

**Institute for
Volunteering
Research**

Assessing Voluntary Experiences: Report 3

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of the pilot stage of the Assessing Voluntary Experiences (AVE) project. The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) is one of seven European partners working on this Leonardo Agency funded research project.

The project focuses on volunteers who are seeking paid employment either for the first time, after a career break or period of unemployment or because they are changing careers. It seeks to help volunteers obtain employment by equipping them with ability to identify skills gained through volunteering and to present these to employers.

1.2 Background

While volunteers have a range of motivations for giving their unpaid time to other people, a cause or organisation, volunteering should also be of benefit to the individual. Volunteering has long been recognised as a way to gain skills and experience useful in the workplace. Volunteers can gain general experience of a work environment or find out what it is like to work in a specific area, such as horticulture or childcare. For those seeking to return to the work place, volunteering can be a chance to brush up on forgotten skills, get to grips with new technologies or establish a work routine. The references, contacts and networks that come through volunteering are also invaluable.

However, it is not always immediately obvious how the skills developed through volunteering are relevant to employers. Volunteers may need help in identifying the skills they have gained and in interpreting these skills for CVs, job applications and in interviews. Talking the language of employers and providing clear evidence for claims about skills and experiences are important techniques in job seeking.

For organisations too, assessing volunteers' progress and helping them achieve the goals they want to achieve is integral to good management. Organisations are increasingly aware of the need to provide a quality volunteer experience. Recent trends in the UK have been towards formalising an 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 (Volunteering England, 2004). Such awards, whether bespoke to the organisation or 'off the shelf' assume a form of quality assurance for organisations as well as providing an important source of recognition of achievement for volunteers. Indeed the latest figures show an increased awareness of accreditation for volunteering, with 46% of young people saying they would be persuaded to do more volunteering if they knew it would help them to develop their skills or get a qualification (HOCS, 2003).

Government interest in assessing voluntary experiences has been recently signalled by the specific recommendations in the Russell Commission

Report¹, which supports 'strengthening the link between volunteering and accreditation' through a structured framework of personal development plan, Youth Achievement Award and vocational qualifications (Russell, 2005). The UK Government's new 'Skills for Life' agenda adds further weight and allows the conclusion that creation of a new self-assessment tool for volunteers as part of the AVE project is thus timely.

2. Methodology

In stages one and two of the AVE project IVR conducted a review of available literature on accreditation and learning in English (Brewis and Ponikiewski, 2004) and undertook a survey of volunteer involving organisations.

The literature review undertaken revealed a number of perceived problems with assessing and accrediting voluntary experiences, including a lack of knowledge and awareness on the part of organisations, problems arising from a lack of resources and staff time or expertise, and problems of transferability of awards and certificates. This led to a desire to find out more about organisations' experiences of assessing experiences, and in this third stage, we conducted one-to-one depth interviews with nine of the previously surveyed organisations to supplement the survey findings.

We conducted a further review of newly available literature as well as broadening the review to consider material on competencies, assessment tools, volunteer development plans etc (please see Bibliography).

We consulted with 10 key stakeholders involved in the assessment of volunteer experiences and how this ties in with human resource needs, including the University of Wales, Lampeter and an awarding body, ASDAN.

We piloted the Tool with volunteers from Kew Gardens, a botanical garden on the outskirts of London that involves around 300 volunteers in a variety of roles.

3. Interview Findings

Benefits of Volunteering

Respondents were in general agreement on the benefits volunteers can gain both in terms of personal development and opportunities to exercise existing skills and develop new ones. Some organisations recognised that they received volunteers looking for a specific type of work experience, be that in horticulture, the heritage sector or in administration. Volunteers were often seen to be motivated by the desire to gain relevant experience and pick up references. This applied particularly to younger people and to students but

¹ The Russell Commission was a commission of enquiry charged with investigating youth volunteering in the UK and recommending how to achieve a step change in youth volunteering. The commission ran a series of consultations with the voluntary and business sectors and conducted research over a 12 month period

several of the organisations spoken to also mentioned people changing careers or re-entering the workplace.

For other respondents, the volunteers they involved had less clearly defined work-related motivations. Volunteering could be simply a way to fill spare time, do something different or form a routine, but the learning outcomes were equally as valuable. For example one respondent commented:

A lot of the young people we work with pick up skills they don't get as part of their studies, especially those who are excluded in some way, kicked out of school etc. They won't know anybody when volunteering, so there's no pressure on them to be anybody else. They can pick up loads of skills and get involved in loads of stuff they otherwise wouldn't dream of getting involved in.'

Assessing Volunteers' Development

Organisations described a number of methods already used for assessing volunteers' development, including volunteer diaries, training records, personal development plans, certificates, exit interviews and questionnaires. These had varying levels of success but were generally not always satisfactory in pleasing both the volunteer and the organisation. One volunteer co-ordinator commented.

We write a lot of references for volunteers...we felt that if we had a certificate, a recognised qualification that someone could take away with them that would kind of carry more weight.

Quality Assurance

Organisations interviewed spoke of the growing need to be able to demonstrate the quality of the volunteering service provided to beneficiaries, funders, auditors and the volunteers themselves. Assessment of volunteering experiences whether formal or informal becomes important in this context. For some this could be achieved by signing up to quality 'kite marks' like the Investing in Volunteers² standard or by introducing externally accredited awards for volunteers. Some organisations were working towards making the volunteer experience more uniform across departments and branches of the organisations, and saw the formation of assessment methods as important in this process. One volunteer manager commented:

It's a quality assurance thing for us, even if we actually rolled [the new award they are introducing] out and nobody took it up, we'd have gone through a process where everything about our volunteering would have been looked at by an external person, saying what about this and being more objective.

Aiming to improve recruitment and retention by giving volunteers what they want (meaningful and transferable awards) was a common theme among respondents.

² Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for all organisations which involve volunteers in their work. The Standard enables organisations to comprehensively review their volunteer management, and also publicly demonstrates their commitment to volunteering.

Information on awards and qualifications

Most of the organisations interviewed had only limited knowledge of the existing range of awards and forms of accreditation available to formally assess voluntary experiences. Indeed there seem to be problems for volunteer managers in accessing this information and some confusion over how awards for volunteers differ from qualifications for volunteer managers.

Problems and challenges with assessing voluntary experiences

Not all volunteers welcome the increasing demands to assess and monitor the voluntary experience. Some are alarmed by the growth of volunteer assessment or the introduction of work-like personal development plans while others feel such mechanisms are not going to be useful or relevant to them. Moreover, volunteers without much experience of the workplace or low levels of educational attainment may be put off if they believe they are expected to undergo assessment procedures.

As one volunteer co-ordinator commented:

Volunteers have said "this is getting too much like work". I think there's a balance between professionalisation and recreation.

In addition some of the programmes already in existence that make awards to volunteers can pose problems, even if they are largely practical in nature they can still take time to complete. For organisations who involve volunteers who are not able to commit 200 hours or two years to a programme, there is a need to record and to recognise progress and development in smaller 'bite-size' chunks.

4. Pilot Stage

4.1 Designing the tool

The tool needed to be easy to understand and accessible to a wide range of volunteers. It was also important to recognise that the tool would not be relevant or useful for all volunteers and that some volunteers may have additional support needs in completing the portfolio. Ideally, the tool also needed to be a flexible resource for volunteer managers and co-ordinators to draw on. It should be able to be used as one document or given out in separate sections. We found organisation's would value a tool that:

- Allows a volunteer to reflect upon experiences and identify skills gained through volunteering
- Helps a volunteer provide evidence of these skills
- Allows a volunteer to set targets and create an action plan for the future
- Provides an organisation with a way to assess a volunteer's development / progression
- Provides information about possible awards and qualifications a volunteer could work towards

4.1.2 The conceptual framework

We designed a tool with a three stage conceptual framework (see table 1). The first 'diagnosis' stage helps volunteers to identify the skills they have gained or improved through volunteering, using tools such as a reflective questionnaire, a mind map exercise and a skills table. The second 'evidence' stage encourages volunteers to think of examples showing where they have used these skills and to form a portfolio by collecting physical evidence. As part of the evidence stage there is included a synthesis document allowing a volunteer to create a one page summary sheet for each volunteer role that can be signed by their supervisor or manager. The final 'action' stage provides information on accreditation and awards available for volunteers in the UK and suggests volunteers complete an action plan.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

Stage	Tool
Diagnosis	a. Reflective Questionnaire
	b. Identifying Skills – Mind Map
	c. Identifying Skills – Skills Table
Evidence	a. Volunteer Portfolio
	b. Volunteer Summary Sheet
Action	a. Information on Accreditation and Awards
	b. Action Plan

4.3 Piloting the Tool

We piloted the tool with volunteers at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, just outside London. Kew involves volunteers in a number of areas of its work: as guides, as education volunteers, as horticultural volunteers. We piloted the tool with five volunteers from the Horticulture Volunteer Programme, a group including career changers, those seeking paid work for the first time and those volunteering whilst unable to work because of ill health.

Volunteers were given the tool at a briefing session then took it away to use. Some volunteers filled out the tool on their own then gave feedback, others needed more ongoing support in completing the Tool and in designing an action plan.

4.3.1 Findings

- The process of reflection had helped volunteers realise what they had got from volunteering through a process of describing what they had learnt, not what they had done. As volunteers commented:

The process of reflection helps you, when you've been turning up and doing work you don't realise what you've got from it.

It's useful because I find it really hard to remember what I've done as a volunteer.

- The tool was useful in identifying specific skills volunteers had developed and in recording the areas where they hadn't developed as much as they would like. Some volunteers were inspired to work harder on particular skills. For example, one noted:

The Volunteer's Pack made me think in greater detail about what it is I am looking to gain from volunteering, what I have already gained and my strengths. It made me think how much I have already picked up, but also how much more I still need to learn!

- The mind map proved challenging for some volunteers, but in general was a useful way to highlight some of the skills they had developed and helped them think of examples / evidence for each skill.
- The volunteers appreciated the information and signposting to other awards and more formal accreditation they could possibly gain through volunteering. None of the volunteers had heard of all of the awards. One commented:

I found it inspiring – it made me think that's possible for me.

- Volunteers also appreciated the 'action' stage of the tool, liking the idea of creating a portfolio and of setting targets to work towards. In one case a volunteer set some achievable targets and had made good progress on after 2 months. The action plan was a stage where volunteers might need extra support, particularly so that the targets they chose could be incorporated into their volunteering role. For example:

The section on creating a Volunteer Portfolio is a great idea and something I'd personally like to spend a bit of time on soon!

- Some other comments from volunteers included:

It's really useful, it's somewhere to write down and analyse what I've done in the garden.

- As expected volunteers had different support needs when completing the pack. Some were happy to go away and fill it out alone whilst others needed to be talked through the documents. In one case the volunteer felt that the whole tool was almost too simplistic for her, she described it as 'a step backwards', showing that for volunteers with already well developed CV's and a great deal of experience of applying for jobs etc, such a tool might be unnecessary. However, in another case, a volunteer mentioned that she had encouraged to update her CV after completing the pack.

- From an organisational point of the view, the tool was helpful as a new way to motivate volunteers and help people who are seeking eventual employment.
- It was also a good way to check on volunteers' progress and to see how to develop the placement
- The volunteer co-coordinator noted that while particularly useful for volunteers building careers or those who need an 'evidence' file, but also for those not seeking employment for health reasons, it can help steer the direction of placement. As the co-ordinator commented:

The AVE tool provides the means to help focus both volunteers and co-ordinators on needs and development...I am already impressed with the motivational effect it has had on volunteers”

4. Conclusions

In some of the organisations we spoke to, mechanisms are already in place to help volunteers both reflect upon their experiences in a helpful way and to keep records of training and skills development. Examples included keeping a volunteer diary, handbooks and training records and exit interviews.

Exit interviews or questionnaires are unsatisfactory to both the volunteer and the organisation, because they can not act as a means for positive interventions in the volunteer experience, nor can they be a resource for the volunteer to draw upon. Questionnaires in particular are often not returned or if so only mention positive aspects of the experiences.

Training records may be kept on file by the organisation but they are generally not helpful for volunteers wishing to have a record of their personal development.

However, there remains a gap for a self assessment tool that would be useful for volunteers as well as providing a mechanism for organisations to assess progress. Kew is a well known and well resourced organisation, but had no such tool in place before the pilot stage.

There are several lessons to bear in mind from the pilot stage in taking the project forward:

- Firstly there is a need to consider individual needs of volunteers – e.g. varying levels of literacy and work experience; poor health or other personal situations may mean a volunteer is not seeking employment immediately but still needs to build a portfolio
- The level of support needed in completing a pack will vary and might be time consuming, although this is less likely to be a problem once integrated with management practices

- Additional tools might be included such as a volunteer diary

5. References

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