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LLAKES CENTRE FOR LEARNING AND LIFE CHANCES IN KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

"They go the extra mile": Experiences of Young People at Volunteer Glasgow

Project Report

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UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

1965 - 2015 50 E·S·R·C 50 YEARS SHAPING SOCIETY

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from the research study of the experiences, perspectives and motivations of young people aged between 18 and 24 participating in the Volunteering Works programme offered by Volunteer Glasgow. The research was conducted as part of the larger research project ‘*Getting in and getting on in the youth labour market: entry practices, under-employment and skill formation in regional economies*’ which is being undertaken by the Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) based at the Institute of Education, University College London.

The project is investigating the fact that a number of ‘Youth Labour Markets’ now exist in the UK, each providing very different opportunities for an expanding age group of 18-30 year olds. In addition, there are an increasing number of different ways of ‘getting in’ to work for young people, such as apprenticeships, voluntary work placements, enterprise schemes and so on, across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Different regions within the UK have instituted various strategies for local economic growth and regeneration which often include schemes to help young people access new skills and get into work. However, we know very little about the success of these schemes and how young people’s experiences of getting into work and getting on within their careers varies across the different regions of the UK. The project takes a comparative approach by looking at five different regions across the UK to explore entry schemes, employment and early careers.

Scotland has taken a pro-active approach to tackling the challenges of youth unemployment. Glasgow in particular has sought to mitigate the effects of the economic recession on young people with a range of locally funded initiatives to enhance training and employment, such as the Glasgow 2014 Legacy Framework, the Youth Employability Partnership and the Strategic Volunteering Framework. This recognizes that volunteering can be a key means by which people from all backgrounds, including young people, may develop the skills and confidence to play an active part in their local communities and economies. Yet while multiple initiatives exist to help those just leaving school at 16-17 into employment or training, little exists for 18-24 year olds. The Volunteering Works programme was therefore introduced to enable this slightly older group to gain transferable workplace skills, improve their CVs and achieve a recognized qualification in Employability.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research employs qualitative methods to build in-depth case studies of youth labour markets in five contrasting regions of the UK**.** In each region, a different 'entry route' was selected: volunteering, internships, enterprise schemes, apprenticeships and employability programmes and interviews conducted with young people and other key stakeholders. Ethnographies were also conducted of each scheme in order to gain a real 'hands on' sense of the experiences of young people. In Glasgow, interviews were conducted with policy makers across the city as well as staff at Volunteer Glasgow and the organizations where the volunteering placements takes place. Young people from two Volunteering Works programmes were interviewed and ethnography conducted of both the classroom and volunteering parts of the programme.

3 VOLUNTEER GLASGOW

Volunteer Glasgow, the Centre for Volunteering, Community Action and Employment Initiatives, has over 40 years of experience in creating, developing, supporting and promoting volunteering. The company is limited by guarantee, governed by a Board of Directors, and registered as a Scottish Charity. In addition to promoting and supporting volunteering, Volunteer Glasgow has established a successful track record in providing community development, befriending/mentoring, training, community care, and advisory services to the general public and other client groups across the city. The Centre currently manages two of the city's Careers Centres, a Young Persons Befriending Service, and an Elderly Home Visiting and Daycare Service. The Centre is also approved by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and provides learning and accreditation support, such as the Volunteering Works Programme. Firmly believing that through volunteering all citizens can make a difference to the lives of others in a vast range of ways, their mission is, "to lead in making Glasgow the city where everyone is passionate about volunteering their skills, abilities, talents, experience and knowledge."

Volunteering Works is a 5 week programme for 18-24 year olds which runs regularly throughout the year, each recruiting approximately 15 young people from a wide variety of social and educational backgrounds.They attend for 16 hours per week for a mixture of classroom based sessions and 'volunteering tasters' and receive funding for lunch and travel expenses. In the first week of the programme, each young person tastes three different volunteering sites before deciding which they would like to spend more time in. They then continue working for their chosen charity, one day a week for the remainder of the 5 weeks. In addition, course members are helped with the preparation of their CV, the development of transferable workplace skills and abilities and provided with references. This is consolidated in the SQA accredited Employability Award. The curriculum is designed to be accessible to people from a full range of educational backgrounds, from NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training) to graduates. The learning is carried out in bite-size chunks and is very interactive. Deliberately different in form to school-based learning there are not, as one participant put it 'hours of sitting listening to a teacher go on and on'. Instead, the sessions are learner-focussed with the pace directed by each individual.

4 MOTIVATIONS: WHY COME TO VOLUNTEER GLASGOW?

The participants of the Volunteer Works programmes are highly diverse. They include both Glasgow 'born and bred' and international migrants, whose educational backgrounds may range from no or few qualifications to undergraduates or even postgraduates. Many had heard about the programme from friends and family, whose positive reports encouraged them to apply:

Well it was my friend came on this course last time, and he was like me, and he said that it's really good. So he told me about it and told me to phone up Tara. And she said "come in", I did, so here we are. **(Oliver, Glaswegian)**

I saw it on the internet before I came to Glasgow. And then I met a friend and he was doing the previous course that I'm doing now, and I told him that I was interested too, so he brought me. **(Carolina, Brazilian)**

My mum's seen it first and then she thought it would be a good idea for me, and so I just agreed to it…. And thought try it out, you know. *So here I am!* **(John**, **Glaswegian)**

While the young people we talked to had a range of motivations for attending the Programme at Volunteer Glasgow, most saw it as a stepping stone into employment.

It was like "I have to update my CVs as well like improve my skills and get like experience". So I was like "let me try this, just wonder if I'll like it or not" and I actually ended up loving it! **(Eri, Somalian)**

Because I've been searching for jobs but all the jobs were saying "you need work experience, you need that" and it's like "oh God". Because I've been searching for like 3 or 4 months in looking for jobs, and they're all looking for work experience, and it's just like because I never had any, it's made life a bit difficult for me trying to find a job. So that's probably the main reason why I came and done this programme, to get work experience and become more confident so I can actually get a job. **(Oliver, Glaswegian)**

For those whose previous school experiences had not been positive, a key attraction was that it felt very different from school:

They've helped me a lot with a CV you know, that kind of stuff. Because at school we had classes of like between 15 and 20, and the teacher would go around everyone who's going to uni, and whoever's not they're kind of set aside. So I was one of those pupils who were set aside, so I've never done a CV or anything like that. So the people in here have helped me a lot with that. **(Oliver, Glaswegian)**

Completely like the opposite, [to school] like everyone is like relaxed, they don't put pressure on you, they always try to help you how you can improve and stuff like that, which is really good. **(Frederick, African)**

However, many young people were also attracted by the idea of doing some volunteering irrespective of whether it led directly to paid employment:

What brought me to the volunteer centre is because it's something that I've always wanted to do, because it also matches my personality because I care a lot about people and I want to help and stuff like that. And at first I wasn't sure if like I wanted to start the course here, I wasn't sure because I was having like second thoughts, but then I decided that I would come – and it's been like a really good decision for me, yeah. **(Frederick, African)**

For some of the more highly qualified participants this was the key reason for attending:

Actually I was not looking for like work experience, I was just looking for volunteering. So I think I have quite a lot of work experience like, because I'm only 19. **(Isabella, Lithuanian)**

5 "EVERYTHING WAS USEFUL WHATEVER WE WERE DOING!"

Without exception, all the young people we interviewed were extremely positive about the Volunteer Works programme run by Volunteer Glasgow. Their views encapsulated by David, a young man with few qualifications and infrequent work experience who had quickly been offered paid work as a result of his participation on the course:

The way they help you, it's down to detail. If you ever need help that they have, like they go the extra mile, if you know what I mean? Just the way they help you, it's just phenomenal that you could just come in here and work with a volunteering opportunity, and just do it and helping, it's just good really. **(David, Glaswegian)**

Many had come to the programme feeling somewhat anxious about what might be entailed and their own abilities. Some of the young people have histories of mental health problems which have made it difficult for them to access the labour market in the past. However, it was clear that the positive atmosphere soon puts them at their ease:

I could see I was getting a bit anxious because I didn't know what to expect, because this is my first time here so I didn't really know what to expect. But it was the best decision for me to come here. **(Frederick, African)**

Good, quite useful and helpful. I like the CV work and stuff, some of it because I haven't been working or doing anything for nearly two years that kind of made me a bit stressful, but it's good, so yes it's good … Since I came here at Volunteer Glasgow, I really like it here, they were supportive. It's flexible, if like ... erm … I'm not a skiver, I'm hardworking, I would work for pennies sometimes. So I'm a real grafter and I enjoy work, but sometimes I've just not got the time because of other things, like I've got [mental health issues] that's how I hadn't worked for two years, like with anxiety and depression and stuff. This is the first time I've got back into it. And I feel like they're quite flexible, they're like don't worry if you can't make it on that day, or if you've got something more important, so you don't feel so overwhelmed and forced to be there. Like it's not like 100% attendance here, which is quite good for me just starting back because there's no pressure here. I feel like if I miss it I'm like very … I do need to go back but it's OK and I'm not going to get kicked out or sacked. So it's really good, it's getting me back in and stuff. And if you've got any issues with the thing that you're doing you just … you feel comfortable to speak about it and stuff. **(Laura, Glaswegian)**

A key factor for the young people therefore was the enthusiasm of the staff and the support they received from them. As Laura concludes:

It's dead open and I just feel like it's dead comfortable. It's like they're loving it!

Some of the young people had done previous, similar courses in other centres. However Volunteering Glasgow was held by the young people to outstrip competitors in the field, mainly because of the approach of the staff:

[Another Centre]… I don't know if they're funded or what, but just going in in the day similar, but I think here helps you more, definitely. **(David, Glaswegian)**

I wouldn't say it [the other centre] would be as good, because like when he was telling you all this he didn't like really like sit down properly with me and explain like everything and stuff. And what they're doing is they're actually sitting down with you and explaining everything, from scratch. So I think that's like a really good help, yeah. **(Frederick, African)**

The staff were perceived to be highly knowledgeable, able to help people with very different backgrounds and needs. Carolina, a highly qualified graduate from Brazil was impressed that:

Billy and Derek showed me some kind of a work that maybe I can apply for. It's for do translation… some enterprises here are looking for someone that can call other enterprises and businesses in Brazil and do the translations and other transactions.

Other migrants also appreciated the help they were given:

I mean it was good because I was a foreigner so everything that I do in English in good, it's just improve my level of English, meet people and also gain a skill, I know how to do my CV and they have a very nice mock interview and they showed you how to do an interview. So it's good to start. (**Paula, Spanish)**

The multicultural makeup of the groups is also appreciated by the young people themselves:

The two lecturers, Billy and Derek, they're good, I like them. And the classes are good as well, it's very multi-cultural. There's only like four people who are actually from Glasgow, you know including myself and there's like … so it's … everybody else is from over the world so it's interesting, you know. **(John, Glaswegian)**

The supportive environment, the classroom sessions and the volunteering tasters clearly combined to enhance the skillsets of the participants. A key concern for many of them was to access work, and for this reason the attention given to establishing personal strengths and appropriate career directions, creating a good CV and application form, and performing well at interview were very much appreciated:

*For my application, I've never really understood application forms, you know, differe**n**ce, so I know the difference between a CV and I sort of know how to do one myself. I've done a major change on my CV and so it's vastly improved now you know from the old one. And I've already seen…I've already got…you know better at getting a job now, say, I think I've improved my chances of getting it because I've made it more focused on what I want to do, you know, so yeah.* **(John, Glaswegian)**

Well like how they are starting to like help with CVs, how you can…you know, just change and how you could put for example like certain words, how you could help you improve and stuff like that. In a case of if you're in an interview and there's for example another 10 people, how you can stand out in a room full of those guys as well. **(Frederick, African)**

As well as the classroom sessions, the participants attend a range of volunteering taster sessions in order to develop their workplace skills. This was seen as an essential, if not the only, 'way in' to work for young people in the present economic climate. Gaining any sort of employment is still a real challenge for many young people, especially those with few educational qualifications or previous work experience. These quotations reveal how well motivated many of the young people are, all wanting the chance to gain the skills seen to be necessary for future careers:

At the moment it's not a good … trying to get a job in Glasgow it's a bit harder now because they're looking for the more experienced people. So I need a good bit of volunteering and a good bit of work to try and get the skills to get an actual full time job in Glasgow, so it's a bit hard. (**David, Glaswegian)**

Probably seeing if I can do like kind of work and actually get paid for it. Because if I can do it, I mean at least I can say I've volunteered into café work, and possibly get jobs. **(Oliver, Glaswegian)**

I'm going to be doing volunteering now, so our local shop down in the city centre, so that will be a good work…that will be a good experience you know to improve my customer service skills, you know. So that's quite good, and I'm hoping to continue it you know if I do well. **(John, Glaswegian)**

What I'm hoping to get out of the volunteering is … I will fall in love with it [caring work] even more, and then after I'm done with my voluntary, like start like a college course, and then from there obviously get like a degree and then obviously change my career path towards social care. **(Frederick, African)**

Some contexts were enjoyed more than others however. It was clear that those organizations which took on board that training was an essential responsibility, as was providing good quality work, were much appreciated

by the young people. A supportive and not overly pressurized atmosphere also helped those who lacked confidence. Tangible new skills which could be learnt and quickly demonstrated were particularly welcomed:

Here is like just serving food to people and just smiling at them…It's quite relaxing as well at the same time. Not too pressured, and just being friendly to people … *[the manager], he's been nice, supportive and all that stuff, and teaching me how to do it Yeah, it's nice.* **(Eri, Somalian)**

….taking orders, cash handling, washing up…. Also took out food and that to the customers, and then … [the manager] having to go out and take a phone call and me having to take all the orders for like half an hour, that was pretty fun! It was actually OK, yeah! **(Oliver, Glaswegian)**

In other contexts, experiences were not so positive. Young people were left on their own, provided with little instruction, or asked to do overly menial or even meaningless tasks. It was clear that the young people quickly became dispirited, as this example reveals:

Yeah that was terrible, it was seriously terrible. Like you were there by yourself. It was just not fun. Everything was disorganised and the atmosphere was like really not inviting somehow, I don't know why. It just didn't feel right! **(Isabella, Lithuanian)**

So I tried to do some retail and really I found myself just staring at the wall the whole day. I thought it might pick up, it might have just been a slow day. And then after about, what was it, 3 days into it, I just decided no I'm going to pack it in and try somewhere else. **(Drummond, Glaswegian)**

I don't know how to explain it….they're not that friendly in a way. Like you know they can talk about one thing and then the next thing it's just like "what the hell were you meaning", you know it's just one of these kind of places. I can't really explain it, but it's about something there. No it didn't feel right to be honest **(Oliver, Glaswegian)**

In these situations, Volunteer Glasgow acted swiftly to sort things out. They saw it as essential that the organizations offering volunteering experience recognize their responsibility to develop the workplace skills of the young volunteers, while recognizing that some of them had particular needs that need to be accommodated. These include both the 'hard skills' of employability, but also soft skills such as confidence and personal abilities. It was clear that many of the young people could see how the programme was helping them develop these:

*Yeah actually more confidence I would say, talking to people, like it's just mainly that***.** *Actually I never knew what to say during the interview, so I think it might help me to figure out what to talk about. So it should be really useful.* **(Isabella, Lithuanian)**

When I first came here I was dead shy and hardly talked to anybody, I didn't, but they bring you out of that shell so they did, so definitely help you. **(David, Glaswegian)**

I'm a bit shy you know when I meet people on most occasions and I've not got very good telephone skills, I'm quite scared to use it you know because I just find it quite … and so obviously that's a big part of thing working in a travel agent, so I'm hoping to do work so I can improve that, you know, so at least I know what I need to work on and where I don't….where I'm fine, you know. **(John, Glaswegian)**

The thing about me is that I like…I've been finding out recently more is that I'm like very open-minded, so even though my background is sports I like doing other stuff as well. **(Frederick, African)**

I would say like I've become like more understanding of people, I've become like more friendly and stuff like that. Not that I wasn't before, but I would say like all these things, saying the small things for me like probably is like helping me even more. **(Frederick, African)**

In sum, it was clear that the young people on the programme, in spite of the diversity of their educational, social and health backgrounds, all gained substantial and multiple benefits from the programmes offered at Volunteer Glasgow. Few would disagree with David, who summarises:

I would definitely recommend to come here, very, very much.

6 BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

It was clear that many of the young people gained much more from their volunteering experiences than employability skills. Several declared that they wished to continue even if they were successful in securing paid employment.

If I've got free time, why not? It's nice to help out….Yeah, I think it's been good to help out. If you're free and not doing nothing, it's not like just sitting in the house and you're better to go out and help outYeah. It's good to do it. Especially help people. **(Eri, Somalian)**

Well I guess if I get a job, my plan would be to continue it, even you know the volunteering place. **(John, Glaswegian)**

Isabella, an undergraduate who also had a substantial part-time job in a fast food chain, enjoyed the fact that her volunteering provided her with something else to do apart from 'just work':

Yes, doing something in my spare time because I can have….I'm always working so I wanted to have a reason to take a day off, you know?

7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings show a significant demand from young people for the training and qualifications provided by centres such as Volunteer Glasgow to support their work and career aspirations. Many of our respondents believe they have the ability to make a productive contribution to the economic life of the city, given the opportunity and the right environment. Although perhaps lacking in those skills deemed to be essential for economic remuneration, they are motivated to gain the relevant training and experience in order that these may be obtained. However it also clear that a 'one size fits all' approach to developing young people's employability skills is not appropriate, given the diversity of their educational, social and health backgrounds. This is where the real strengths of the programmes offered by centres such as Volunteer Glasgow most clearly reveal themselves. Our findings show that these are perceived to offer substantial benefits across the full range of course members. Most highly valued are the individualistic and caring approach of the staff, the sensitively designed curriculum of both classroom tasks and the opportunity for real workplace experience. However, for the programme to be fully successful, it is also important that organizations offering volunteering experience fully recognize their responsibility towards the training and employment of young people. Trainers and employers now need to work together to meet the needs and build on the potential of young people.