Successful partnerships with third sector organisations to enhance the healthcare student experience: A partnership evaluation

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Successful partnerships with third sector organisations to enhance the healthcare student experience: A partnership evaluation.

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Abstract

There is limited research surrounding academic partnerships and more research is needed to educate universities, and the private, public and third sectors about the benefits and limitations of such partnerships. The aim of this study was to outline the unique partnership between Macmillan Cancer Support and De Montfort University and to evaluate the progress of this partnership. A qualitative approach was employed which involved interviews with nine members of the partnership's steering group. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The results showed that a partnership between a university and a third sector charity can have mutual benefits for all those involved, particularly for students and those affected by cancer. Furthermore, the module to develop volunteering among families affected cancer, created through this partnership is now being considered by other universities as a way of providing holistic and non-traditional lecture based learning experiences. Recommendations are made for future partnerships between third sector charities and universities.

Key Words: Partnership, Academic, Third-Sector, Health Care, Students, Volunteering, Cancer Support
Background

University–community partnerships can be described as ‘the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination activities’ (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 1998, p. 239). Partnerships between universities and public sector organisations or the private sector are well established and have been shown to benefit both parties including students. Buys & Bursnall (2007) argue that these benefits can include new insights and learning, better informed community practice, career enhancement for both the students and the facilitators, improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, additional funding and more frequent and higher-quality publications (Davies, 1996; Landry & Amara, 1998; Kellet & Goldstein, 1999; Mead et al., 1999; Amabile et al., 2001; Hollis, 2001).

Joint partnerships are based on agreed models of working. Sargent & Waters (2004) model of academic collaboration suggests that partnerships between universities and outside parties go through cycles of four specific phases to form a partnership. The first phase, the initiation phase, focuses on the motivation for each partner to be involved. Motivation is often instrumental (specific knowledge, complementary skills and employment advantages), intrinsic (building friendships/relationships, the enjoyment of working together) or a combination of the two. The second phase, the clarification phase allows those involved to identify issues relating to the duration, scope, collaborators and goals of the project. The third, or implementation phase allows for roles and responsibilities to be identified. Finally, the completion phase refers to how the partnership rates the success of the project in terms of objective, subjective and learning outcomes. Additional interpersonal (trust, communication, mutual respect) and contextual processes (support from faculty members, information technology and administrative staff) are also placed as highly important within successful academic partnerships (Buys & Bursnall 2007).

Despite these numerous benefits, there is limited research surrounding academic partnerships. Davies (1996) argues that both academic and community partners are able to benefit from collaborative research within academic partnerships, however community partners may be less aware of these benefits within their day to day operations (Buys & Bursnall 2007). There is a call for more research to be able to educate the public, private and third sector about the benefits and limitations of the partnerships they are involved in (Buys & Bursnall 2007). By doing so, research outputs can be used within the university, the public and private sector and community to guide teaching and improve relationships within academia and the local community.

Partnerships between universities and third sector organisations are less common but have potential to benefit partner organisations, students, and local communities and develop citizenship between all of these. A prime example is the De Montfort University and Macmillan Cancer Support partnership, created to improve students educational experiences and employability, increase volunteering opportunities and create direct links to the local community. The aims of this paper are to:

1. Describes the unique partnership between DMU Macmillan Cancer Support
2. Discuss a partnership evaluation
3. Provide recommendations for the development of partnerships between universities and third sector organisations.

The DMU Macmillan partnership

De Montfort University (DMU) currently holds partnerships with private and public sector organisations such as Hewlett-Packard, BBC, the National Health Service Social Care, and Social Work. These relationships have been beneficial in developing students that are fit for practice.

As part of DMU’s ambition to contribute to the local community and improve the student experience, DMU and Macmillan embarked upon an innovative joint venture: a partnership between a university and a third sector organisation. Macmillan Cancer Support is a high profile national charity which aims to improve the lives of those affected by cancer by offering a variety of services including advice, guidance, volunteering, fundraising, campaigning and support from health care professionals. DMU and Macmillan aimed to provide students with valuable volunteering experience.

Initial discussions were held in November 2012 and a formal partnership was agreed in 2013, creating the DMU Macmillan volunteering module. The aim of the partnership was to provide volunteering experiences for students and at the same time benefit cancer sufferers, their carers and their families. The module supports students from DMU to help improve the lives of local people affected by cancer. The purpose of the module is to develop relationships with Macmillan, other local volunteering organisations and the wider community. The intended outcome is for development of student key skills and employability. Governance of the partnership project has been via a Steering Group.

The volunteering module is hosted within the School of Nursing and Midwifery, is open to students across the faculty and attracts 15 credits at level 5. The module includes workshops and training sessions which are delivered jointly by Macmillan and DMU staff. Students are required to undertake 100 hours of volunteering placements and complete an academic assignment. A range of volunteering opportunities have been developed that allow students to work with other partner organisations within the locality. The module runs across three years which allows students to spread their volunteering placement hours.

In a short space of the time the module has proven to be successful, earning several award nominations for the partnership, the module, and the student volunteers. Twenty-two students enrolled on the first intake, completing up to 100 volunteering hours each and over four hundred students attended the information day for the second intake. The partnership achieved national recognition when it was discussed in the Houses of Parliament as an exemplar of excellent practice, generating interest from other universities aiming to implement similar partnerships.

Partnership evaluation

Evaluation of the partnership took place after one year to identify strengths, weaknesses and benefits. As part of the evaluation, steering group member agreed to be interviewed.
Participants

The steering group was set up to govern the partnership and is chaired by the University’s Pro Vice Chancellor. Membership includes representation from Macmillan (Service Development, Learning & Development, Inclusion, Communications, Fundraising, and Information) and DMU (Research, Nursing & Midwifery, Administration, Student Union, Palliative Care and Communications). All fifteen DMU Macmillan steering group members were invited to take part in interviews. Nine members agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the telephone, depending on availability and preference of participants. Participants who were unable to attend for interview chose to exchange information via email. In these cases, participants were sent a list of questions. The interviewer then followed up with additional questions via email. Interviews were carried out by a research assistant. The interview questions were generated by the steering group members and focussed on the following themes:

- Individual roles within the partnership
- Key elements within the DMU Macmillan Partnership
- The value of the partnership
- Achievements and challenges within the partnership
- Benefits of the partnership

Data analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the research assistant. Transcriptions and written responses were coded into descriptive themes with each data item given equal attention in the coding process. Individual themes were grouped together into main themes. Themes were checked against each other and back to the original data set. The generation of themes was also checked by a second member of the steering group and themes were reviewed by the entire steering group to confirm they were representative and valid.

Ethical considerations

The project was an evaluation of a new initiative and did not require university ethical approval. However, confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were still maintained. All steering group members were involved in the design of the project and were fully informed regarding the interviews. Steering group members were able to opt in to be interviewed. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and written consent obtained.

Findings

Nine interviews were conducted with members of the steering group from both DMU and Macmillan. Of the nine interviews, eight were conducted via email and one over the telephone. The telephone interview lasted around 30 minutes. The following main themes and sub-themes were generated:
Partnership (uniqueness, challenges, and mutual benefits)

Benefits (students and society)

**Partnership - uniqueness**

The main discussion theme within the interviews was the partnership. Almost all participants described the partnership as something new, unique and original:

- “First of its kind” (participant 5)
- “The Chief Executive of Macmillan and local MPs are describing the partnership as groundbreaking to a wider audience” (participant 4)
- “I think it makes DMU and Macmillan appear forward thinking and not stagnant” (participant 8)

Many of the participants stated that this relationship was something other higher education institutions wished to emulate:

- “The partnership between DMU and Macmillan is the first of its kind and we have set the benchmark and we already know that other universities are following suit” (participant 1)

**Partnership - challenges**

While participants considered the relationship to be successful, they acknowledged the challenges of working collaboratively with different organisational cultures. Bureaucratic differences between the two organisations were particularly mentioned. While Macmillan found the university’s bureaucratic processes frustrating, DMU staff found the charity’s flexibility surprising.

- “volunteering recruitment processes have been rather clunky at times due to bureaucracy” (participant 4)
- “you can see the different organisational cultures through processes especially around recruitment, finance and organisation. Comparing our strengths and weaknesses is interesting and informative” (participant 8)

However both organisations contributed to the ‘flow of ideas’ and were able to ‘flex and adapt to accommodate new thinking and innovative ideas.’ (participant 4). The nature of the relationship was described as being ‘different’ from other university collaborations and ‘organic’ (participant 5).

**Partnership- mutual benefits**
DMU aims to contribute to the local community, and Macmillan aims to improve the lives of people with cancer and their families. The participants believed that the partnership and subsequently the volunteering module, addressed the aims of both organisations.

“**The partnership will help both DMU and Macmillan work within the community to help improve the lives of people affected by cancer**” (participant 1)

“**The partnership can be a catalyst to ensuring that the future workforce is armed with the skills and knowledge to care for the increasing number of cancer patients and other people affected by cancer alike**” (participant 3).

Participants felt that the successful outcome was dependent on the two organisations working together.

“**Strategically the key element is partnership. Organisations working together at a number of levels to help influence the care of the increasing number of people affected by cancer**” (participant 3)

**Benefits for students**

The benefits for students and for the wider society was a recurring theme in all interviews. These included giving students the opportunity to take control of their own learning and being able to experience situations that would not be possible within traditional lecture based learning. The contribution to society and particularly those affected by cancer was also discussed.

Undertaking the volunteering module gave students new opportunities and experiences which gave them confidence, control over learning experiences, exposure to real life situations and improved their CVs.

“**Students have been exposed to an experience of life that otherwise they would not have had**” (Participant 5)

“**Volunteering is a way of enhancing your CV and gives you real life experiences to talk about in job interviews. It is evident that graduate employers often feel that students have the academic skills but often lack the soft transferable skills required such as communication, leadership, problem solving skills - volunteering can help develop these**” (participant 1)

‘the students are thriving, they can decide what to get involved in and what they want to learn and write about’. (participant 8)

**Benefits for society**

People with cancer and their families were seen as the ultimate beneficiaries through the students’ volunteering activities. Volunteering was not just seen as being limited to the students’ university days but as a contribution to society which they could continue throughout their lives.
“practical and emotional support for people affected by cancer in Leicester has been identified as a gap and volunteers are stepping up to rise to this challenge” (participant 3)

“The partnership has been mentioned and recognised by Leicester MP Liz Kendall within the House of Commons and described the project as a fantastic initiative which is making a real difference in Leicester” (participant 1)

“It helps focus Macmillan’s resources and inform the wider population of what Macmillan is about and how it can help” (participant 3)

‘I think everyone feels good about this module because we are giving something back to the community, we are doing something for the greater good. ’ (participant 8).

Overall the findings showed that the partnership itself was unique and novel. It was a project that both Macmillan and De Montfort staff found completely new and this was a positive experience for most of the steering group. The partnership itself also bought about many mutual benefits including improved student experience and increased volunteering opportunities to help people affected by cancer. It also bought about some challenges surrounding the organisational structure of each partner, which at times may have been frustrating but were informative in the long term.

Discussion

The steering group members felt that the key issues in this successful partnership were the unique nature of the partnership itself, thereby acting as a bench mark for other universities, and the positive benefits to students, the partner organisations and wider society, and people affected by cancer.

Partnerships

Partnerships between universities and charities are uncommon, yet this partnership demonstrated qualities found in other more traditional partnerships. A recent concept analysis of partnerships identified eleven defining attributes included genuine and trusting relationships, honesty and openness, and communication and listening (Bidmead & Cowley 2005). Almost all of these attributes were discussed by steering group members from both organisations, and enabled steering group members to achieve role convergence (Robinson & Cottrel 2005). Role convergence occurs within multi-disciplinary partnerships as members become affiliated to “the team” rather than to different agencies. For example, during the partnership, documentation evolved to replace the phrase ‘DMU/Macmillan’ with ‘Team Leicester’.

There are however challenges which arise from working within different organisational cultures. While members of the steering group found these differences frustrating, it was possible to empathise and learn from each other. Working within a partnership allowed for mutual benefits for both Macmillan and DMU. Previous research shows that working within a partnership can provide mutual benefits for both parties, which can often be different for each partner (Breen & Hing 2012). For the University, benefits can include improved educational offerings; enhanced university reputation in the discipline and for cooperative
education partnerships and funds for discipline development and research opportunities. Benefits for the partner can include enhanced industry professionalism and legitimacy; increased professional status; better public image and control of abstract knowledge (Breen & Hing 2012). The findings of this evaluation show that the DMU Macmillan partnership, and subsequently the volunteering module, is providing many of these benefits by contributing to the local community and aiming to improve the lives of people with cancer and their families.

Benefits for Students

The evaluation findings indicated that this kind of partnership can generate many positive benefits to students. Overall these were: control over individual learning experience, and CV and employability skills enhancement. Other benefits for students included new work experience opportunities, increased confidence, and exposure to real life situations.

Volunteering through a university and third sector module provides an opportunity for students to act as producers of their own learning and actively control what they do and do not engage in. Students work alongside staff in the design and delivery of their voluntary activities thus increasing the responsibility they have over their own learning and the way they manage their experiences as a student. Not only does volunteering allow a student to develop academically and mindfully, research demonstrates that students who volunteer report higher levels of psychological well-being compared to non-volunteers (Windsor et al 2007).

Volunteering gives students the opportunity to be part of a critical pedagogy; it enables them to gain life experiences and have a sense of control over their learning which is not always possible through traditional teaching. Giroux (1988) argues that education and pedagogy promote and present a specific view of knowledge, values and desires and can shape the way students view the future. Pedagogy should empower learners to gain knowledge and skills to function as critical agents of society (Giroux 1988).

Based on our findings, it can be argued that student volunteering equips those involved with many of the cognitive and affective learning skills needed within holistic learning. During volunteering activities students are required to improve their current knowledge, comprehend, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate their own experiences. Volunteers are regularly required to indicate attitudes of awareness, interest, concern, the ability to listen and respond in interactions with others and the ability to demonstrate those attitudinal characteristics or values which are appropriate to their current environment. These kind of skills improve their ability to volunteer and can also be utilised within their later employment.

Through the development of these new skills, it can be argued that a volunteering-specific module promotes staff and students to be involved in an ‘engaged pedagogy’. Volunteering as an intrinsically worthwhile activity provides a means to positively impact upon the student learning experience and public perception of healthcare professionals by embedding care and compassion as an integral part of practice.

Research shows that employers have highlighted the need for highly educated and skilled people to ensure the success of their business (Brown & Lancer 1992). Previously a degree may have secured graduate employment, however because of organisational
changes and the ever increasing number of graduates; a degree is no longer a direct guarantee for employment (Harvey et al 1997). Furthermore, it is argued that graduates must develop a range of personal and intellectual attributes beyond those from a tradition study of program in a higher education institution (Harvey et al 1997). Bennett, Dunne & Carré (2002) found that graduate employees identify being able to ‘fit in’ as a major skill to be learnt. This meant that adapting to cultural expectations, pressures of the organisation and learning the “language of the job” were all important skills. These are difficult to teach in traditional higher education settings.

Further discourse suggests that volunteering gives students the opportunity to develop such attributes, Harvey et al (1997) found that strategic managers, line managers, graduate and non-graduate employees endorsed work based placements as they are claimed to help students develop skills that will help them to be successful at work. Moreover, a major motivator for young people to volunteer is the opportunity to gain work-related experience, skills, and qualifications that can help them in their education and careers (Eley, 2003). The DMU Macmillan volunteering-specific module can allow students to gain transferable and soft skills that are often difficult to achieve from lecture-based teaching. This can be seen as a more holistic way of learning that allows students to develop both academically and professionally.

Contribution to Society

Findings show that volunteering through the DMU Macmillan Partnership was seen as a way of contributing to the needs of society and it can be argued that this kind of partnership offers a solution to filling many of the gaps within our healthcare system.

Government policies such as “The Big Society” highlight the increasing need for more volunteers and demonstrate how volunteering is becoming increasingly politicised. The Big Society Policy, originally created by the Conservative party, aimed to create a climate that takes power away from politicians and gives it to local communities and individuals (Hawkins 2010). This policy has had a knock-on effect in a variety of areas within the UK because of the Coalition's drive to make £20bn of efficiency savings in England by 2015. Within the NHS this has included 7,060 clinical staff redundancies since 2010 and 4,620 frontline staff being made compulsorily redundant between 2010-11 and 2012-13, and a further 2,430 voluntary redundancies. (Cambell, The Guardian 2013). From this it can be argued that volunteers are required to fill such a drastic gap within health care. Dame Elisabeth Hoodless from Community Service Volunteers (CSV) said “volunteering should be introduced as part of national curriculum projects in schools and backed a United States idea that ties the funding of public bodies with the number of volunteers recruited”.

University students are a key component of the volunteering workforce that is, to date, a particularly under-utilized and under-researched segment of potential young adult volunteers (Francis 2011). A national survey in 2013 found that 44% of adults volunteered formally at least once a year with 29% volunteering once a month. This shows an increase over the previous two years from 39% and 25% (Cabinet Office, 2012/3). Despite this increase in participation, the average number of hours spent volunteering has declined, with evidence showing a particular trend towards episodic volunteering (Low et al, 2007). Full time students accounted for nearly half the sample but evidence suggests that volunteering among young people is in decline (Eppig, 2009).
The economic downturn has created additional pressures. Students face a number of barriers to volunteering, such as the rising costs of education and the need to undertake paid work, thus reducing the time available to volunteer (Sax et al 2005). In addition, it is felt that volunteering is suffering from an image problem resulting in a relatively low up take of volunteering activities (Steen, 2006). This reduction in volunteering activity is a concern because of the ageing population and health and social care policy becoming increasingly dependent on volunteers. A recent report highlights the vital role played by three million people in England who volunteer within the health and social care sectors. Fellows at the King’s Fund said “There are huge opportunities for volunteering to help transform health and social care services and bring about real improvements for patients and the wider public.”

Findings show that the DMU Macmillan partnership recognises these gaps within society and volunteering within the UK. It not only increases student volunteering but also makes it easier to volunteer and easier to provide support to those affected by cancer.

**SUMMARY**

The DMU Macmillan partnership is the first of its kind to introduce volunteering as an accredited module which will in turn help to increase students contribution to the local community and wider society. Through this partnership it can be argued that there are mutual benefits for students, the university and the third sector. These include meeting mutual aims, creating a more holistic learning experience for students and providing support for local communities.

**Recommendations for future Partnerships:**

- Understanding and working within different cultures of each partner organisation allows for both parties to accommodate new thinking.
- Partnerships such as this are an opportunity to provide non-traditional teaching and offer a new learning experience for the student.
- This partnership has increased both DMU and Macmillan engagement with the local community and in turn has provided, and will continue to provide, support for people affected by cancer.
References


Highlights:

- A description of the unique partnership between Macmillan Cancer Support and De Montfort University
- An evaluation of the partnership
- Collaborative partnerships with cancer based charities can benefit all those involved including the partners, students and people affected by cancer