

VALUE: UK National Report

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This document reports on the interaction between University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) and volunteering in the UK.

1. Overview of volunteering – university interaction

1.1 Volunteering in the UK

Volunteering in the UK is a popular activity. In England, 41 per cent of the population has volunteered formally (through a group, club or organisation) at least once a year (in 2008/09) (DCLG, 2009). Levels of formal volunteering have decreased very slightly since 2001. The most popular activities for volunteers include education (31% of current formal volunteers), religion (24%), sports and exercise (22%) and health and disability (22%) (Low et al, 2007).

Research shows that volunteering is a common activity in the other nations of the UK. In Northern Ireland 35% of the population engaged in formal volunteering (Ulster Marketing Surveys, 2001), while in Scotland 23% had volunteered within the past 12 months (Scottish Executive, 2004 cited in VDS, 2006)¹. In the 2005 Citizenship Survey figures for Wales were amalgamated with those from England, finding that 44% of people in the two countries took part in formal volunteering at least once in the past year (Kitchen et al, 2005).

Volunteering takes place in the third sector², the public sector and the private sector. For the purposes of this report, any volunteer-involving organisation will be referred to as part of ‘the volunteering sector’.

1.2 University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) in the UK

The term ‘Lifelong Learning’ from the UK government’s perspective covers a wide range of learning activities for both children and adults. This national lifelong learning agenda aims to strengthen both the individual citizen’s and the community’s commitment to continuous learning and updating.

¹ The lower figure for Scotland can be partly attributed to the way in which the question was asked in the Scottish Executive’s Household Survey and may not actually reflect lower levels of volunteering.

² The third sector includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals, and housing associations (www.communities.gov.uk).

Within the University sector the term has a more focused definition and is generally taken to indicate flexible, innovative adult education that is usually part-time. This can be divided into three main categories:

- *Continuing Education (CE)*, which generally is non-vocational. Typical subject areas cover art, history, archaeology, languages, literature.
- *Continuing Professional Development (CPD)*, sometimes also known as 'Vocational Lifelong Learning'. These courses can range from generic business and management style provision to more focused profession-based courses.
- *Widening Participation*, which aims to encourage and support people who traditionally would have not considered going to university to study for a degree. Whilst involving some adults returning to education, the main focus of initiatives and activity in the UK tends to support young people aiming to access undergraduate study.

As well as the distinction between CE and CPD, there is a further differentiation that needs to be made when considering UK ULLL. Some participants enrol on CE or CPD courses to pursue their own intellectual or professional interests and gain personal fulfilment – and these are often called non-credit-bearing (NCB) courses – whilst others will wish to accumulate credit towards an academic award.

1.3 The political and legislative context in the UK

1.3.1 Volunteering policy

Volunteering has received a great deal of government support since the Labour Party was elected in 1997 and the government have generally been seen to be supportive of volunteering (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). Government policies around volunteering have tended to concentrate on two main groups of people:

1. People who are considered to be 'at risk of social exclusion' (this includes people with no qualifications, those with disabilities or long-term limiting illnesses, and people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities).
2. Young people. The Russell Commission (2004) led to the set-up of a new independent charity called **v** (www.wearev.com) to take forward youth volunteering amongst people aged 16 – 25 years. One of its key aims is to attract one million more young volunteers.

As well as specific policies, there are two broad government policy areas that have affected volunteering:

1. Civil renewal. This agenda was launched in 2003 to encourage people to get more involved in decision-making processes about their communities (e.g. committees and forums) and enable people to participate in projects which addressed problems they were facing (e.g. antisocial behaviour).
2. Public service delivery. Large numbers of volunteers are now involved in helping to provide public services in the UK, for example, through volunteering in the National Health Service. This has been actively encouraged by government who have listed numerous benefits to involving volunteers, including greater accountability for public services (HM Treasury, 2002).

1.3.2 Lifelong learning policy in the UK

Adult learning in the UK appears to be declining and increasingly being undertaken by a narrower section of society. The Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning has stated that 1.5 million places for adult learners across England have been lost since 2005 (www.callcampaign.org.uk). Similarly, a recent survey by NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) found that 18 per cent of adults were undertaking some sort of learning, having declined from 23 per cent in 2002. It also found that people engaged in learning were far more likely to be from higher socio-economic groups and younger (Tuckett and Aldridge, 2009). Government has, however, rejected the results from NIACE; the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills' National Adult Learner Survey of 2005 showed a higher number of people participating in learning (Snape, Tanner, and Sinclair, 2006).

There are a number of different policy issues affecting lifelong learning. Firstly, many argue that government is prioritising vocational courses that are designed to improve skills for work, such as 'Train to Gain', at the expense of 'leisure' (or 'professional development') courses (Tuckett and Aldridge, 2009; www.callcampaign.org.uk).

Secondly, changes in government policy has meant that it has recently become more costly for an individual to study for a qualification that is at a level 'equivalent to, or at a level lower' (ELQ) to one that they have already achieved. With limited exception the government will no longer fund participation of an individual in such courses if they have an ELQ. This could, for example, include a graduate returning to study at undergraduate degree level. In most cases, the additional cost to the course provider has to be passed on directly to the individual, which can make undertaking an ELQ prohibitively expensive. Study for career change, or even skills updating, may therefore become inaccessible to many people. This has also meant that many university departments who have offered lifelong learning courses will not be able to continue to offer the same volume or same kind of provision in the future.

The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UaLL), with over 100 member institutions, has been campaigning against the ELQ policy. Its Submission to the Select Committee (January 2008) is critical of the government's policy, stating that it *'falls into the trap of addressing up-skilling needs whilst failing to recognise the importance of re-skilling in a dynamic economy'*. It goes on to say that the policy wrongly *'assumes first time learning is sufficient for life'*. UaLL's response specifically cites an example of a volunteer.

There has been a diverse range of responses from UK universities. For example, Sunderland University's Centre for Lifelong Learning has experienced an 80 per cent reduction in its government funding as a result. Subsequently, this university is currently exploring different funding models to continue its provision of lifelong learning through the development of a public subscription and membership model. Other universities are reviewing their portfolio of courses and aiming to achieve a change of balance in their current provision, for example the University of Liverpool. Others have opted to close their Centres for Lifelong Learning.

NIACE is currently hosting an independent 'Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning' in the UK which aims to develop *'an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK'*. It began in 2007 and will report back in summer 2009.

1.4 The volunteering – university interaction in the UK

There is little research that explores the volunteer perspective on ULLL. Many of the positive impacts of volunteering can, however, relate to this area. Large numbers of volunteers, for example, report that a benefit of their volunteering is learning new skills (61 per cent). Similarly, volunteers also list benefits as improving their employment prospects (24 per cent) or gaining a recognised qualification (14 per cent) (Low et al, 2007). Volunteer-involving organisations also seem to recognise the experiences and achievements that can be gained through volunteering. Over three-quarters of organisations responding to a major national survey, for example, said that they provided ways of recognising and rewarding their volunteers. This commonly included long service awards or certificates (Machin and Ellis Paine, 2008).

Research by the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Liverpool provides information on the university perspective. It found that 23 of the UK's 128 universities offer some form of academic accreditation for the employees and/or volunteers of voluntary sector organisations. The majority (18) are in England. The accreditation varies from full awards to stand-alone modules. Across the 23 universities, 28 full awards were offered, of which only two do not carry academic credit. The majority of awards are either at EQF Level 4 (first year of undergraduate study) or Masters, with few full undergraduate degrees being available. There appears to be involvement of the voluntary sector in the design of some of these awards, with eight universities developing modules with

their input and a few more requiring voluntary work as part of their course (Stewart and Hughes, 2007). Whether a university department develops an interaction between ULLL and volunteering may often be highly dependent on the personal interests of individual staff members within the university. This reflects the UK university structure, whereby universities tend to have considerable autonomy in working with and implementing national policy.

The implications of these findings are that ULLL providers in working with their volunteering sector partners need to ask:

- Are there sufficient opportunities for voluntary work-based learning in these awards / short courses? Despite a variety of assessment formats, many universities still stress traditional essays / assignments as the form of assessment.
- Is this a sufficient bridge between the world of work / volunteering and the world of academia, for example the use of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)? (see section 3.1)
- Do people want full awards or stand-alone modules to build up credit into an award?
- Is there a sufficient match between skills and knowledge being developed by volunteers and University curricula?

In the context of the recent policy developments described in section 1.3.2, however, universities providing ULLL may face difficulties in continuing with such provision. The government focus on the acquisition of vocational skills through learning may not fully match the learning that can be gained through volunteering; volunteering and ULLL can often have a greater focus on informality and can be based on an individual's enjoyment of the process of learning rather than a specific career path or vocation. Furthermore, the costs of a volunteer undertaking a ULLL course will often either be met by the volunteer themselves or by the organisation. In the current economic climate in which individuals and organisations may be less inclined to spend money on training and learning, this may result in fewer volunteers linking with ULLL.

2. Good practice examples and effectiveness of the interaction

2.1 Successes and challenges

ULLL complements volunteering in many ways. It can introduce volunteers to the concept of learning and provide new opportunities for them. Interacting with a university may help them in their volunteering role, by providing them with new knowledge, for example. It can also bring together volunteers from different backgrounds who may not otherwise have met one another. Examples have also

shown that it can be highly beneficial for volunteers to attend classes with non volunteers, allowing them to appreciate their volunteering role in a wider context.

A key challenge is that a successful partnership between a university and a volunteer-involving organisation is often dependent on the organisation to facilitate or organise the volunteer's involvement, something that may be out of the control of the university. Key to this is the development of a good working relationship and a shared understanding of goals, aims and objectives. A further challenge may be that people who have not previously engaged in academic learning may find it intimidating and inaccessible.

2.2 Good practice examples and principles

2.2.1 Examples of good practice

(a) The National Trust and the University of Liverpool

The National Trust is an independent charity with approximately 3.5 million members and 52,000 volunteers throughout England and Wales. It protects and opens to the public over 300 historic houses and gardens. The University of Liverpool is working with a local National Trust property called Speke Hall to provide ULLL opportunities for the National Trust volunteers, including:

- Lectures by staff from the University to the volunteers on topics including the history of the Hall or the development of the National Trust. Volunteers have found that this has allowed them to perform their role more effectively, for example when answering questions from the public.
- Short courses that are available to the public and volunteers (for a reduced cost). These explore the history, art, architecture and literature of the property.
- An accreditation award (Personal and Professional Development Certificate). This allows volunteers to reflect on their learning experience.

(b) The National Trust and the University of Sunderland

Over the past few years, the University has offered an accredited course for volunteers from local National Trust properties. The first core module is based on the volunteers' practical volunteering, allowing them to reflect on their experience. This includes writing a journal describing what they have learnt. Volunteers also carry out research and give a short presentation on the history of the National Trust site at which they volunteer. The second core module encourages volunteers to visit a number of different National Trust properties – they are asked to compare and contrast different properties and their audiences as part of their assessment.

Each student has a course tutor. The programme has resulted in:

- Volunteers developing their knowledge about the site.
- Improved volunteer management as a result of better communication between volunteers and staff within the National Trust.

- Volunteers developing new ways to engage with visitors to the sites and to provide them with information.

(c) The Faith Community Development qualification

In 2007/08 NIACE was funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to develop and pilot a qualification for faith leaders, workers and volunteers. It aimed to develop the communication, representation, safeguarding and other skills of faith leaders, workers and volunteers so that they could operate more effectively and confidently within their own communities. The work is now complete and the new Faith Community Development qualification has been developed.

The demand for such a qualification from the volunteering sector highlights the opportunities for ULLL providers

2.2.2 Principles of good practice

These case studies and other work have highlighted the following areas of good practice in the development of ULLL and volunteering interaction:

- Ensuring that the volunteering organisation and the university both have an agreed set of aims and objectives, and have a common understanding of what they would like to achieve and how;
- Flexibility in accreditation programmes, that take into account the unique role and experiences of volunteers;
- Opportunities for volunteers to reflect on their experience and the learning they have gained;
- Focus on the individual learning needs and motivations of volunteers and a requirement to develop programmes and accreditation from this foundation (i.e. fitting the task to the volunteer, not vice versa);
- Do not assume that academics from universities can provide all the answers to volunteers, or are in some way better. Interactions between ULLL and volunteers should be based on genuine and equal partnerships.

3. Barriers and opportunities for future development

3.1 Barriers

In the current policy context the lack of government funding for ULLL seems to be the biggest single barrier. If universities do not develop alternative funding models, as Sunderland University is currently aiming to do, it appears that departments will either have to pass the increased costs on to their students, or simply stop providing the same number of courses.

There are also a number of programme-specific barriers. One is how to ensure that the non-formal learning that is gained through volunteering can be reconciled with a university's requirement for formal academic quality assurance. Similarly, being able to provide satisfactory, flexible and appropriate tutorial support to volunteers that is appropriate to their circumstances is a further challenge. In addressing this issue, much work has been done in the ULLL sector over recent years in the field of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), whereby learning gained through practical work (or volunteering) experience can gain academic accreditation. SEEC (South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer), a university and colleges consortium, has, for example, produced a number of resources for implementing APEL in universities.

Some in the ULLL sector feel that universities may now have less freedom in the development of their courses. Increasingly, certain sources of funding have specific requirements attached to them (e.g. for certain age groups or target locations), or universities can be required to develop educational outcomes in shorter timescales (while much work with the volunteering sector takes considerable time to develop effectively). Also, some universities may increasingly be pressured to focus on research at the expense of their work with the wider community (including the volunteering sector); flexible part-time courses can remain unattractive to some universities; and many universities may be becoming more business-orientated.

A further challenge may be associated with definitions of volunteering. David Tross of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at Birkbeck University in London raises a concern that current understandings of volunteering may often exclude that which takes place at the grassroots or very informal level (e.g. active citizens or campaigning). These individuals may, therefore, currently feel excluded from engaging in ULLL.

3.2 Opportunities

There seems to be a consensus that ULLL and volunteering can complement one another well and that there are a great many opportunities for volunteers to engage with the university model. Within the volunteering sector there is also a growing recognition of the need to recognise and accredit the skills and learning that volunteers can gain as part of their experience. ULLL can help do this in many cases, allowing volunteers to engage with a natural next step in their learning. This may, for example, help link volunteering to employability which is increasingly of interest to policy makers and organisations in the current economic climate. And it enables volunteers and the organisations they are working with to value the learning and personal development that they are achieving in their community / civic work as a volunteer.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Initial conclusions and summary

ULLL remains a popular significant activity within the UK and there are many examples of innovative, successful and creative interactions with volunteering. The benefits to the volunteers, the organisations with which they are working, and to the universities, can be considerable. Both sectors have much to offer each other.

ULLL, however, currently faces an uncertain future in many cases due to government funding cuts for ELQs. This may have a major impact on the link between ULLL and volunteering and could act to limit participation in ULLL to those volunteers fortunate enough to have their study funded by their organisation or to those who are financially well-off; neither outcome is beneficial to the sector. This is compounded by the current governmental focus on vocational and skills-based courses, which do not represent the full opportunities afforded to the community through ULLL.

4.2 Recommendations

This short report makes the following broad recommendations, for both the volunteering sector and ULLL centres:

1. The desires and motivations of individual volunteers should be listened to and acted upon, by both the volunteering sector and by ULLL centres. The benefits of participation to the individual volunteer, as well as to the organisation and the wider community, should be recognised and valued. Not all volunteers will wish to engage in ULLL or accredit their experience, however. Opportunities to take part in ULLL should therefore be made available to volunteers where appropriate, but should not become mandatory.
2. The volunteering sector and ULLL centres should proactively engage with each other. While many ULLL centres recognise that volunteering can often be a rich learning experience through which an individual can gain high level skills and knowledge worthy of university accreditation, many ULLL centres have not yet fully taken up these opportunities. Similarly, there are many volunteer-involving organisations who have not fully appreciated the potential value of accrediting experiences gained by through volunteering.
3. ULLL centres need to look to develop alternative and creative funding models, so that the impacts of government funding cuts will have a minimal effect on volunteers taking part in courses. ULLL would benefit from exploring new markets and developing new partnerships with other sectors to ensure continuing access to ULLL for the community. The sector would greatly benefit from those universities that develop successful models sharing their experience.

4. Any work in this area needs to recognise the value of volunteering in small, volunteer-led and grassroots organisations, where individuals may currently feel excluded from the opportunities to engage in ULLL.
5. Where a partnership between ULLL and a volunteer-involving organisation is developed, it is necessary to develop a good working relationship, that is based on a shared understanding of goals and aims, and that recognises the differences between university and volunteering sector approaches and systems of work.
6. Successful examples of ULLL and volunteering sector interaction should be shared throughout both sectors, as examples of good practice.

5. Further information

5.1 Bibliography and references

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5.2 Further resources

5.2.1 Websites

University of Sunderland (www.cll.sunderland.ac.uk/Home.aspx)

University of Liverpool (www.liv.ac.uk/cll/)

National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning (CALL) (www.callcampaign.org.uk)

Continuing Professional Development for Faith Leaders, Workers and Volunteers (<http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/leadwithfaith/public/>)

UaLL (www.uall.ac.uk/)

SEEC (www.seec.org.uk/)

5.2.2 Glossary

Volunteering

An activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives (Volunteering Compact Code of Good Practice).

Formal volunteering	Volunteering that takes place through a group, club or organisation.
Informal volunteering	Volunteering that takes place independently of a group, club or organisation.
Volunteer-involving organisation	An organisation (in the public, private, or third sector) that involves, supports or works with volunteers.
Voluntary sector	This is also called the 'third sector' or the 'voluntary and community sector'. It includes voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals and includes housing associations.
Volunteering sector	A collective term for all volunteer-involving organisations and their volunteers. This can encompass the public, private and third sectors.

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