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150 word abstract for inclusion in the conference programme	The assumption that volunteering during unemployment is a stepping stone to paid work is behind several policy initiatives of the UK government aimed to improve employability through volunteering. This paper questions the extent to which empirical evidence supports this assumption. After systematising and evaluating the empirical evidence I conclude that - for a significant proportion of the unemployed - volunteering does not raise a jobseeker's chances of securing paid work. However, volunteering has benefits other than getting a job: it enhances employability skills and attitudes and it can be a productive alternative for individuals who cannot secure employment because of various barriers in the labour market. The policy implication of this conclusion is that including volunteering in policy initiatives might not be an effective immediate solution for high levels of joblessness. However, volunteering can be used to enhance the national skill base or to aid social inclusion of people who find it hard to secure a paid job.
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VOLUNTEERING DURING UNEMPLOYMENT: MORE SKILLS BUT WHERE IS THE JOB?

INTRODUCTION

During the current economic crisis the UK government is using volunteering as one of the solutions to high levels of unemployment. Under the Big Society agenda, government initiatives such as Work Together, a pilot voluntary work scheme for unemployed youth in London and the Olympics Employment and Skills strategy encourage or require the unemployed to do some voluntary work. These initiatives are based on the assumption that volunteering enhances the employability of the unemployed person and therefore helps them back into paid work.

This paper questions the evidence on which this assumption is based. How does volunteering during unemployment actually affect employability skills and attitudes and - more significantly – jobseekers' prospects of finding paid work?

The scope of this paper covers the links between formal voluntary volunteering and re-employment in the UK. It focuses on the unemployed individuals who would like to find paid work and are actively searching for it. This paper examines only the effects of formal volunteering - unpaid voluntary work that benefits a community and which is carried out in organisational settings for charitable and voluntary organisations; informal volunteering or unpaid work experiences carried out for private businesses as part of employability enhancement schemes are excluded.

VOLUNTEERING AND EMPLOYABILITY POLICY INITIATIVES IN THE UK

The growing interest of policymakers in the UK in volunteering as a solution for a range of societal problems has culminated in the Big Society agenda, which envisions a society where individuals take greater responsibility from the government for solving various societal problems and providing some public services (Cameron, 2010a). An important objective of the Big Society agenda is to encourage a volunteering culture that persuades and enables people to play a more active part in society (Cabinet Office, 2011).

The government's use of volunteering as a solution to societal problems has been prominent in the active labour market policies which form part of recent welfare reform in the UK and in the discourse of the legacy of the London 2012 Olympics. Thus since 2009 the UK government has introduced a range of labour market initiatives that involve volunteering during spells of unemployment. One of these employment-boosting labour market activities is a nationwide 'Work Together' initiative. Work Together '*aims to encourage unemployed people to consider volunteering as a way of improving their employment prospects while they are looking for work*' (DWP, 2011) citing that: '*It [volunteering] can help keep them in touch with the labour market. It [volunteering] can offer opportunities to obtain the skills and experience that can make moving into work easier*' (DWP, 2008). This initiative suggests

volunteering as a voluntary option of employability-enhancing activities for jobseekers unemployed for six months or longer.

Volunteering for employability has also been a strong theme in the London 2012 Olympics discourse, especially within the Olympics Employment and Skills strategy (London 2012 Organising Committee, 2010). The London 2012 Organising Committee (LOCOG) developed a range of volunteering programmes in partnership with a range of local authorities and government departments. This involved up to 70,000 volunteers in programmes that aimed to help the individuals, particularly those young and unemployed, by providing opportunities *'to develop new skills, raise their self-esteem and confidence, and open up employment and education opportunities'* and thus to *'reduce worklessness'*, (London 2012 Organising Committee, 2010).

More recently, a significant shift from *voluntary* to *compulsory* voluntary work for jobseekers has occurred. In August 2012 the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) announced a pilot voluntary work scheme aimed at improving employability and increasing the employment levels among young people (aged 18-24) who have been unemployed for at least six months since leaving education. Unlike the voluntary Working Together programme, participation in the pilot voluntary scheme is compulsory and a prerequisite for receiving unemployment benefits. The DWP states: *'Participation in the trial will give young people the experience they need of work, help to strengthen their CVs and enable them to compete more effectively in the jobs market.'* (DWP, 2012).

All these policy initiatives are based on the same premise: that volunteering during unemployment provides jobseekers with skills and experiences that will increase their competitiveness in the labour market and thus improve their chances of re-employment. But does volunteering during unemployment really *significantly* enhance the chances of re-employment? In order to answer this question using the available empirical evidence firstly it is important to clarify the term 'employability' and secondly, we must conceptualise the relationships between volunteering and employability.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VOLUNTEERING, EMPLOYABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

EMPLOYABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The term 'employability' needs some clarification as in volunteering during unemployment literature and policy documents it is routinely used as self-explanatory. In general 'employability' refers to an individual's 'capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required' (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p.1). This 'capability' depends on individual factors affecting one's chances in the labour market, also called 'employability skills and attributes', 'assets' or 'human capital' (e.g. Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). In this sense, employability represents the 'supply' side of the labour market (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), in other words: what an individual can offer to the employer. As we can see in the previous section, labour market initiatives including volunteering are explicitly focused on improving employability skills and attitudes through volunteering during unemployment. They also imply that skills and attitudes enhanced through volunteering can *'make moving into work easier'* (DWP, 2008).

However, having the right skills and attitudes does not always leads to employment, as McArdle et al. (2007) have pointed out. One can be employable (ie in possession of the necessary skills and attitudes) but because of external factors, for example, the lack of suitable job openings in a particular locality or occupation or because of employers' prejudices, one is not able to secure employment. Equally, an individual might have a low level of employability skills and be categorised as 'long-term unemployed' but become 'employable' in times of a workforce shortage. The external factors affecting employability represent the 'demand side' of the labour market (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) and these demand or structural factors are largely ignored by labour market initiatives promoting volunteering.

To summarise, the relationships between employability skills and employment status can be represented with the following equation: (Equation 1)

$$\text{Un/employment} = f([\text{Employability skills and attitudes} \times \text{Context}])$$

Equation 1 Relationships between employability and un/employment

where an individual's employment status is a function of his/her employability which include his/her employability skills, attitudes and the context of labour market. Therefore it is important to differentiate between the effects of volunteering on employability skills and attitudes and the effects that volunteering has on re-employment. This equation suggests that while volunteering could have positive effects on employability skills and attitudes (but only if it offers opportunities to enhance them), its effects on employment status could vary considerably depending on structural demand factors, for example, on whether there are enough job openings or whether employers value experience gained through volunteering.

VOLUNTEERING, EMPLOYABILITY AND RE-EMPLOYMENT: TWO COMPETING HYPOTHESES

Two competing hypotheses on the possible effects of volunteering on re-employment can be identified in the literature. Both are concerned with voluntary volunteering. No hypothesis has been proposed in the literature about the effects of so-called 'compulsory volunteering.'

The first hypothesis - the **enhancement hypothesis** - suggests that volunteering enhances employability and therefore increases chances of re-employment. This hypothesis focuses predominantly on volunteering as a means of improving individuals' employability skills and attitudes, largely ignoring factors of context, and assumes that improved employability skills and attitudes translate directly into re-employment. This is very much the hypothesis that the government is following in using volunteering as a policy instrument.

According to the enhancement hypothesis volunteering might serve as 'a stepping stone' for a re-entry into employment (Beck, 2000) because it helps to maintain and enhance individuals' human capital - skills, knowledge, and capabilities - and thus increase their chances of re-employment (e.g. Day & Devlin, 1998; Gay, 1998; Menchik & Weisbrod, 1987; Smith, 2010). Volunteering is also supposed to increase one's social capital, as it expands the number and quality of one's social contacts, especially the number of so-called 'weak ties' (e.g. Flap, 2002) which, according to Grannovetter (1976) are presumed to increase the likelihood of finding a new job through these social connections.

In contrast, the second hypothesis - **the replacement hypothesis** - argues that volunteering does not increase a jobseeker's chances of re-employment but does have positive

consequences as it provides a range of benefits for someone who is long-term unemployed. It proposes that volunteering can become a substitute activity for paid work among people who cannot find work for a long time due to context factors (i.e. there is no demand for their skills or other barriers exist) (Beck, 2000). Paid work not only provides a person with an income but also with time structure, social contacts, collective purpose, social status and activity opportunities (Jahoda, 1982) which are important for psychological wellbeing; volunteering during unemployment can act as a compensation or as ‘a meaningful alternative’ to paid work (Ockenden & Hill, 2009), as a way to counteract the negative psychological effects of unemployment.

To examine the empirical evidence in relation to each of these two hypotheses, a systematic literature review was conducted, the results of which are introduced in the following sections.

METHODS

This paper is based on an extensive literature search using several criteria through six types of sources, which yielded a final set of 15 publications. The search was done in: 1) Online collections of publishers (Elsevier, Emerald Insight, Sage Journals Online, Springer Link, Wiley Interscience); 2) Academic databases for social sciences (EBSCO, PsychInfo, Sociological Abstracts; JSTOR, Social Policy Digest); 3) In Google Scholar; 4) Using the references cited in the articles that were found; 5) On websites of relevant governmental agencies and third sector organisations (e.g. the Department of Work and Pensions, the NCVO, the Institute of Volunteering Research, and; 6) In the author’s own database. References to unpublished work were included only if the research was publicly available. Only studies published since 1998, the year of the previous literature review (Davis Smith, Locke, & Shepherd, 1998) were included in the review.

The following keywords were used in this search: ‘volunteering’, ‘voluntary work’, ‘employability’, ‘unemployment’.

The search led to nearly a hundred of hits, but only those papers that contained empirical analysis of relationships between volunteering among unemployed and employability and re-employment in the UK were selected.

RESULTS

The results of several studies provide little support for the enhancement hypothesis: for the majority of the unemployed voluntary volunteering does not significantly raise the chances of getting a job. However, volunteering has benefits other than the end result of getting a job – it enhances employability skills and attitudes and can act as a productive alternative to paid work for those who cannot find employment, as the replacement hypothesis suggested.

The few longitudinal studies that have sufficiently controlled for possible effects of individual differences have found that in general, volunteering has a weak or negative effect on the prospects of the majority of unemployed people in finding a new job. In addition the effects of volunteering vary considerably by age, gender and frequency of volunteering. For example, Paine et al. (2012), using a nationally representative sample of adults in the UK from the British Household Panel Survey found that volunteering has a weak effect on re-employment: those unemployed who did volunteer are only slightly more likely to find a job

than those who did not volunteer at all. In addition this weak effect varies by age and frequency of volunteering: volunteering has no effect on young people's re-employment but increases an older person's re-employment chances but only if they volunteer on a monthly basis or several times a year. The effects of volunteering can also vary by gender. Volunteering for a voluntary organisation during unemployment has a positive effect on men's re-employment but has no effect on re-employment for unemployed women in Britain (Strauß, 2008).

Paine et al. (2012) also found that frequent volunteering (e.g. volunteering weekly) can actually impede one's chances of re-employment while volunteering rarely (only several times a year) can have a positive effect on getting back into work. Similarly, for unemployed people with disabilities, volunteering several times a year had a positive effect but volunteering either more or less than that had no effect.

Volunteering can have negative effects on re-employment and its effects can vary for short- and long-term unemployed. For example, Hirst (2001) found that volunteers were on jobseeker registers longer than non-volunteers. Volunteering or volunteering too frequently during unemployment might negatively affect one's chances of re-employment, probably because - as Elam and Thomas (1997) have found - many people consider volunteering as a form of job search; a way of acquiring or updating the necessary skills for work, of gaining experience useful in job applications for certain sectors of the labour market. As a result they make fewer and more specifically targeted job applications and therefore might spend a longer time unemployed. Trickey et al. (1998) found positive effects of volunteering on re-employment of those unemployed for less than two years, but no effect for those out of work longer than two years.

Research also suggests that volunteering during unemployment has benefits other than getting a job. Volunteers themselves believe that volunteering during periods of unemployment does enhance their employability skills and attitudes: hard skills (for example, IT, language, business management and customer relations skills), soft skills (communication, teamwork skills, routines and time keeping, discipline) (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Hirst, 2001; Newton, Oakley, & Pollard, 2011; Nichols & Ralston, 2011; Ockenden & Hill, 2009) and volunteering helps them increase levels of commitment, confidence, motivation, discipline and self-esteem (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Gay, 1998; Hirst, 2001; Newton et al., 2011; Nichols & Ralston, 2011; Ockenden & Hill, 2009), which improves their psychological readiness for paid work. Voluntary work also gives a boost to their social capital (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005; Newton et al., 2011; Nichols & Ralston, 2011). However, the effect of these social networks on re-employment is not well evidenced - Hirst (2001) found in a survey of unemployed volunteers that only three in ten felt volunteering activity led to them hearing about employment, educational or training opportunities.

Other studies indicate that volunteering during unemployment does not cater for the employability needs of, for example, unemployed professionals, people with special needs and people on incapacity benefits (Lee, 2010; Vegeris et al., 2010).

Furthermore, some studies indicate that for jobseekers struggling to secure paid work (e.g. people with long term health issues and disability, the long term unemployed, individuals with caring responsibilities), volunteering becomes a replacement activity for paid work, thus supporting the replacement hypothesis.

Using data from a yearly census survey of people with long-term mental health problems in an inner London borough, Perkins and Rinaldi, (2002) have argued that volunteering (along with involvement in education) has become a replacement activity for paid employment for those with long-term mental health problems. They argue that, if volunteering is supposed to prepare people for paid work, it has not happened, because despite high involvement in volunteering, unemployment rates have continued to decline. Similarly, Loumidis et al. (2001) studying people on incapacity benefits found that volunteers stayed on benefits longer than non-volunteers. Baines et al.(2008) found a similar replacement effect among people who were excluded from the labour market (for example, because of family caring responsibilities or disability). For those people, volunteering provided them with a work-related identity and direction and acted, as one of the participants expressed it, ‘as an alternative to having a job’ (p.313).

DISCUSSION

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this review. Firstly, in general, voluntary volunteering does not increase the chances of paid work for a substantial proportion of the population and its effects vary greatly by age, gender, the frequency of volunteering and the length of unemployment.

Secondly, volunteering has benefits other than helping someone out of work get a job. It can enhance employability skills and attributes of some of the unemployed and volunteering can also serve as a meaningful alternative to paid work for individuals who encounter multiple barriers in the labour market.

Thirdly, there is no publicly available empirical evidence on the effects of compulsory volunteering during unemployment on re-employment.

According to the relationships between employability and un/employment status (Equation 1), there could be two main reasons why despite enhancing employability, volunteering often does not lead to higher rates of re-employment.

Firstly, while volunteering does provide individuals with some skills, they are either not transferable or relevant to the paid work, or they are not always the skills “*for which employers are crying out*” (DWP, 2012). For example, Lee (2010) - using data from semi-structured interviews with people on incapacity benefits in Scotland who were volunteering with the main aim of moving into the labour market - came to the conclusion that activities that volunteers are engaged in (e.g. sorting, ironing and hanging up clothes in the local charity shops) often do not develop into the transferable skills that they need for work.

The mismatch between supply (skills gained through volunteering) and demand (skills shortage in labour market) is not surprising as the predominant focus of current policies and research has been on which employability skills and attributes policymakers, voluntary organisations and volunteers think are important to increase the competitiveness of the unemployed (the supply side), not what employers are actually looking for and what is missing among the unemployed (the demand side). How likely volunteering can provide the unemployed with the skills relevant to hard-to-fill jobs, as for most of these, employers cannot find people with relevant job-specific, technical or practical skills, e.g. skills needed in trade occupations (jobs like butchers, chefs, carpenters, and electricians) (UKCES, 2012).

Remarkably, the voice of representatives from the ‘demand’ side (for example, managers making recruitment decisions) is absent from the studies and policy debates on volunteering. An exception is an ongoing study by Reilly (2011) who will examine third sector employers’ attitudes to volunteering. To what extent do employers actually take into account individuals’ volunteering experience and skills gained through volunteering when making selection decisions? These questions will become even more important if *compulsory* volunteering schemes are introduced nationally.

The second reason for the lack of impact of volunteering on re-employment can be that although some volunteering can enhance job-related skills, there might be a range of context factors why the unemployed cannot secure a paid work. In times when unemployment rates are historically high (ONS, 2012), even the ‘ideal’ unemployed person with relevant employability skills and attitudes might find it hard to re-enter the world of paid work.

CONCLUSIONS

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Currently there is not much evidence that volunteering during unemployment does help to secure a job for a considerable proportion of the unemployed. Does that mean we should abandon volunteering as an active policy instrument? Not necessarily.

Firstly, most of the studies discussed in this paper have examined the effects of volunteering in general but they have not evaluated any of the current policy initiatives, such as Work Together, volunteering for the London Olympics or the compulsory youth volunteering pilot in London. While volunteering in general might have a limited effect on getting paid work, more specific and better targeted volunteering programmes might be more efficient, especially if they provide the unemployed with skills that are in demand in the labour market.

Secondly, the findings suggest that volunteering can help to maintain and enhance the national skill base and also serve as a productive alternative to paid work for those who cannot find employment. Therefore focusing only on the issue of employability risks missing the wider social benefits and gains that people experience when they volunteer during periods of unemployment. Thus, in the long-term, volunteering will actually contribute to the economic growth of the nation and improved national wellbeing, both of which are among the stated aims of the current coalition government (Cameron, 2010b).

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Taking into account the limited numbers of studies that have examined the effects of volunteering on re-employment and the number of questions that remain unanswered, there is significant room for further research.

Firstly, perhaps one of the most crucial questions that need to be answered relates to the effect that volunteering has on employers’ recruitment decisions? Studies answering this question will help to understand better what role volunteering might play in the process of increasing the chances of re-employment among the unemployed.

Secondly, it is important to pay more attention to which factors relating to volunteering actually have an effect on employability and help people get paid work subsequently. For example, what kind of volunteering experiences have they been involved in? What

responsibilities have they had? What type of organisations have they been involved with and for how long? For example, some of the government's more recent volunteering schemes have a 'compulsory volunteering' element to them: in these programmes individuals who refuse to volunteer can lose their benefits - we need to have evaluation studies conducted to examine the possible effects they might have.

Thirdly, the effects of volunteering can vary under different macro-economic and welfare policy conditions. Now that we are anticipating several years of high unemployment and witnessing significant changes in welfare policies, the results obtained in pre-crisis times might not apply to the current labour market and policy context. Therefore there is an urgent need for up-to-date studies that examine the effects of volunteering on employability and re-employment in the current macroeconomic and welfare policy context.

Apart from the substantial outstanding issues that need to be addressed by new research into volunteering and employability, there are certain methodological challenges too. Experimental studies would be particularly suited to study the effects of compulsory volunteering. For voluntary volunteering studies the best option would be mid- to large scale mixed methods longitudinal panel studies that follow the same individuals and their unemployment and volunteering histories over longer periods of time. Such studies could examine whether particular volunteering activities do statistically increase one's chances of finding a job among a particular group of the unemployed, when controlling for an individual's previous volunteering and unemployment history, (un) observed individual attributes and a range of contextual factors. The qualitative components of such studies would allow the examination of in-depth volunteering experiences in individual and macro context.

But for now, the evidence suggests that for the majority of the unemployed voluntary volunteering does not significantly raise a person's chances of gaining a job. However, there are other wider benefits than simply getting a person into work. Volunteering enhances employability skills and provides a meaningful productive alternative for people who find it hard to secure a paid job.

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