experience?

Also in some cases stakeholders such as trade unions are suspicious of volunteers – volunteers can be seen as taking away **job** opportunities i.e. paid employment, because the 'work' is being done unpaid by a volunteer. In the UK, Volunteering England and the Trade Union Congress have developed guidelines around avoiding cases of blatant 'job substitution'.

In view of these examples, it is important to review the political landscape. Much is said about the 'knowledge- based economy' but is the state actually valuing the learning or just 'the doing'? Volunteering needs to be accepted across the EU as a rich learning and working environment and not just something 'nice to do'. So how do we challenge the 'instrumental approach'? ULLL's role in this can be to emphasise the wider social / civic benefits of adult education and personal development and to facilitate this through its course provision.

### ***Volunteering is not just an employability but social interaction***

We noted that:

- volunteering and ULLL must remain a free choice and neither must be seen solely as a social measure to help the unemployed or to be a requirement for an individual to obtain state unemployment benefit. (*ref CEV General Assembly Paris, France, March 2007, Final report – 'Volunteering as a route (back) to employment'*). We discussed whether volunteering planned by an individual as a route back to employment is in fact true 'volunteering'.

- ULLL can help a volunteer 'value the opportunity' e.g. where there is an overlap with a route to employability but this should not always be its primary aim or role. Volunteering is a 'learning event' and should be valued for this in itself. ULLL is not a tool of the state to reinforce the 'need to get qualifications' but can help a learner/volunteer, who may not have previously engaged in much formal learning, take first steps to access these learning opportunities.
- A lot of volunteers don't want ULLL and we must be careful that everything doesn't get wound into an economic cycle of quantifying and analysing. Some volunteers may take the view 'let me volunteer for my own reasons'
- But at the same time let's provide the opportunities of ULLL for those who genuinely want and need it.
- Thus ULLL can help to build the bridge between social and economic activity. But it needs to be presented to volunteers as an **opportunity** not a necessity/requirement. ULLL should not be viewed as 'professionalizing' the role of the volunteer.

### ***The ULLL response to the need - flexibility***

In reviewing the needs and opportunities for Universities to provide LLL for those engaged in the voluntary sector we noted:

- In providing LLL opportunities for managers in the voluntary sector, is it solely an 'economy-driven' model of management that is being offered? If so is this appropriate? Universities need to recognise that the voluntary sector is very different from the employment sector and the curriculum for overall management of voluntary organisations must reflect this.
- As volunteering isn't one-dimensional the complexity of managing volunteers needs to be recognised in ULLL. For example a volunteer may also be a 'user' or 'sponsor' of the service as well as a volunteer – managers need to be aware of this in order to manage them effectively. So ULLL courses need to recognize the uniqueness of HR management in this sector.
- IVR Research Bulletin 'Volunteering to Lead' identified the tension between balancing requirements for managerial training and the informality and flexibility of a host organisation valued by its volunteers
- Some volunteers report they do not receive the kinds of management good practice promoted in volunteer management. Many volunteers report they do not receive training for their role. This identifies a continuing need for ULLL for both managers and volunteers. (See IVR Research Bulletin 'Managing for Success')
- Are funding bodies pushing towards professionalization of the sector?

One prime response of Higher Education (HE) is in terms of flexibility – providing flexible delivery with small steps of learning. In doing so HE needs to consider:

- Does a 'volunteer' always recognize that they are in fact volunteering – do they just see it as a continuum of life experience, especially when they are not 'formally' volunteering i.e. not doing it within an organisational context. In those very informal volunteering cases (e.g. helping in the neighbourhood) it is likely that those undertaking the voluntary role do not reflect at all on their personal learning. How can ULLL help them to do this? So universities need to provide ULLL support for informal volunteering – i.e. reflective small steps (e.g. possibly non-accredited or accredited short courses and counselling).
- Is ULLL too academic with its emphasis on theory when asking volunteers to set out skills learned from long-time volunteering? Should volunteers be gently encouraged to theorise/ reflect a little earlier in their learning journey during their volunteering experience? Also should the academics start to think more deeply about what they

classify as 'evidence'? Sometimes the academic and practice boundaries are not clear

ULLL brings to the volunteer- employability equation opportunities for part or full time study with:

- Flexibility of approach:
  - Qualifications – i.e. full awards of varying lengths (UK has some that are equivalent to half year full time study)
  - Small short courses - possibly without academic credit or small accredited modules

An example is Birkbeck College, University of London (UK), which offers a variety of options –Certificate of Attendance / Certificate of Achievement / Full academic award

- Flexibility of modes of delivery:
    - Shell modules that allow for work-based learning / project- based work
    - APL – recognition and accreditation of learning achieved through their role
- An example is Lampeter, University of Wales (UK), which offers accumulation of credit / distance learning / introduction to university study

But will ULLL make LLL for volunteers too formalised? Do some see the issue as 'let's keep it informal'? Universities must bear this in mind when developing and delivering course provision for the sector.

### **Highlighting and developing good practice**

The subgroup members have been building on the employability theme in VALUE by developing new contacts to work with, new research and provision of case studies. For example Ruud Duvekot has been working on a spin-off from VALUE by developing a project with the NL voluntary organisation partner NOC\*NSF, with whom they had not worked before in this field. Resources produced will be in Dutch and it is being funded by the NOC\*NSF. Using 4 sport unions ( including boxing, athletics, volleyball) it will review generic APL and the relation between EQF and the NL NQF and look at building a bridge from Level 4 to the associate degree (Level 5 - 2 year cycle – similar to UK Foundation Degree) and eventually to teacher training. It will explore the individual learning pathways that this could involve for the volunteers in these unions and also eventually the possibility of progressing to a bachelor degree (4 year). Although the main project content will be generic it will be made specific in terminology / language for volunteers in these unions. The outcome will be a generic matrix with function-related competences and professional competences (e.g. diplomas). Volunteers in these unions who do coaching/ refereeing will work with the generic profiles to produce more contextualised and individualised profiles. The aim of their involvement will be 'how to personalise the matrix'.

Matthew Hill has been working on some very relevant research projects within IVR, which will produce papers that (once completed) can be a resource on the website, including:

- exploring the link between volunteering and employability. The bulletin discusses strong evidence for the role of volunteering in skills development but points to a lack of evidence in hard job outcomes.
- IVR survey of skills and volunteer management in the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector in the UK. The survey included some specific questions re ULLL in order to provide synergy with VALUE's work. This includes volunteer manager interviews – with many stating they want some professional recognition and learning opportunities. But the experienced managers have emphasised that they do not mean by this short (e.g. half day) courses, but rather an opportunity to undertake more in-depth LLL. It was noted that

volunteer managers have different LLL needs e.g. depending on whether they are paid/unpaid; in the public or private sector; the level of their experience.

Alison Hughes has reviewed the UK ULLL provision for volunteers and volunteer managers. A survey (for the MOVE project) was carried out on behalf of her university in 2007 and she has now updated this survey. Main findings in 2010 are as follows:

- There is a growing recognition of the demonstrated need for not just generic management style competences but very specific applicability of ULLL for those managing volunteers. So whereas in 2007 most of the management modules on offer in the UK to those in the voluntary sector were very generic type 'business school' style, now some universities appear to be developing modules tailored with more specific applicability to the voluntary sector e.g. Lampeter, Roehampton, Winchester, Durham
- Having said this, still the ULLL UK offer is weighted to managers of volunteers rather than volunteers themselves, except where there are specialist centres e.g. Birkbeck, Lampeter
- HE can encourage reflexive competences for volunteers – allow them to value learning, and there seem to be more opportunities for this now than in 2007.
- Community learning and the different contexts for volunteering are increasingly appreciated and being accommodated within ULLL provision
- More Foundation degrees or UK first year undergraduate Level courses are now on offer for the sector – so there is growing acknowledgement that not all volunteers and/or their managers are ready for study at Masters level.

The ULLL sector in the UK, therefore, has moved on since 2007 to provide more tailored learning opportunities that reflect the unique nature of the roles of those engaged in volunteering and in the voluntary sector.

## **Conclusion.**

In conclusion, after over two years working together in the Employability Subgroup we would summarise our reflections on this issue as follows

- There is a need to be cautious in assuming that ULLL is universally required for those participating in this sector as volunteers or managers of volunteers. This educational step is not for everyone. In relating volunteering to employability issues we must ask ourselves – how much do employers value (recognise, accept and build further on) the resultant academic achievement from participation in ULLL? And how much do volunteers want this opportunity in the first place? As we have seen, the potential learners do not form a homogeneous group and the motivation, even around the single theme of employability, can vary substantially depending on an individual's background, age group etc
- Volunteering should not just focus on employment outcomes, nor should ULLL. In these times of economic crisis it is understandable that economic benefits of both volunteering and learning are to the forefront of thinking for those in government. Nevertheless both volunteering and ULLL offer much wider societal benefits both to those engaged in it and to their wider civic community and these should not be undervalued. The rationale for volunteers and those working in the voluntary sector to become engaged in ULLL should not just be an economic argument. The holistic argument, therefore, is much stronger: linking economic as well as social benefits within the local/regional community.

- Having said all this, there remains a demonstrated demand for tailored ULLL provision for this sector. And even if many volunteers do not want to take the opportunity, there are others who do.
- Saying this, universities and voluntary organisations should not underestimate the energy the volunteer or manager requires in order to be able to invest in him/herself. For example, energy is needed for building up a portfolio with prior learning outcomes and matching those outcomes with the (commonly) inflexible standards used in education. A volunteer really needs to be empowered before entering the arena of ULLL.
- Thus, flexibility of support, content and delivery is the key to a successful ULLL offer. The varying needs of the different groups engaged in volunteering and the voluntary sector must be recognised if meaningful ULLL is to be offered. There are examples of good practice e.g. where this is acknowledged and accommodated by several universities in the UK and NL implementing policies of widened access and tailor-made programmes. Opportunities can be made more easily available to those wanting to access ULLL when recognition of their prior experiential learning is available and easily understandable to those wishing to engage in it. e.g. potentially increasing tailor made ULLL, recognising prior learning outcomes and creating a professional, customer-oriented guiding service within the volunteering as well as the education sector
- From the perspective of employability, this flexibility needs to reflect the recognition of the different employability needs and motivations from within the community of volunteers and this sector and the tensions this can cause. Finally, Universities can and do provide ULLL for the sector that is relevant to employers and volunteers themselves. Flexible responses to the diversity in learning needs can provide ULLL for the sector that is relevant to employers and volunteers as well as to the new role of universities in our changing society.

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