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**‘It just adds that extra sparkle’: Students’ experiences of volunteering and the impact on satisfaction and employability in Higher Education.**

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### Abstract

Research suggests that students entering Higher Education are doing so with greater expectations around their graduate employability. Students' volunteering activities have been of interest to academics but the impact of these activities on learning, employability and student satisfaction have been neglected. The current study investigated whether students who volunteered felt it benefited them, whether they felt they were more employable and whether they perceived their course as satisfying in combination with their volunteering. This small-scale qualitative study used a sample of psychology undergraduate students in focus groups ( $n=11$ ), and also a number of psychology graduate interviews ( $n=6$ ) from one UK university. Thematic analysis produced several key themes including students' motivations to begin volunteering, their motivations to continue, the impact of volunteering on their psychology degree, and their perceptions of their volunteering and its impact on their employability. The findings indicated many reasons for both starting, and continuing, with volunteering activities with a clear narrative amongst this sample that volunteering enhanced their employment and postgraduate prospects. Findings are discussed in line with the current context of Higher Education and the implications for both students and Higher Education institutions.

**Keywords:** Employability, Higher Education, volunteering, student satisfaction; psychology

## Introduction

### Graduate Employability

The recent increase in Higher Education (HE) tuition fees in the UK<sup>1</sup> resulted in growing concerns amongst the academic community, regarding the potential impact on students' expectations. With these large financial investments in HE, it was suggested that students would expect more from their university experience, resulting in greater dissatisfaction in instances of disparity between expectations and experiences (Jones 2010). As a means of addressing these concerns, recent research has been dedicated to exploring the extent to which these concerns are justified (Bates and Kaye 2014a, 2014b; Kaye and Bates 2016). Bates and Kaye (2014a) compared the expectations and experiences of first year psychology students before and after the change in tuition fees and found minimal support for the idea that students had heightened expectations with the exception of employability; those students paying higher fees held greater expectations for their employment prospects following graduation.

Other recent evidence that suggests that the cost of tuition fees is associated with enhanced perceptions of prospective graduate employment (e.g. Moore, McNeil and Halliday 2011). The current UK economic climate employment is a concern to all and it is understandable students want to feel their investment in their education will pay off, particularly in light of the increased expense. These pressures also appear to be related to political expectations of the way in which HE providers should be implementing specific strategies for enhancing students' employability skills (Tymms, Peters and Scott 2013). This

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<sup>1</sup> The publication of the Browne Review (2010) recommended allowing Universities to charge up to £9000 a year which was implemented in England from September 2012. The cap was lifted and 64 of the Universities in England stated they would charge the maximum £9000 with some opting to charge slightly lower fees. This legislation was not UK wide with Wales having different policies on the use of tuition fees and Scotland having their cap on fees significantly lower at under £2000.

is putting increasing pressure on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to respond, something which is reflected in the literature (e.g. Gedye, Fender and Chalkley 2004). A further source of pressure comes from the introduction of the Key Information Sets (KIS), detailing the destinations of leavers in terms of employment and salary data which suggests the importance HEIs enhancing their provisions, both as a means of boosting universities' graduate employment statistics, as well as better preparing students.

In response to these concerns, research has been dedicated to understanding the concept of 'graduate employability', but there is debate surrounding the operationalization of the term (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). Yorke and Knight (2007) defined it as 'a graduate's suitability for appropriate employment' (p158), whereas other models, such as the Career-EDGE model developed by Dacre-Pool and Sewell (2007), acknowledge a range of different facets to the concept. These include: subject knowledge, generic skills, emotional intelligence, career development learning, reflection and evaluation, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

One way HEIs are able to support the employability of their students, is through encouraging volunteering activity. For psychology graduates in particular, many postgraduate programmes want relevant work experience (British Psychological Society [BPS] ND) and so gaining voluntary experience gives some practical insight into a career in psychology as well as helping with career progression. Psychology as an academic discipline is not a vocational course, but does form the foundation for professional vocational career routes as well as more general graduate level employment. Furthermore, the competition for professional psychology postgraduate training posts, and later job roles, is intensively competitive; psychology graduates must have relevant experience to be able to progress into their chosen area (Williams 2001). For example, to gain entry onto a clinical psychology training course there is an expectation of working in a setting similar to those where

psychologists work, contact with clinical psychologists, work with the “typical” client group (e.g. people with learning disabilities, children with psychological difficulties; Roth, 1998). Indeed, Bromnick, Horowitz and Shepherd (2012) detail the increase in psychology students and graduates and a simultaneous decrease of employment prospects within the current economic climate. This highlights the importance of fully exploring the way in which psychology student volunteering activity impacts on their experience in HE and subsequent employability.

### **Student volunteering**

Studies around volunteering have often focused on personal aspects of the experience, such as the effect on health and happiness (Borgonan 2008) and links to personality (Carolo, Okin, Knight and de Guzman 2005). Research specifically regarding students’ volunteering activities has focused on the motivations behind why students choose to volunteer (Clary et al. 1998), commitment to volunteering (Matsuba, Hart and Atkins 2007), as well as personal benefits such as career progression (Hackl, Halla and Pruckner 2007) and employability (Bromnick, et al. 2012). Finkelstein (2009) found intrinsic motivation was positively associated with a volunteer self-concept, pro-social personality, volunteer time and motive strength. In contrast, extrinsic orientation was more closely associated with more external motives such as career aspirations, which required the outcome to be distinct from the volunteer work in order to be seen as fulfilled. In reality, the transition to university can be challenging and large groups of students often drop out of volunteering at this time, with it rarely given a priority in their time management (Hustinx, Vanhove, Decercq, Hermans, and Lammertyn 2005). However, the skills it could foster could increase their academic self-efficacy, which has been found to facilitate the transition into the University environment (Pennington, Bates, Kaye and Bolam 2017).

Despite the plethora of research investigating undergraduate students' motivations to volunteer and the potential long-term benefits, there is a lack of research aimed at exploring actual experiences of volunteering and how their motivations may change over the course of their activities (Handy et al. 2010). Furthermore, there is a lack of pedagogic research exploring the impact of volunteering on learning whilst students are completing their degrees, as well as how it influences student satisfaction. Two particularly relevant theories here are Transformative Learning (Mezirow 1991) and Experiential Learning (Kolb 1984).

### **Transformative Learning**

Theories of transformative learning suggest that being able to put in to practice taught information and theories, can lead to a change in perspectives, not only in regard to personal learning but also to the issues affecting other individuals and society in general, particularly when combined with a critical thinking perspective (Bamber and Hankin 2011). Two major elements of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory are focused on critical self-reflection, and reflection where the learner considers their own judgement and takes into account any alternatives. It is evident from this that the theory is underpinned by some constructivist assumptions (Kitchenham 2008); Mezirow's revised theory posits that meaning exists within the learner rather than externally (e.g. in teacher, in books), that personal understanding and learning is acquired through social interactions. The meaning we gain from our learning experience is therefore individualistic. Mezirow (1995) further added that this critical reflection involves the concept and consequences of the actions involved, as well as the circumstances, making the setting of the learning very important.

Applied to volunteering activities, it may be that the opportunity to apply the knowledge developed from the degree programme allows students to critically reflect on their understanding in a real world setting. Indeed, Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranston (2006) describe

transformative learning as a ‘metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired frame of reference...by assessing its epistemic assumptions’ (p.124). By exploring theories and assumptions in a setting with directly relevant populations (e.g. real clients and service users), it can challenge the foundations of knowledge and lead to a deeper understanding. Transformative learning is more likely to occur in these interactions where there is a deeper and more complex level of understanding (Mezirow 2000). The tenets of this theory, that deeper learning occurs through experience and reflection, are in line with experiential learning.

### **Experiential Learning**

The origins of the concept of experiential learning can be seen in Dewey’s (1938) work with the recognition of how important reflection and experience can be in the learning process. It reflects an active and involved style of learning that includes reflection as part of the process; this is in contrast to a more passive style (Burnard 1991). Within his Experiential Learning Cycle, Kolb (1984) encompassed the initial acknowledgement of a non-institutional aspect of learning and offered something more practical as an approach (Fowler 2008). As with transformative learning, knowledge is socially and culturally constructed with experience underpinning the learning process (Cohan, Boud and Walker 2000).

Research regarding experiential learning gives an insight into its success as well as the level of student enjoyment. For example, Konak, Clark and Nasereddin (2014) found that hands on activities based around Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle were more likely to increase student interest and enjoyment, compared to step by step hands on learning. In contrast, Bradley, Webb, Schmitz, Chipman and Brasel (2010) found experiential learning had no significant effect on learning, in a group of resident surgeons, compared to structured learning but those in the latter category did not feel as confident with their practice. Wolf and



Archer (2013) used experiential learning opportunities (a real life client project) with their students and found that, whilst it might not be popular amongst a wider student cohort, it did prepare them for the future workplace. Other studies have explored experiential learning in different contexts and with different sample groups, including students studying abroad (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen and Swap 2012), research participation (Bowman and Waite, 2003), and increasing cultural competency (Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams and Keim 2016). Frequency of experiential learning has also been found to be an important factor for student success in psychology (Stoloff, Curtis, Rodgers, Brewster and McCarthy 2012).

Experiential learning is particularly relevant when discussed in line with student volunteering. Many students seek relevant work experience in organisations that are close to their aspired career goals and this learning outside the classroom will serve to prepare them better for their future careers and increase their employability. Indeed, research has demonstrated the importance of placement and work experience for learning; for example, Heyler and Lee (2014) found their internship programme was beneficial for students' learning and the authors posit it provides a useful antecedent for future success and career development. Experiential learning can bolster the learning of the curriculum by exploring the content in a real life setting and can also give students the opportunity to learn skills that are critical in the workplace. Stone and Lewis (2012) posit there are three kinds of skills required to increase career readiness: academic knowledge, employability or 'soft skills' and technical skills (specific to each occupational pathway). The 'soft skills' refers to those that prepare students and graduates for the work place in a practical sense. For example, this may include how to work in teams, engaging with supervision, or other behavioural attributes such as developing persistence and resilience.

### **Aims of the current study**

Bromnick et al. (2012) detail the ‘bottle neck’ (p.47) caused by an increase in psychology students and graduates, together with a simultaneous decrease of employment prospects within the current economic climate, highlighting the need to better understand this issue. At undergraduate level, without the necessary qualifications and training, there are few opportunities to gain experience in relevant psychology related areas with, for example, clinical or forensic populations. Volunteering activities are therefore strongly promoted and encouraged as a way to gain valuable work experience. The aim of this study was to investigate whether psychology students who volunteered during their undergraduate studies felt that volunteering benefited them, whether they felt they were more employable as a result and whether they perceived their course as satisfying in combination with their volunteering activities. This qualitative study aims to investigate psychology students’ experiences of volunteering in relation to their undergraduate studies and satisfaction with their course through speaking to undergraduates and graduates from the same course and institution. It is hoped this will give an insight into some subject specific issues around employability and work experience.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited through opportunity sampling of students enrolled on the undergraduate Applied Psychology degree at a post-92 University<sup>2</sup> in the UK. The focus groups were advertised around the department and via email, with undergraduate students volunteering to take part in the study. The overall sample of the current students consisted of 11 participants (9 female and 2 male) from the first (n = 1), second (n = 2) and third year of

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<sup>2</sup> Post-92 era Universities refer to any former poly-technic, institution or HE college given University status by the UK Government through the Further and Higher Education Act (1992).

the degree programme (n = 8). For the graduate sample, participants were recruited through the Alumni publication and social media pages of the University. The overall sample here consisted of 6 participants (all female) who had graduated in the last 1-3 years.

### *Procedure*

For the current students, a series of three focus groups was conducted, each including three to four participants. Smaller participant group formats were chosen to allow individual participants more time to share their thoughts and to allow for more in-depth discussions of the issues (Hughes and Dunmont 1993). Several of the focus groups consisted of established friendship groups which appeared to facilitate the discussions. Each focus group session lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Individual interviews with post graduate participants followed the same structure but were shorter in duration due to the one to one nature of the setting.

### *Agenda*

The focus group and interviews commenced with an introduction and overview of the purpose of discussion and research. The agenda consisted of open-ended questions, developed to allow participants to discuss their experiences of volunteering and how it has impacted on their degree. A number of questions were initially selected to be discussed. These included:

1. What are your experiences of volunteering?
2. Do you think your volunteering has affected your experience of your degree? In what ways?
3. Do you think your volunteering has affected your future employability? In what ways?

Focus group discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used since it is a useful way of identifying, analysing and reporting themes in qualitative data in a way that is not restrained by theory (Braun and Clarke 2006). As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) the first phase of analysis involved reading the transcripts through several times and noting initial ideas of themes. The data corpus was coded on a semantic level, without deeper interpretation of underlying meanings or motivations. The aim of the coding was to provide a coded overview of the data in its entirety and themes were refined and named to best represent the coded data within each theme and to ensure there was no overlap between. Coded data extracts from the transcript are used here to support and illustrate the results.

## **Results and Discussion**

Within both the student and graduate samples there were several themes common to both groups. These were namely: motivations for beginning volunteering, motivations for continuing volunteering, challenges of volunteering, organisation, volunteering and the degree and employability. These will be discussed in turn with respect to both sample groups.

### ***Motivations for beginning volunteering***

Students' reasons for starting volunteering activities were varied, although there was extensive discussion around the need to gain work experience and enhancing employability. This was reported as being endorsed by other professionals and seen as important when considering applying for employment or post-graduate study within psychology. Participants

discussed the influence of others in the decision to start volunteering, the advice appeared to be intended to improve career prospects:

‘I had a talk with a psychologist that I know and he said that don’t let your education come at the cost of experience er he said although your education is the gateway to getting somewhere it’s the experience that will allow you to go that extra distance’ (*Participant 3: student*)

‘...we was told that a degree is worthless without experience, like work experience...we got told that volunteering is the best way to go...I’m not saying paid work is bad because both look amazing on your CV, volunteering just gives it that extra sparkle’ (*Participant 1: student*)

One graduate had also recognised the lack of compulsory experience often found on psychology degrees:

‘...for experience learning different skills and...wanting to use my you know something alongside my degree because whereas social work have placements...with psychology we didn’t so I felt it was important to do something extra’ (*Participant 13: graduate*)

This type of extrinsic motivation has been seen before in relation to volunteering activities (e.g. Finkelstein, 2009) and reflects an awareness of the need for experience in an economic climate where there are more psychology graduates than employment opportunities (Bromnick et al. 2012). With current students entering HE with high expectations of their graduate employability (e.g. Bates and Kaye 2014a) and making subject choices that are influenced by this (Kaye and Bates 2016), it is encouraging to see students are personally committing to their career enhancement through their personal development planning.

Volunteering was also seen as a way to try out potential career paths before committing to a specific route of postgraduate training:

‘I was slightly considering a slight turn to more like erm clinical rather than just kind of research based...prior to the volunteering whereas during that I decided no, just...I knew it wasn’t for me at all...so it kind of it reinforced my kind of my direction... confirmed it’ (*Participant 5:student*)

‘I...find that volunteering in places, if you’re unsure about where you want to go forward in the future that gives you that sort of dip into different places where you might want to look into sort of thing so if you’re not sure if you want to work with kids or not...volunteering in places with kids gives you that experience so...I find that really helps’ (*Participant 4: student*)

These comments serve to highlight another role of volunteering experience in the career development process. As well as enhancing the employability and CVs of the current sample, they further saw the importance of exploring their career goals prior to committing to them.

The motivations for starting volunteering activities support the consideration of career oriented motivations (Clary et al. 1998) and enhancing career prospects. This may however be a reflection in the way that volunteering is presented within the programme, as being important for gaining relevant experience. If volunteering had also been promoted to these participants as a social, altruistic, or self enhancing activity, as well as promoting the potential career benefits, participants might also report these aspects as motivations for beginning. In addition, this approach might also encourage less career-oriented students to try volunteering.

*Motivations for continuing volunteering*

Many participants' volunteering activities were long-term, over several years and they discussed their motivations for continuing to volunteer which included feeling that they were doing good, making a difference and finding the experience personally rewarding.

'I'd like to think I'm doing some good...I do like to think that it's helping'

*(Participant 7: student)*

'I feel like I'm doing some good...it's rewarding' *(Participant 6: student)*

'Yeah it's fun it's good to know that I can give back so yeah, it's been positive...cos like befriending and like mentoring you're helping someone so...makes me feel good and makes them feel good as well' *(Participant 9: student)*

The impact of volunteering experiences on individuals was related to more than just their employability expectations. Participants felt that they benefitted socially, expanding their social network and reported ways in which they felt they had developed as individuals, gaining transferrable skills.

'I have got a lot of friends that work there as well so it's like more of a social thing...volunteering turned from helping my CV to like a social thing'

*(Participant 1: student)*

'...by doing volunteering I got to meet a different mix of people that weren't at uni...I'm still friends with a lot of people that I volunteered with'

*(Participant 12: graduate)*

‘...it does allow you to make other choices in your own personal life as well like...normally I would have phoned by Mum up and been like oh Mum what do you think I should do but now I feel a bit more confident...thinking no this is what I want to do... so that’s my motivation because it gives me like life skills as well’

*(Participant 2: student)*

Again, this supports previous work on career motivations (Clary et al. 1998), in particular the categories of enhancement and understanding. Perhaps promoting volunteering as an enjoyable, social and self enhancing activity might help to engage less career-oriented students. Mezirow’s (1991) revised theory of transformative learning points to the personal understanding and learning that comes through our social interactions. Where students describe important social and professional relationships, it may also facilitate their learning in these settings. Learning and reflection that occurs in such a setting is likely to be on a deeper level, which can often change the foundations of developing knowledge.

The sub-theme regarding skills was seen in discussions relating to careers, future development and confidence:

‘I do enjoy it and it is good experience being given challenges and treated like an employee because then you kind of you do feel like an adult’ *(Participant 2: student)*

‘... like improved my confidence like interpersonal skills and with things that you have struggled with...if there’s something that you did find difficult dealing with and you were better prepared if something like that comes up again’ *(Participant 13: graduate)*

These discussions around learning and skills development relates to the literature on experiential learning. Several studies have demonstrated how the opportunity to implement



knowledge developed in the classroom, has positive impacts on learning (e.g. Heyer and Lee 2014). Experiential learning in a volunteer setting, such as those described above, both supplements and complements that of the curriculum within their degrees. Specifically, the critical skills needed to be career ready. Stone and Lewis (2012) refer to ‘soft skills’ which more pragmatically prepare students for the graduate workplace. Here, these could refer to the social and interpersonal skills and the challenges of working with others, as well as the personal attributes participants discussed, such as independence in making personal decisions.

### *Challenges of volunteering*

Undergraduate students may be attempting to balance a number of commitments which make demands on their time, including academic and paid work, or family commitments; volunteering activities may add to this pressure, particularly if students’ motivations are driven more by outside influence than inner motivation (e.g. Finkelstein 2009). In addition to discussing positive aspects of volunteering, participants also talked about the challenges they faced. These included practical considerations such as managing time restraints of assignments and obligations to organisations, as well as the personal impact of volunteering, which was not always positive.

‘...the only thing was erm time management, fitting in volunteering and training alongside doing like assignments and going to lectures’ (*Participant 12: graduate*)

‘The thing is the amount of time it takes up... because like pretty much everyone has said it’s pretty inflexible, you know you’re working, studying...that’s your primary reason why you’re here but you’re also working for an organisation...it’s kind of difficult getting that balance really’ (*Participant 4: student*)

One participant felt that their worldview had altered and another found being on the receiving end of aggressive behaviour during volunteering particularly challenging.

‘Volunteering opened my eyes up to the real world, I’ve been brought up in cotton wool’ (*Participant 1: student*)

‘...you would often have an aggressive experience with him or an angry experience with him which could make you feel like you didn’t wanna go back, that could be quite intimidating’ (*Participant 16: graduate*)

As an institution, actively promoting volunteering activities within the programme, this suggests that there needs to be more awareness of these issues; HEIs have a responsibility to make students aware of these potential issues before they begin. The potential to experience anger or intimidation from individuals within some services may be upsetting to some students and it is likely that they need to have an understanding of this possibility, in order to make an informed decision when considering routes of volunteering. The demands of volunteering are often why students transitioning to university drop out of such activities (Hustinx et al. 2005).

### ***Organisation***

Some of the challenges faced by participants were directly related to the organisation in which they were volunteering. These included the level of training or supervision they received, which varied between organisations and affected their ability to deal effectively with the situations they were in and the people they were interacting with.

‘...the training there was like an hour erm...and it I think it doesn’t really prepare you for the difficulties of some of the children have’ (*Participant 3: student*)

Students sometimes felt frustrated with the way the organisation was run and how this impacted on people who were volunteering:

‘It’s just how it’s run, it can get awfully stressful because it doesn’t seem erm...particularly well planned, the communications doesn’t seem very good between the people’ (*Participant 7: student*)

‘We’ve got our volunteer coordinator but she...lacks a bit of drive in getting things done sometimes...’ (*Participant 2: student*)

Others commented on their positions as volunteers, some not feeling valued in the same way as other paid members of staff:

‘...you just feel a little bit...I know I’m only a volunteer...but you don’t feel important by them all the time...some people just you don’t you don’t feel part of the team’ (*Participant 7: student*)

However some organisations were seen to be very positive, in terms of both the support offered and the training undertaken:

‘...the training was amazing, like it it well equipped us for everything that could happen and the staff that work there are so supportive’ *Participant 1 (student)*

The contrast between students’ experiences within different organisations highlighted the issue of differing levels of training, support and supervision for volunteers. Whilst this is often part of the learning experience, it is important that HEIs and staff are available to support students to ensure the challenges do not become overwhelming. When the training offered complements and supplements the learning on their degree programme, it is likely to be more useful. The training being implemented in such professional settings (especially if in

addition to their curriculum content) can help develop technical skills that will facilitate students and graduates in becoming career ready (Stone and Lewis 2012).

### *Volunteering and degree*

Volunteering, whilst studying for their degree, allowed students to apply the knowledge they developed through the curriculum to real situations. For a course which does not incorporate placements into the programme, volunteering is a valuable opportunity for situated learning.

‘...you’re putting sort of little ideas in your head that you’ve had from lectures and I’m going into this situation and I’m thinking oh yeah I know what that is’

*(Participant 6: student)*

‘...what I learn in uni has helped me develop in [organisation name] like the stuff I learned at uni has helped me, like apply, like theories’ *(Participant 10: student)*

Others discussed how their volunteering experiences had impacted on the way they developed knowledge as part of their degree.

‘...I think when you’re learning new material at uni um if you’ve got kind of real world experience as well it kind of I think it helps you understand some of the discussions at uni...you feel like you can contribute a bit more’ *(Participant 8: student)*

‘People teach you a hell of a lot more than a journal will’ *(Participant 16: graduate)*

Others commented that the additional training they received from their organisation also contributed towards their degree experience:

‘I think like erm the training that we did...really added to what we’re learning on the degree...it adds a practical context to what we’re learning about’

*(Participant 4: student)*

‘...we learnt a lot about like legislation and current law and restorative justice which...is really useful with the forensic side of things...and the [organisation name] training, that was really intensive and we learnt a lot of counselling theories...about self-supervision and managing your own boundaries and stuff so that was really useful in...at uni and now on like a professional level as well’

*(Participant 12: graduate)*

Students were able to apply this knowledge and understanding to their research and thinking towards summative assignments; some commented on the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the two experiences:

‘I think...I probably was more enthusiastic about my dissertation because I was it was combined with my volunteering work’ *(Participant 15: graduate)*

‘...the working knowledge that you learn like the theories at university but then the working knowledge from your volunteer work gives you a better understanding of those things’ *(Participant 8: student)*

Although this was not always a positive thing for the students in this sample:

‘No because I do struggle to differentiate sometimes...’ *(Participant 2: student)*

The nature of both transformative and experiential learning has its basis in learning-by-doing and the importance of reflection alongside that process. The students and graduates reflected on the reciprocal nature of their learning in both settings. The knowledge gained from their degree impacted on their volunteering activities and the

experience they had within their volunteering was also being brought into the classroom and their assignments. The explorations of psychological theories within a professional setting can complement learning and also challenge previously held assumptions through critical reflection (e.g. Dirkx et al. 2006). Furthermore, students often enjoy the opportunity to learn by experience (e.g. Konak et al. 2014) and it can impact on their confidence through utilising their knowledge and skills (e.g. Bradley et al. 2010). The general themes within the discussions so far highlight the knowledge and skills development that will impact on students becoming future employees.

### ***Employability***

When students and graduates were asked how they felt their volunteering activities did, or would, impact their career prospects, there were both positive and negative comments. The graduates discussed how they felt their experience had been instrumental in helping them to gain such positions.

‘I found since leaving if I didn’t have my voluntary experience and things I don’t I wouldn’t have the job I’ve got now or I wouldn’t have got on to my masters or anything, it’s a lot harder with a psychology degree anyway to do anything if you haven’t got any experience to go along with it’ (*Participant 17: graduate*)

‘I don’t think I would be in the position that I’m in now with the company that I’m with now if I hadn’t done the volunteering’ (*Participant 16: graduate*)

Whilst this is perhaps to be expected in line with previous research which demonstrates the employment enhancing effect of volunteering (Hackl, et al. 2007), one participant felt that their volunteering experience was a disadvantage when interviewed for their job role;

supporting offenders was seen as conflicting with the organisation's aims of supporting victims:

'I got that job as a result of my degree I know now from speaking to my boss that the volunteering I'd done went against me in my interview because it was with offenders rather than victims or survivors and my organisation now is directed at survivors' (*Participant 15: graduate*)

This highlights the complex nature of the current job market and the potential for additional experience having unexpected consequences. The majority of graduates did see their experience as facilitating their career, either through enabling them to gain employment, or to be successful in enrolling on postgraduate programmes.

The undergraduate participants talked about their perceptions of volunteering increasing chances of gaining employment or a postgraduate training place:

'I think it will definitely put me ahead when I'm applying for like post grad stuff' (*Participant 5: student*)

'...it shows that you're like that you're flexible...that you've got the ability to learn the skills that it's already taught you and that you can transfer the skills that you've already learned to a job' (*Participant 1: student*)

Many students discussed the direct benefits of experience, in relation to applying for jobs and postgraduate courses, whereas others discussed the indirect benefits such as increasing their confidence in themselves and their potential to take advantage of future opportunities:

'I think so coz the the thought of working with young offenders or...vulnerable adults absolutely terrified us until I actually did it and got experience of doing it erm and the

stuff that I've learnt throughout the training as well you can sort of take that with you and apply it to your job' (*Participant 12: graduate*)

'I think it makes you feel more confident in terms of um maybe getting a career after your degree cos it's like everybody done like the interview process and done like a professional training course and I feel like more able to kind of go out and do that afterwards' (*Participant 8: student*)

For these students and graduates, volunteering activities increased their confidence in their career development but also increased the employability skills that employers seek amongst applicants. This experience, coupled with engagement in personal development planning, could make students not only more employable but also aware of their skills and employability - which is key to self-promotion in applications. Professional development planning (PDP) has been defined as 'a structured and supported process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.' (QAA 2009, p4). However, a recent review of the PDP literature suggests that when discussed in terms of actions and processes, PDP should contain multiple elements, including planning, doing, reviewing and evaluating (Gough et al. 2003). Often, PDP is conducted through activities which engage students in reflective processes on their learning, to monitor progress and to set targets for both personal and academic goals (Gosling 2003). PDP is used as a means of helping students to review their performance, by identifying their relative strengths and weaknesses and to reflect on tutor feedback (Croot and Gedye 2006). Furthermore, engaging students in PDP should encourage evaluative and higher order thinking skills (Kneale 2002). It can therefore be said that a key objective of PDP is to support and improve students' learning, through helping them become more independent, reflective and confident learners (Quinton and Smallbone



2008). The benefits of PDP activities for student learning and development are well documented in the pedagogic literature (e.g. Bullock and Jamieson 1998).

## **Conclusion**

### **Impact for HEIs**

The findings of the current study indicated a multitude of reasons for both starting, and continuing, with volunteering activities. An overwhelming theme that was found within the participants' discussions (both at student and graduate level) was around volunteering activities enhancing their employment and postgraduate prospects. In an economic climate where there are more psychology graduates than psychology job opportunities (Bromnick et al. 2012) and there is intense competition for postgraduate training places (Williams 2001), the students in the current sample recognised the importance of experience for career progression. Their choice to undertake voluntary work was largely self-determined but it leads us to question the responsibility HEIs have to support and encourage these activities.

The recent increase in tuition fees has meant students view their degree as a financial investment in their future, one that they expect to offer them a return, in the form of increasing their employment prospects (Bates and Kaye 2014a; Moore et al. 2011). This puts HEIs under pressure to respond to this expectation by implementing specific strategies to enhance employability (e.g. Tymms et al. 2013). Demonstrating enhanced employability (volunteering being a key example here) can serve as an important mechanism for attracting future applicants. This is particularly salient given the use of the National Student Survey (NSS) which is an established indicator of students' satisfaction with their degree experience and the introduction of the KIS data.

One way to aid students in making the most of their volunteering activities is to encourage them to reflect on it as part of their PDP. This may include a greater focus on embedding employability within curricula, to achieve a more integrated provision. This may be perceived as more favourable and more relevant to students, than 'add-on' provisions. One way in which HEIs are able to support the employability of their students is through personal and PDP. Indeed, given the recent increase in tuition fees, and the implications associated with this (see Bates and Kaye 2014a), many HEIs have reviewed their current PDP provisions to provide a more comprehensive and impactful provision for their students. For example, the introduction of study abroad options, voluntary placements and research intern schemes are just some examples of the types of activities some institutions have encouraged for this purpose. Resources such as the 'Psychology Student Employability Guide' (Lantz 2011) could be employed as a core resource to both encourage and document students' PDP activities.

Embedding more experiential learning within the curriculum could be another way to foster employability skills and enhance student satisfaction associated with volunteering activities. Research has demonstrated the success of experiential learning in the learning process (e.g. Intolubbe-Chmil et al. 2012) and the increased interest and enjoyment of students (e.g. Konak et al. 2014; Stoloff et al. 2012). Placement opportunities could serve this purpose by embedding these professional contexts within a credit bearing module in the curriculum. This would mean all students would engage in this through either a mandatory or optional module within their programme. However, this experiential learning and skill development has found to be facilitated when undertaken by the 'deliberate action of the student' (Fowler 2008, p.431). This indicates part of the learning and reflection process is through the students' personal decision to undertake these activities and is likely associated

with more intrinsic motivation (Finkelstein 2009). It is possible this is something employers consider when examining the skills and experience of applicants.

An alternative could be to allow students more opportunities to reflect on volunteering in the classroom and their assignments. Another factor that facilitates experiential learning is when students are prompted in some way to interact and reflect on their experience (Fowler 2008). This could occur, for example, in a classroom discussion, in a reflective piece of writing, or within a specific career focused module with embedded PDP activities. It is worth considering embedding these activities within the curriculum as they can then be taken into consideration within staff workloads. There are growing pressures on staff to balance increasing workloads and respond to students' demands; Houston, Meyer and Paewai (2006) highlight, HEIs are 'complex organizations' (p. 27) in which staff are trying to balance their workloads whilst respecting the more traditional culture of academia. These are concerns that have been found to be more prominent since the increase in tuition fees (Bates and Kaye 2014b).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although the current study has presented some insight into the impact of volunteering activities on students' learning, employability and satisfaction, future research should seek to explore these aspects in more detail. Recommendations made above regarding the embedding of PDP and volunteering activities could be trialled and evaluated in future projects to explore the impact on both students' experiences and HEIs (in terms of key satisfaction and performance indicators).

The students and graduates who took part in the current study all volunteered to take part in the research as well as volunteering in their extracurricular work. Future research should seek to explore the experiences of those who are no longer volunteering as well as

those who have chosen not to undertake these activities. By focusing on their experience it is possible to explore reasons for not undertaking these activities as well as ways in which HEIs could encourage them to do so. Furthermore, it is important to consider those who are not engaging in these activities, due perhaps to financial reasons, or child care commitments, who wish to enhance their experience and employability skills. Ramsden (n.d.) points out that the greater range and variety of students (due to initiatives such as widening participation with HE becoming more accessible) have increased the range of student expectations. It is important with this diversity, that no student feels disadvantaged in any learning opportunities.

### **Final comments**

Ensuring students leave university as employable graduates is critical for their career development. The findings of the current study indicated that students were motivated to undertake voluntary extra-curricular work to give them work-based experience that would enhance their prospects for both employment and post-graduate study. Students also discussed the impact this type of transformative and experiential learning had on their degree and their satisfaction whilst at their HEI. The implications of these findings are important for both students and HEIs, as the need to respond to students' expectations and demands is felt with greater pressure. The findings of the current study should be useful in informing HEIs of one way in which they can encourage students in their skills development and in increasing their employability and job prospects post-graduation.

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