

Value of volunteering more than economic

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With rising unemployment and fewer job vacancies, the current financial crisis has seen renewed policy emphasis in both Europe and the UK on volunteering as a route to employment, according to a new report from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC.)

'The Value of Volunteering' - which features contributions from academics, representatives from the UK government, third sector organisations and volunteers themselves - outlines fresh UK government initiatives to use volunteering to help people into jobs, and offers powerful examples of how volunteering can change people's lives for the better.

It also calls for more effective use of European Social Fund to incentivise providers to offer voluntary activity as a pathway to integration especially for groups furthest from the labour market.

Liam Clements, now employed as a youth worker, explains how volunteering helped him, commenting: "I felt the whole experience turned me into a leader and a great communicator, and I'm now very optimistic." Paul Murphy is also now in full-time paid work, with the experience he gained through his voluntary work considered invaluable by his new employer.

Recent months have seen significant activity from the UK government in the area of volunteering. Between April and July 2009, 1,200 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants reaching six months of unemployment took up volunteering placements through a new national brokerage service.

Additionally, the Office of the Third Sector now funds a National Talent Bank to provide volunteering opportunities for people whose work has been affected by the recession, and has created an Access to Volunteering programme to enable more people with disabilities to volunteer.

Dr Jeremy Kendall of the University of Kent points out that the value of volunteering now enjoys great recognition in both the UK and Europe - including the European Union (EU), the European Social Fund for example has long recognised voluntary activity as a positive outcome especially for disadvantaged groups. But he warns that the EU's emphasis on market-led economic growth may underplay the richness and breadth of volunteering, and that policy makers will need to keep this in mind when seeking to benefit from the EU's interest.

Concentrating on refugees as a group disadvantaged in the employment market, Dr Frances Tomlinson of London Metropolitan University argues that the value of refugee volunteering must be recognised, and that it must be properly resourced. She explains: "Even highly skilled refugees face a range of barriers to employment, and the transition from volunteering to paid work is often difficult. Resource issues aside, volunteers must be better protected by equal opportunities policies and practice, and volunteer experience should be given parity with that arising from paid work."

Speaking at the seminar 'The Value of Volunteering - Helping to build an inclusive and cohesive society', at which the report was launched, chair Tamara Flanagan of Community Service Volunteers (CSV) and the Third Sector European Network (TSEN) commented: "It is clear that, whilst good work is being done in the UK, there are concerns that some current policy approaches might limit the extent to which volunteering helps people and contributes to our society - we must find new outcomes to reward, and new ways of evaluating them."

Source: Economic & Social Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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