

## Introduction

Benjamin Gray

Published online: 29 June 2011  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

### **The Rise of Voluntary Work in Higher Education: New Perspectives and Directions on Student Volunteering**

This special issue of the *Journal of Academic Ethics* focuses on the growing and global phenomenon of the voluntary work of students in Higher Education. Volunteering has been suggested by Hodgkinson (2003) to be a central part of most societies throughout history. Moreover, the current weight of expectation about the contribution it can make to personal and individual development, addressing social exclusion and need as well as promoting community involvement and cementing social cohesion has never been greater. Universities increasingly promote the voluntary activities of their students, through schemes such as Widening Participation and Aim Higher in the United Kingdom, which aim to recruit people into Higher Education from more marginalised and non-traditional scholarly communities, such as people from ethnic minority groups and working class backgrounds.

In the main, volunteering initiatives could be taken as demonstrating the potential for universities and their students to demonstrate moral and social awareness, contribute to society and the communities in which they are based and therefore be seen to engage in a high standard of values, virtues and ethics. Voluntary work has a citizenship dimension (Blunkett 2003, 2008; Harries 2005; Russell 2005), which often focuses on helping people who are disadvantaged, marginalised, in poor health, have learning disabilities or mental health problems, have no qualifications and who are socially and educationally excluded. Voluntary work involves people's values and motivations behind helping others and touches on issues of social responsibility, personal maturity, citizenship, self and political awareness, character development and community involvement.

Successive governments in the United Kingdom, Canada, the USA, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere have advocated and promoted the importance of voluntary work. In the United Kingdom, for example, the promotion of volunteering and voluntary work is firmly established as a major priority for government action. The former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, included in his list of key challenges ahead for the government the aim

---

B. Gray (✉)  
Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK  
e-mail: btgray@hotmail.com

to increase overall levels of volunteering across all age ranges, social classes, ethnicities and backgrounds. The current UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, has recently launched his vision of a volunteering renaissance as the government plans to expand socially responsible investments through the idea of 'The Big Society', which involves all members of the community taking part in voluntary work and collective civic action.

The education, civic action and learning of young people is often described as a 'circle of inspiration'. A key issue is to more fully focus on 'volunteering journeys' and investigate the ways in which Higher Education can promote, support and encourage these journeys of inspiration, volunteering, personal development and citizenship.

This special issue does just that and explores the volunteering journeys, experiences, history and international dimensions of student volunteering. Five substantive and important articles explore the nature of voluntary work of students at university, providing new perspectives and directions on student volunteering.

The international study, *Cultural Values and Volunteering: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Students' Motivation to Volunteer in 13 Countries* (Grönlund et al.) examines how cultural values affect attitudes towards volunteerism, using data from an empirical research project on student volunteering in 13 countries. The findings suggest that there are differences in motivation to volunteer between countries which represent different cultural values.

*V for Volunteer(ing): The Journeys of Undergraduate Volunteers* (Simha, Topuzova & Albert) explores the experiential content of undergraduate students' journeys in volunteering, detailing the motivations, challenges and barriers that these volunteers face during their journey.

*"If This is What I'm 'Meant to Be'...": The Journeys of Students Participating in a Conversation Partner Scheme for People with Aphasia* (Jago & Roseingrave) provides profound and emotive insight that links student volunteering with issues in health and ameliorating social exclusion.

*Designing Programs with a Purpose: To Promote Civic Engagement for Life* (Bringle et al.) assesses the ways in which curricular and co-curricular civic engagement programs may contribute to nurturing civic-minded graduates. Models and strategies that enhance student volunteering are identified and discussed.

Drawing on six case studies of Higher Education Institutions selected to represent the diversity of the higher education sector in England, *University Support for Student Volunteering in England: Historical Development and Contemporary Value* (Brewis & Holdsworth) considers the value, challenges, obstacles and problems associated with the organisation of student volunteering. The article explores the issue that without adequate support, management and opportunities for reflection and placing volunteering in a wider social context, student volunteering can fail to be of benefit. The article outlines the development of institutional support for volunteering by students before assessing the value such support has for student volunteers today.

## References

- Blunkett, D. (2003). *Active citizens, strong communities—Progressing civil renewal*, Based on the Home Secretary's Scarman Lecture delivered at the Citizens' Convention, 11th December 2003. See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/activecitizensstrong>.
- Blunkett, D. (2008). *Mutual action, common purpose: Empowering the Third Sector*. London: Fabian Society.

- Harries, R. (2005). Government and volunteering; from Research to Policy, *presentation to the Institute of Volunteering Research Conference on Volunteering Research: Frontiers and Horizons*, in Birmingham, November.
- Hodgkinson, V. (2003). Volunteering in global perspective. In P. Dekker & L. Halman (Eds.), *The values of volunteering: Cross-cultural perspectives*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Russell, I. M. (2005). *A national framework for youth action and engagement*. London: The Russell Commission.