



**Assessing Voluntary Experience in a professional
perspective
First Report - United Kingdom**



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Glossary of terms

ACD	Active Communities Directorate
AQA	Assessment Qualifications Alliance
ASDAN	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
CSV	Community Service Volunteers
CVS	Councils for Voluntary Service
EV	Employee Volunteering
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HOCS	Home Office Citizenship Survey
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NIACE	National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education
NOCN	National Open College Network
MV	Millennium Volunteers
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RSA	Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
S/NVQ	Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications
VBx	Volunteer Bureaux
VE	Volunteering England

1. An Introduction to Volunteering Infrastructure in the United Kingdom

Introduction

In the UK there has been a long history and tradition of volunteering. Recent years have seen the UK Government's support for volunteering demonstrated via a range of initiatives and substantial financial support for volunteering, of which a large proportion has been directed at strengthening the volunteering infrastructure.

Volunteering has been seen as a way to bring different people together and provide opportunities for individuals to develop existing skills or learn new ones; volunteering has also been recognised as a key way in helping to deliver services within communities. Expectations of volunteering are high; a number of Home Office Ministers have described it as "The essential act of citizenship," for example, see Michael (1998). In fact, all the main political parties in the UK have been keen to voice their support for volunteering.

This report is structured in four parts; the first outlines how volunteering is organised, promoted and supported in England; the second highlights key statistics and trends in UK volunteering; and the third section presents a review of literature on accreditation for volunteering and outlines existing tools and methods used to assess voluntary experience and gives some examples of best practice. The final section raises questions for further research.

The Volunteering infrastructure

The UK has until recently had a relatively complex volunteering infrastructure. There are a wide range of organisations and umbrella bodies, which can be split into two broad groups – those supporting volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations, these can work at the local and national level and those supporting voluntary organisations, which also operate nationally and locally. Organisations that involve volunteers may be voluntary organisations, but some voluntary organisations do not involve volunteers: there are also organisations' that involve volunteers, but are not voluntary organisations, such as schools and hospitals.

National Government support for volunteering

The government provides valuable financial support to a range of organisations, with Ministerial responsibility for volunteering is located in the Active Communities Directorate (ACD) of the Home Office.

The brief of volunteering falls within the ACD, its vision is:

'of a society where the voluntary and community activity flourishes and where all individuals and communities are enabled to play a full part in civil society. We want to ensure that the support, assistance and means exist to enable that vision to become reality.'

And it aims:

'To support strong and active communities in which people of all races and backgrounds are valued and participate on equal terms by developing social policy to build a fair, prosperous and cohesive society in which everyone has a stake and to ensure that active citizenship contributes to the enhancement of democracy and the development of civil society.'

The majority of Government funding for volunteer involving organisations is provided by the ACU, and it is responsible for the achievement of the Government's target of increasing voluntary and community sector activity, including increasing community participation, by five per cent by 2006.

The work of the unit is divided into three strands:

Service Delivery, including policy co-ordination, liaising with other Government departments and with the main voluntary and community sector umbrella bodies; development and implementation of the Compact; and removing barriers - funding and procurement issues.

Community Participation, including increasing diversity in community participation; managing the mentoring programme; developing policy on corporate community involvement; and raising awareness of community involvement through the media;

taking forward other initiatives to encourage and facilitate involvement by individuals in volunteering and less formal kinds of community engagement

Sector Development, including developing and sustaining more effective and efficient sector support structures and programmes; and building capacity in community organisations.

Volunteering England

Volunteering England (VE) comes into being on 1 April 2004. It will be an independent voluntary agency committed to excellence in volunteering. It brings together The National Centre for Volunteering (NCV) the lead national membership agency promoting and supporting volunteering, Volunteer Development England (VDE) the membership organisation of the volunteer bureaux network and the Consortium on Opportunities for Volunteering (COV) a grant making organisation that aims to tackle health inequalities by supporting local projects that involve volunteers in the delivery of health and social care services).

Volunteering England will work as the new, integrated national volunteer development agency for England. NCV, COV and VDE will cease to exist as individual entities. It will work not only at national level, but also regionally and locally and it's work links research, policy, innovation, good practice and grant making in the involvement of volunteers. It receives some financial support from the ACU.

The mission of VE is to promote volunteering via events such as national Volunteer Week, both for those who already volunteer and to promote volunteering to the wider community. It recognises that the term volunteering can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation.

The aims of VE are to:

'Secure and support an England-wide network of quality volunteer development agencies, promoting and enabling volunteering and community involvement; undertake research, policy and

development activity and provide grants, support and advice to sustain and develop volunteering.'

Volunteer Bureaux

Volunteering at the local level is mainly supported and promoted by volunteer bureaux (VBx). Some are independent agencies and others are part of voluntary sector agencies such as Voluntary Action Councils or Councils for Voluntary Service; such agencies promote and develop the effectiveness of voluntary action by providing a range of basic facilities such as meeting rooms, photocopiers, computer equipment, community accountancy and employment advice. Their members may also receive funding advice, newsletters, training courses and other specialist services.

Historically, VBx were places where people could go for information and advice about volunteering opportunities in their area, and perhaps be referred as a volunteer to a specific organisation or group. VBx are very diverse and can be found in urban and rural areas, some employ paid staff, while others are run solely by volunteers. Over the last few years the role of VBx has changed, most do more than just provide information about volunteering opportunities. Each VB has six core functions through which it provides support for individual volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. The ways in which that support is provided by each VB depend on the composition and needs of the local community. They have six core functions, which are:

- Developing volunteering
- Promoting volunteering
- Brokerage
- Enabling participation in volunteering
- Providing information, training and research into volunteering
- Commenting and campaigning on volunteering

Other organisations involved in the advancement of volunteering

As well as organisations that support organisations at a strategic level there are a number of initiatives and organisations which work to promote volunteering on a

national level, beyond that of a grassroots organisations or individual volunteer involving organisation, these include:

Cares

This is an initiative of Business in the Community, it is the main business led employee-volunteering programme in the UK, it operates as a national partnership and operates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Community Service Volunteers (CSV)

CSV offers hundreds of volunteering opportunities, and is the largest provider of employee volunteers; it is also one of the major deliverers of the Governments Millennium Volunteers programme.

Do-it.org.uk

'Do-it' is the UK's first virtual charity, it publicises volunteering opportunities via a central online database, which can be accessed by any one at any time, it matches would-be volunteers to available opportunities in their local area.

Experience Corps (EC)

EC was established in March 2001 to promote ways of recruiting volunteers in the 50-65 age group. The future of EC after this time is uncertain, as the ACU will no longer continue to provide financial support.

TimeBank

TimeBank was launched in February 2000 to raise the awareness of the value of giving time and inspire a new generation of volunteers. It works in partnership with a range of organisations to help them innovate and to spread good volunteering practice.

2. Statistics on Volunteering in the UK

The last in-depth survey undertaken explicitly on volunteering in the UK was the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis Smith, 1998). It represents the third in a series undertaken in 1981 and 1991. The aim of the National Surveys is to provide a picture of the extent and nature of volunteering in the UK and to track trends in volunteering.

The most up-to-date statistics on volunteering have been asked in the Home Office Citizenship Survey, (HOCS) (Atwood, Singh, Prime, Creasey et al (2003). This survey asked a wide range of questions to do with citizenship, including several on volunteering. On a methodological note, not all of the definitions used in the HOCS survey are directly comparable with the previous National Surveys and it does not go into as much detail. The following section reports the findings of the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering¹ and data from the HOCS².

How Much Volunteering is undertaken?

Both the National Surveys and the HOCS, (see Table 1), suggests that there has been a slight decline in both formal and informal volunteering since 1981. The proportion of the adult population engaged in formal voluntary work rose from 44 per cent in 1981 and peaking in 1991 to 51 per cent and 48 per cent in 1997. HOCS noted a further fall to 39 per cent in 2001, but as noted above this may be explainable due to the methodological differences. Informal volunteering saw a similar trend with growth from 62 per cent in 1981 to 76 per cent in 1991, falling to 67 per cent in 2001.

¹ Definition of volunteering used was, namely: 'any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to, close relatives, or to benefit the environment'.

²HOCS defines voluntary and community activity in the following ways; *Civic participation*, engaging in at least one of a range of nine activities which included signing a petition; contacting a public official working for a local council, regional authority, central government, attending a public meeting or rally; or taking part in a public demonstration or protest. *Social participation*, being involved in groups, clubs or organisations, for example, being a member, attending meetings or events, playing in a team. *Informal volunteering*, giving unpaid help as an individual to others who are not members of the family. *Formal volunteering*, giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment (e.g., the protection of wildlife or the improvement of public open spaces). It has roots in social participation but involves a greater commitment.

Table 1: The percentage of those involved in formal and informal volunteering between, 1981 and 2001*

	1981	1991	1997	2001*
Proportion undertaking formal voluntary activity in past 12 months	44	51	48	39
Proportion undertaking informal voluntary activity in past 12 months	62	76	74	67

*Data may not necessarily be directly comparable with 1981 –1997 figures.

The decline in numbers between 1991 and 1997 was offset by a rise in hours spent volunteering. Those engaged in volunteering in 1997 were found to be putting more time into their activities, up from an average of 2.7 hours per week in 1991 to 4.05 hours in 1997. Despite the loss of perhaps one million volunteers over a six year period (down from 23 to 22 million), there was a marked increase in the number of hours volunteered, up from 62 million hours of formal volunteering in 1991 to 88 million hours in 1997. The HOCS data reflects this upward trend in the rising number of hours spent on formal and informal volunteering. During 2001 on average 1.7 billion hours of formal volunteering were undertaken and to 1.8 billion hours of informal volunteering.

Who Volunteers?

Studies of volunteering have found that certain types of people were more likely to volunteer than others, data from 1997 Survey was no different. A strong correlation was found between participation and socio-economic group, with those from the highest groups almost twice as likely to take part in a formal voluntary activity as those from the lowest groups. The HOCS echoed these findings, it found that those who had the highest levels of education, the highest levels of household income and were in employment, were more likely to be involved in all types of voluntary and community activity. HOCS estimated that around three-quarters of those in higher management occupations and lower professional occupations participated in informal volunteering or social participation.

Does volunteering differ between the sexes?

Men and women were reported to be equally as likely to volunteer (at 48 per cent) according to the 1997 National Survey. HOCS also reported equal numbers of men

and women involved in formal (39 percent) and informal volunteering (68 per cent). Slightly more men were involved in forms of social and civic participation.

Are people of particular age groups more involved in volunteering than others?

As can be seen in Table 2 the 1997 National Survey confirmed that volunteering tends to peak in middle age and tail off after retirement. However, two marked trends were identified after 1991; an increase in participation by those in the third age and a sharp decline in involvement by young people, with the rate for the 18-24s down from 55 per cent to 43 per cent. Not only were fewer young people volunteering in 1997 than in the previous six years, but the amount of time given was also sharply down, from an average per week of 2.7 hours in 1991, to an average of just 0.7 hours in 1997. HOCS did not provide estimates of time volunteered by age breakdown.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents volunteering by Age, 1981-1997

	18-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65-74 years	75+ years
1997	43	52	52	57	40	45	35
1991	55	60	63	60	46	34	25
1981	42	52	60	48	33	29	-

Source: The Institute for Volunteering Research

The HOCS data, (shown in Table 3) found that those aged between 16 and 49 were more likely to be involved in informal volunteering. The highest concentration of those involved in formal volunteering were aged between 35-49. Those above the age of 75 were less likely to participate in informal or formal volunteering.

Table 3 Percentage of respondents involved in voluntary activities at least once in the last twelve months, by age.

	All	16-24 years	25-34 years	35-49 years	50-64 years	65-74 years	75+ years
Informal volunteering	67	73	72	72	64	61	46
Formal volunteering	39	40	37	44	40	37	26

Source: Home Office, HOCS (2003)

What activities do volunteers undertake?

The main areas of volunteering identified in the 1997 National Survey of volunteering were sports, education, religion and health and social welfare. The main types of activities undertaken were found to be fundraising, organising events, committee work and transportation, with a big increase in committee activity since 1991. In 1997 the majority of volunteers (84 per cent) were active within the voluntary sector, with 24 per cent involved in the public sector and 13 per cent in the private sector. Of the voluntary sector activity, the overwhelming majority (69 per cent) was carried out in local, independent groups.

For those who responded to the HOCS the main areas of formal volunteering undertaken were in sports/exercise, children's education/ schools and hobbies/recreation/ arts and social clubs. The main activities those in formal volunteering were involved in were raising or handling money, organising or helping to run an activity or event. The most popular activity cited by those who undertook informal volunteering was giving advice to someone or looking after a property or pet while someone was away.

Who Does What?

Both the 1997 National Survey and HOCS found that women were more likely to be found volunteering in schools and social welfare and men more active in sports related volunteering. Whilst men were found to be more active on committees in 1997, HOCS suggests that men and women are almost as likely to be found volunteering on a committee. Women were more active in fundraising activities in 1997, however HOCS suggests only slightly more women than men were involved in these activities in 2001. For both the National Surveys and HOCS young people were particularly likely to be active in the field of sport.

Volunteer Motivations

In 1997 only two per cent of respondents had had contact with a Volunteer Bureaux before volunteering. Motives to volunteer were found to be a mix of altruistic and self-interested, including the meeting of one's own needs and those of family and friends, responding to a need in the community, and learning new skills. Older people were more likely to stress free time as a motivating factor, while younger respondents

emphasised the learning of new skills. Young people are apparently less altruistic, with only 10 per cent of 18-24 year olds citing a need in the community as a factor behind the decision to volunteer, compared with 26 per cent of respondents overall. In contrast 28 per cent of young people claimed to be motivated by the desire to learn new skills, compared to 15 per cent overall.

Being asked remained a key route into volunteering, this was found in the National Surveys and HOCS. HOCS also found that institutions such as schools, colleges and universities; places of worship; and places of work were key places to learn about volunteering opportunities. Black and Asian people were three times as likely as white people to refer to recruitment via places of worship.

Attitudes towards volunteering

Attitudes towards volunteering and its place in society were explored in the 1997 Survey. On the whole there was a favourable attitude. Nine out of ten respondents agreed with the notion that a society with volunteers is a caring society; with seven out of ten feeling that volunteers offer something that the state cannot provide. However, a minority (sometimes a quite sizeable one) were less positive. For example, four out of ten felt that if the government fulfilled all its responsibilities there would be no need for volunteers; a third felt that receiving a volunteer service makes you feel dependent; with one in eight feeling that volunteers are less efficient than paid staff. On the role of government eight out of ten supported a government campaign to encourage unemployed people to volunteer in return for their benefit; seven out of ten supported a campaign to encourage young people to volunteer; with a similar figure in favour of government funding of a period of national community service for young people. Interestingly young people were the least likely to support a campaign to encourage them to volunteer, although a large majority of two thirds were in favour.

The key personal benefits from volunteering reported in the 1997 National Survey were: the enjoyment of the activity; the satisfaction of seeing results; meeting people; and a sense of personal achievement. Young people were more likely to cite instrumental benefits, the opportunity to learn new skills; to get a qualification; and to achieve a position in the community. As reported in the 1991 Survey the main

drawback was identified as poor organisation, with 71 per cent saying their volunteering could be better organised. Other criticisms, voiced by about a quarter of volunteers, were that they sometimes got bored with what they were asked to do; that they couldn't always cope with the tasks they were given; that their volunteering takes up too much time; that they do not get appreciation from their organisation; and that they find themselves out-of-pocket. Since 1991 volunteers had grown more critical of the time volunteering takes up (not surprising, given the big increase in hours volunteered), but less critical of being out-of-pocket (this is due to the rise in payment of expenses).

Reasons for Stopping or Not Getting Involved

Those who had given up their volunteering were asked why this was. A third said it was no longer relevant and 19 per cent that they had moved away from the area. Other reasons included: that it was getting too much for them and that they couldn't spare the time.

The 1997 National Survey asked those not currently volunteering if they would like to get involved. Thirty seven per cent said yes, 20 per cent said no due to lack of time, and 12 per cent said no for other reasons. Those not involved were asked why not. The key reasons given were: no time; don't know any other volunteers; and don't have the necessary skills and experience. Those who had expressed an interest in volunteering were asked what would make it easier for them to get involved. Key encouragements noted were: being asked; if someone helped me get started; if family or friends were involved too; if I knew it would improve my skills; if I could do it from home; and if it led to a qualification.

HOCS also explored the incentives to greater participation. The main incentives to those who currently were involved less than once a month but would like to get more involved in informal volunteering said that knowing someone in need of help (59 per cent) and being asked directly to get involved (52 per cent) would work as an incentive. Those who expressed that that had never been involved, who had been involved more than 12 months previously or who were currently involved but less frequently than once a month who indicated they would like to spend more time in formal volunteering. The main incentives were identified as; being asked directly (44

per cent), getting involved with friends or family (40 per cent) and knowing someone who was already involved (32 per cent).

Employer-Supported Volunteering

The 1997 National Survey found that of those respondents in paid work or who had retired 16 per cent said their employer had supported volunteering. Of these one third had taken part in a voluntary activity through the workplace in the past year. Of those who had retired from jobs where support for volunteering was not offered, 40 per cent said they would have been interested if it had been available. Those who had not taken up the opportunity to participate in an employer's scheme were asked what would make them more likely to get involved. The key factors were: time off work; knowing that the activity would benefit their career; learning new skills; volunteering as part of a group; and more information about available opportunities.

The HOCS found that 18 per cent of employees (excluding those who were self-employed) worked for employers which supported schemes for employee volunteering, and seven per cent (four per cent of people overall) volunteered at least once through these schemes.

3. Assessing Voluntary Experiences in the UK

This section presents some background to the assessment of voluntary experience in the UK based on a literature review and Internet research. We then outline the ways in which voluntary experiences are currently assessed, developing a framework of accreditation as a tool for understanding the debates around recognition and accreditation of volunteering. Some examples of qualifications and certificates that can be earned by volunteers are outlined in an appendix.

Volunteering has long been recognised as a way to gain skills and experience that will be useful for volunteers in the workplace and help them in finding employment. Recent trends in the UK have been towards formalising this implicit system of recognition for volunteering by introducing accreditation for voluntary activities. Accreditation can be defined as the formal recognition of the achievements of an individual linked to some internal or external standard (National Centre for Volunteering, 2003).

Background to Accreditation

Vocational qualifications have been championed over the past 20 years as a part of the solution to a general skills shortage in the UK labour market and consequent poor economic performance. In 1986 the Government White Paper, *Working Together: Education and Training* recognised that Britain's competitors invested heavily in training, concluding 'our vocational education and training system is not – and never was – the envy of the world, but we must make it so' (DfE, 1986). Accreditation for volunteering is part of a more general move away from recognising solely academic achievements towards assessing vocational skills.

Accreditation for volunteering needs to be placed in the context of lifelong learning, which has been promoted as an antidote to the:

*'radical shifts in the organisation of industry and labour markets
[and] rapid changes in occupations and the demand for skills'*
(Fryer, 1997).

In view of these long-term economic changes, it has become accepted that individual learning careers need to extend well beyond the traditional period of compulsory

education (Robertson, 1995). This is reflected in government rhetoric of ‘the learning society’ ‘up-skilling’ and ‘lifelong learning’.

In the 1990s individuals’ learning needs were becoming explicitly linked to the needs of the economy (Ecclestone, 1993). The Government’s commitment to improve and extend participation in education and training, particularly by adults, resulted in the creation of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) (NIACE, 1990). The introduction of Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications (S/NVQs) - which recognise competence relevant to work and the assessment of prior learning - had a major impact on education and training in the UK (Cox, 2002). Accreditation for vocational skills offered the recognition of a wider range of learning acquired in many different ways and was thus seen as a more flexible and accessible route (NIACE, 1990). It has been argued that education before the advent of lifelong learning and S/NVQs was marked by a ‘learning snobbery’, which largely restricted educational opportunities to those with previous experience of learning, left ‘a large reservoir of unrecognised and unaccredited skills’ (Euclid, 1996).

In 1990 the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) noted that the relevance and usefulness of accreditation for formal education and training could apply equally, if not more, to volunteers. In 1993 the then Secretary of State for Employment, David Hunt, proclaimed his support for accreditation for unpaid work, sparking concern about ‘Diplomas for Dishwashing’ (Tiernan, 1995). Nevertheless, the need to meet national targets for vocational qualifications brought volunteering into the spotlight as an alternative way for people to earn such qualifications. This was in line with the Governments’ widening participation agenda, providing opportunities for people not working due to unemployment, disability or care responsibilities to gain the vocational qualifications demanded in the workplace.

Learning is crucial in local area regeneration and in combating social exclusion and volunteering is thus advocated as an egalitarian measure providing opportunities for people with few or no formal qualifications to re-skill, get back into employment or access further education (RSA, 2001). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Henderson and Mayo, 1998) outlined a model of individual personal development through participation in grass roots community and voluntary work:

‘Individuals can move on from their initial involvement, building upon their knowledge and skills to take up further education and training as well as paid employment.’

A more recent development is that as employers increasingly find employee volunteering is delivering real Human Resources benefits, several are choosing to offer accreditation to staff undertaking employee volunteering. This is a way of providing explicit evidence of staff development through employee volunteering within a rigorous framework of assessment. As such it is more transferable and likely to have more long-term benefit on an employee’s career progression. For companies it is a cost-effective form of development that goes beyond training (National Centre for Volunteering, 2003).

A number of other perceived benefits to accreditation for volunteering have been identified in the literature. For volunteer involving organisations, offering accreditation may make volunteer recruitment and retention easier and lead to volunteers who are more effective and skilled (National Centre for Volunteering, 2003). Project 2001 - an action research project on learning and accreditation in the voluntary sector - reported that organisations had ‘a genuine wish to enhance the experience of volunteers and to demonstrate that the organisation values them’ (RSA, 2001). NIACE (1990) summed up the benefits of formal accreditation for volunteering thus:

- Confirming the status and value of unpaid work alongside paid work
- Recognising the quality of service and training in organisations
- Gives individual volunteers access to opportunities for progression and growth
- Raising self esteem and motivation of volunteers
- Currency in the job market

Routes to Assessment of Voluntary Experience

Qualifications and awards rewarding voluntary experiences range from in-house certificates given by individual organisations and judged on internal criteria to those awarded by nationally recognised awarding bodies who make assessment in line with

external standards. Changes over the past fifteen years, such as the introduction of the S/NVQ framework and the development of the National Open College Network (NOCN), have provided new impetus for community and voluntary organisations to provide staff and volunteers with routes to accreditation (RSA, 2001). There are a number of different routes that volunteers looking for accreditation can pursue, depending on their motivations and needs. Our initial research has identified three broad criteria on which voluntary experiences are currently assessed. These are:

- Time (assessing the number of hours the volunteer has put in)
- Vocational Competence (assessing vocational skills gained through taking part in voluntary activities)
- Volunteer Competence (assessing skills and understanding specific to volunteering, e.g. soft skills, health and safety, understanding of the voluntary sector etc.)

The standards by which the achievements of an individual are assessed ranges from internal to external. Three broad clusters on this continuum can be identified:

- Internal / in-house - individual organisations issuing their own certificates and awards in line with internal standards. The organisations can range from small local charities to large national organisations.
- Umbrella - individual organisations issuing their own certificates and awards in line with criteria approved by some regional or national umbrella body or organisation.
- External - qualifications awarded by a nationally recognised awarding body that sets the criteria or Higher Education Institute (HEI). There are a number of awarding bodies, regulated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), that award vocational qualifications that can be gained through volunteering, the key ones being:
 - ASDAN - Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
 - AQA - Assessment Qualifications Alliance

- Btec (Edexcel)
- City and Guilds of London Institute
- NOCN – National Open College Network

Qualifications may be gained by volunteering at a range of local and national organisations; taking part in a gap year or employee volunteering scheme; through courses run by colleges and universities; or undertaken through distance learning.

Examples of schemes using these different routes are given in the appendix.

Which accreditation scheme?

Accreditation for volunteering is still in relatively early stages of development in the UK. Despite the recent explosion of a number of innovative accreditation schemes at a variety of different levels, there remain a number of barriers to having voluntary experience assessed. Moreover, little research has been done on the impacts of these awards or the way in which employers perceive them.

In addition to support for S/NVQs, direct Government promotion of the accreditation of voluntary experience has so far mostly taken the form of awards such as their flagship volunteering programme for young people, Millennium Volunteers (MV), which counts hours people spend volunteering. Questions over the validity of ‘time’ as a criterion for assessment are discussed below.

A research report looking at Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications and volunteers, managed by Wales Council for Voluntary Action (Spinks, 1997) highlights the need for organisations to be clear about what the aims and objectives of promoting access to accredited qualifications for volunteers are. Is it about service standards, improved training, a qualified workforce, or better recognition for volunteers? The answers to these questions should inform the type of accreditation chosen by organisations.

With all accreditation schemes there are associated costs. An external scheme has greater credibility and increased transferability, but is likely to have higher developmental and implementation costs than an internal programme (NIACE, 1990).

Internal schemes have lower start up costs but the assessment system may lack rigour. Indeed, increasing numbers of individual organisations, including student unions and small charities as well as umbrella organisations like Volunteer Bureaux and Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) are following the Government's lead and introducing awards that recognise the time volunteers have committed. If, as can be argued, the assessment of voluntary experience refers to more than merely rewarding a volunteer for giving up their time, there is some debate over how far 'time' qualifies as a criterion. It is included in this typology because of the numerous examples of awards for volunteers that count hours. Such certificates reward the time donated to charities and implicitly recognise the skills an individual is assumed to have gained from volunteering. However, they cannot be used as indicators of the quality of the service provided by an organisation, something NIACE identifies as a major benefit of the accreditation process. In light of the barriers identified below to accrediting volunteers through formal structures of NOCN or S/NVQs, it should not be surprising that smaller organisations in particular see 'time' as relatively easy criterion to assess.

Barriers to accreditation for volunteering

Much of the literature focuses on the problems of implementing accreditation schemes in the voluntary sector, especially for small volunteer involving organisations. Spinks (1997) found that the numbers achieving S/NVQs as a proportion of the total estimated population of volunteers was tiny and that there were significant barriers that deter both volunteers and voluntary organisations from seeking S/NVQs. Furthermore while Project 2001 concludes that 'the voluntary sector is uniquely positioned to offer learning opportunities to millions of people', they go on to note that very few people are able to formalise these learning opportunities by obtaining qualifications or receiving recognition (RSA, 2001).

High costs mean that it is only larger, well-resourced organisations that are able to design bespoke, externally accredited programmes for volunteers, such as the growing numbers of private sector companies that are commissioning awarding bodies to develop qualifications for their employee volunteers. Small voluntary organisations may not have the human resources to provide internal assessment nor the financial resources to buy in assessors and thus face great barriers (RSA, 2001). Project 2001 found that where an organisation was able to train its own assessors, or had access to

a voluntary sector assessment centre the S/NVQ route was the most popular. They noted that, for both S/NVQs and Open College Network qualifications, that compared to the diversity of the voluntary sector, there was a limited range of subjects currently available (RSA, 2001). NIACE advises that, by working in partnership, smaller voluntary organisations might be able to ask awarding bodies to develop qualifications to suit shared needs (NIACE, 1990). Project 2001 identified four key organisational barriers to training and accreditation:

- Lack of access to unbiased information and advice
- Lack of expertise in identifying training needs and planning for training
- Lack of financial and other resources
- Lack of recognition for the voluntary sector as a context for learning

Spinks (1997) highlighted a number of the problems and barriers of implementing S/NVQs in voluntary organisations, several of which may be applicable to other awards for volunteering. These are summarised below:

- Difficulty and complexity of language of S/NVQs.
- Volunteers require high levels of support and management.
- Volunteer roles may span several S/NVQs making assessment complex or be too narrow for full S/NVQs to be appropriate.
- The costs of delivering S/NVQs to volunteers are unclear and variable. It can be difficult to attract funding to offer accreditation to volunteers.
- Many voluntary sector organisations do not work to national standards but S/NVQs recognise competence to national standards.
- Time commitment – those achieving full S/NVQs volunteered about 3 days a week for a year, well above the average time spent volunteering reported by respondents to the survey, so most volunteers would only be able to achieve units of awards.
- Given that most voluntary organisations do not have the management, information and training structures in place to deliver S/NVQs, introducing such a scheme would require whole organisation commitment.

Government promotes volunteering, for young people in particular, as a way of engendering citizenship and creating ‘work-ready’ citizens (Ellis and Rochester,

2003). Whilst volunteering can provide excellent opportunities to gain skills and experience as well as qualifications, especially for the unemployed, students and employee volunteers, there is a debate over how far voluntary organisation should be seen as a cheap learning or training ground. Some in the sector still question whether it is the role of the voluntary sector to deliver qualifications (Spinks, 1997). For example, there has been criticism of employee volunteering schemes that seek to provide management opportunities for staff in a risk-free (at least for the company) environment. Furthermore, expecting voluntary organisations to help provide volunteers with qualifications can lead to extra management costs and may affect service provision.

Do volunteers want accreditation?

There has been relatively little research done on the attitudes of volunteers to accreditation. Ninety three percent of volunteers surveyed in the most recent National Survey of Volunteering saw ‘nothing wrong with people getting qualifications as a result of their voluntary activity.’ However, only 10 per cent viewed ‘the chance to get a recognised qualification’ as a fairly or very important benefit of volunteering (Davis Smith, 1997). In a survey of 600 volunteers for Wales Council for Voluntary Action, 37 per cent reported that they wanted recognition of their skills, though the figure was slightly higher for volunteers aged under 50 (43 per cent). Those who offer to volunteer were twice as likely (40 per cent) to want skills based recognition as those who are asked to volunteer (20 per cent). The author of this report cautions, however, that the figures cannot be taken to indicate that the same percentage of volunteers seek formal qualifications, such as NVQs, for volunteering (Spinks, 1997).

Research into young people’s attitudes to volunteering in Northern Ireland (Harland, 1999) revealed support for accredited volunteering schemes. 79 per cent of non-volunteers said they would be more attracted to volunteering if it offered an accredited qualification while two-thirds of current volunteers said they would like to see volunteering leading to accredited qualifications (DfES, 2003). ‘Training, a reference, or qualification’ was the second most important factor for volunteers on the volunteer wish-list identified by 16-24 year olds in Kathy Gaskin’s (1998) qualitative study of young people volunteering. Gaskin points out that the full incentive of work experience and accreditation for volunteering is only achieved if it is recognised by

those who matter. This need for awards for volunteering to be credible and to be taken seriously by employers is one of the biggest challenges facing accreditation and an important area for further research.

It is often assumed that accreditation for volunteering is something sought solely by younger people, yet there is evidence that older volunteers are interested in receiving qualifications. Hutchison (1999) found older volunteers in London enthusiastic about the idea of accredited training. The Imperial War Museum North reports success in this area with many older volunteers working towards an NVQ in Cultural Heritage and developing basic skills through their innovative volunteering scheme (IWMN, 2003).

In one of the few pieces of research directly exploring attitudes of volunteers to training and accreditation, Cox (2002) questions the appropriateness of accreditation for volunteers. Taking four case studies she identifies a tendency for volunteers to drop out of training courses leading to accreditation or decide against the completion of the assessment necessary for the certificate or diploma. She outlines a number of reasons for this. Firstly, Cox argues, 'the reward of a qualification is extrinsic and alien to the values of volunteering' and motivation for volunteering is based less on inducements and more on intrinsic rewards that do not bear accreditation. Secondly, motivations for volunteering differ from motivations for learning; for volunteers learning is less important than 'doing'. Cox also argues that gender has a bearing on assessment of voluntary experience, since women may choose a low risk voluntary activity as a way of avoiding the pressures of academic study or paid work. Moreover, the idea of earning qualifications for volunteering is at odds with their image of the feminine role. Cox's research raises interesting questions about the ways people become involved in accredited volunteering schemes and highlights the range of issues around assessing voluntary experiences. Yet she arguably fails to appreciate that volunteering can be a mutually beneficial activity, and that, when asked, volunteers express a range of instrumental and altruistic reasons for getting involved (Davis Smith, 1997).

The importance of striking the right balance between volunteering and training / working towards assessment is raised in the literature. For example, some

organisations surveyed in the evaluation of the Millennium Volunteer programme complained that MVs were spending too much time training rather than volunteering (Davis Smith, Ellis and Howlett, 2002). The young people interviewed by Gaskin expressed concern that the training for a qualification should not mean extra work but should be built into the voluntary work (Gaskin, 1998). In line with this Project 2001 found volunteers 'unwilling to take on more "academic" work perceived to be involved in evidencing their skills and working towards a qualification' (RSA, 2001).

The evidence may suggest that accreditation can be a motivating factor for some volunteers, particularly, but not exclusively, younger volunteers seeking skills recognition, for the majority it is not the primary reason for involvement in volunteering. This may not preclude such volunteers from seeking accreditation, particularly as motivations for volunteering can change. As with all discussions on the management of volunteers it is well to remember that 'one size does not fit all' (Rochester, 1999) – some volunteers will actively seek volunteering opportunities leading to accredited learning, for others such schemes will be wholly inappropriate.

4. Questions for future research

Accreditation for volunteering is a relatively under researched area and much work remains to be done on:

- The attitudes of volunteers to accreditation and qualifications earned through volunteering.
- How employers and educational establishments regard awards and qualifications that assess voluntary experience.
- How appropriate are the current forms of accreditation for volunteer involving organisations and what influences their decisions on what certificates and qualifications to award?

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Appendices: Some Examples of Qualifications

1. Time

The Government's flagship volunteering programme for young people Millennium Volunteers has to date involved 120,000 16-24year olds. The DfES has also been piloting a scheme for younger students called Active Citizens in Schools (ACiS). Both these schemes provide certificates recognising the number of hours people have committed. Increasing numbers of individual organisations have introduced awards that recognise the time volunteers have committed. These schemes may be more flexible than the MV programme, which requires volunteers to chalk up 200 hours within the space of one year, an sustained personal commitment that some young volunteers, particularly those from marginalised communities with little tradition of volunteering, find hard to make (Davis Smith, Ellis and Howlett, 2002). Some examples are given below:

- Wirral CVS Volunteer Development offers 100 Hour Certificate and Student Volunteering Certificates to volunteers working for a range of local organisations. Through these awards, Wirral CVS aims to encourage employers and schools/colleges to give more recognition to unpaid work and to acknowledge its relevance in maintaining and improving skills.
- Great Yarmouth Volunteer Bureau offers awards for 30 hours, 75 hours, and 120 hours to volunteers from non-traditional backgrounds including volunteers who suffer from mental ill-health, or who have physical or learning disabilities, ex-offenders, single parents, ethnic minorities and asylum seekers. Many of their volunteers are severely lacking in confidence and esteem and have not previously been recognised as having achieving anything.

2. Vocational Awards

Volunteers can earn a range of vocational qualifications including NVQs, National Open College Network awards and qualifications awarded by BTEC and City and Guilds. Some examples of these include:

- National Trust volunteers on their ESF programme can earn NVQ Landscape and Ecosystems (levels 1-3) and NVQ Forestry (levels 1-3)
- Volunteers at Imperial War Museum North can work toward NVQ Cultural Heritage as well as being offered other learning opportunities such as basic skills.
- Volunteers for Cancer Research UK can gain NVQs in Customer Service and Retail Operations by volunteering in their chain of shops.
- Scout Association – Level 2 Open College Network Awards
- Princes Trust volunteers taking part on the personal development training programmes can receive a range of awards, including City and Guilds ‘Profile of Achievement’ Certificates, First Aid and Sports Leader Awards. They also offer a Youth Achievement Award for 14-20 year olds through ASDAN (NCVQ Key Skills).
- Volunteers for Frontier can gain a BTEC while volunteering on conservation projects in Africa

3. Awards for Volunteering

In recent years there has been an increase in qualifications assessing volunteering. These are promoted as a way to recognise skills built up through volunteering, such as team work, listening, project management etc. Some go further, down a more academic route, study of voluntary/community sector.

- **ASDAN – Certificate in Community Volunteering** (basic and intermediate level) The qualification recognises the general skills and good practice that volunteers need to show to work effectively in the community. It is run by a number of local voluntary sector organisations, colleges or training providers, and is intended for volunteers:
 - Who wish to develop skills and confidence in accessing modern vocational awards before progressing on to specialist vocational training
 - Seeking formal quality assured recognition irrespective of any plans for further progression
 - Seeking recognition for generic skills, who might be exploring a range of options before choosing a pathway (eg unemployed volunteers, workplace returners)

- Volunteers who may wish to develop their role within the organisation.

There are five units:

- Preparing to volunteer
- Skills for self management
- Dealing with meetings
- Working to good practice standards
- Understanding needs, issues and responses

- **NOCN Volunteer Training Intermediate Award**

Available from the Open College Network through local providers, this qualification is designed for volunteers working in a wide range of contexts and is appropriate for those participating in the voluntary strand of the New Deal. The qualification recognises transferable skills which will offer opportunities for progression to a range of employment within the voluntary sector.

Units within the qualification cover the essential knowledge and practical, vocational skills required. Health and safety requirements are included and specific units relating health and safety to work with disabled people and children may be selected to meet individual learner's requirements.

Learners may select units appropriate to progression requirements and the context in which they are working or wishing to work as volunteers. Units include:

- The Role of the Volunteer Youth Worker
- Equal Opportunities in Voluntary Organisations
- Communication.

- **Certificate in Interpersonal Skills for Volunteers**

Run by the University of Wales, this course is available to anyone across the UK (or the world) through distance learning. It facilitates students' learning of a range of communication skills to deal with a variety of situations. For example, one module focuses on communication at meetings and describes the ways in which

presentations can be made more effective.

Applicants need to be over 18 and have a minimum of six months' experience working as a volunteer (or paid worker) in a caring environment, with a minimum of five hours to spare each week. Assessment is by coursework at the end of each module and is designed to enable students to relate theoretical knowledge to their own voluntary or working experience.

Assessment Criteria				
Awarding Body		Time	Vocational Competence	Volunteering Competence
	Nationally Recognised Awarding Body		Scottish and National Vocational Qualifications (S/NVQs) National Open College Network Awards (NOCN) BTec City and Guilds	ASDAN - Certificate in Community Volunteering NOCN - Volunteer Training Award University of Wales - Certificate in Interpersonal Skills for Volunteers
	National level Organisation	Millennium Volunteers (MV) Active Citizens in Schools Pilot (ACiS)	Duke of Edinburgh Awards Red Cross First Aid Qualifications Scout Association Girlguiding UK	Duke of Edinburgh Awards
	Umbrella Organisation	Volunteer Bureaux Awards Great Yarmouth VBx 30, 75, 120 hours Wirral CVS Volunteer Development, 100 Hours, Student Volunteering Certificate	Umbrella body training certificate eg Wiltshire & Swindon Education Business Plus - Mentor Induction Attendance Certificate	Bristol Student Community Action – University of Bristol Union Community Work Experience Award (approved by Student Volunteering UK) Bedford Volunteer Bureau - Youth Volunteering Certificate (counts hours and assesses volunteer skills)
	In-house		Internal training certificate	UCL Volunteer Development Award

