Discussion Paper
Unblurring the Boundaries?
Volunteering and other forms of Unpaid Work

Since the recession and the sharp rise in unemployment, there has been increased interest in volunteering from the public, government departments and those that work with young people and the unemployed. Volunteering provides skills and learning that can be transferred to the workplace and that can increase people's employability. In today's economically depressed times, where unemployment is high, it is important to find the widest range of ways to build employability skills and mitigate against the negative consequences for individuals, families and communities. Volunteering is part of the solution, alongside internships, traineeships, work placements and Government work programmes. As much as each of these interventions are valuable, it is important for volunteering to be distinguished from other forms of unpaid work.

Much of the energy from those supporting volunteer management good practices over recent years has been to ensure a clear distinction is made between volunteers and paid staff. This is mainly due to the wish to avoid employment legislation including National Minimum Wage Regulations, taxation and implications for social security benefits but also to prevent exploitation of volunteers and to maintain good working relationships between paid staff and volunteers. With the increased range of unpaid work and the number of people involved, the focus has shifted on how to distinguish volunteering from other unpaid roles.

This debate has been expedited by recent examples of volunteering and volunteer involving organisations being linked with poor implementation of the GB work programmes and criticism of unpaid internships. There is also a lot of confusion around language, definition and labelling of different forms of unpaid work. Internships have received considerable attention recently. (See the latest blog *The Sparking Controversy about Volunteer Internships* written by Susan J Ellis & Rob Jackson (July 2013) http://www.e-volunteerism.com/volume-xiii-issue-4-july-2013/points-view/1403 and also Volunteer Now's briefing paper, *Intern - Volunteer or Employee?* http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/fs/doc/publications/internship-briefing-paper.pdf (Oct 2011). There has been less discussion about student placements, work placements, work programmes and traineeships.

As increasing numbers of volunteer involving organisations involve other forms of unpaid worker it is important to analyse the similarities and differences between them. This includes how organisations can distinguish between them, if and why it is important to do so and what significance it has in terms of policy and practice.

Within this paper the definition of volunteering set out in the Volunteering Strategy for Northern Ireland sets the parameter for determining what activities fall within and outside its boundaries.

Volunteering is an _unpaid activity_; and in addition it must also have a _benefit to society_ and be carried out by _choice_ (Department for Social Development, 2012, _Join In, Get Involved, Build a Better Future - Volunteering Strategy for NI_).

Even with this definition, it is increasingly difficult to completely separate volunteering from these other forms of unpaid activities. It could be argued that in some cases some student placements can contain the three basic tenets of volunteering (Table 1). In most cases it is the lack of 'choice' in place of the 'mandatory' nature of some placements that differentiate a 'work programme or student placement' from a 'volunteer' role. This was one of the key issues being debated in recent criticisms of the GB work programme. In some instances volunteer involving organisations were accepting placements without being fully clear about the conditions attached to them. Setting aside ethical and moral dilemmas, this lack of clarity around role title also makes it less likely that appropriate policy and protocol will be set in place. We discuss this practical issue later in the paper as it is central to the need to identify appropriate 'titles' for different forms of unpaid work.

Key Characteristics of Volunteering- Found in Work Placements / Programmes?

Table 1		Characteristic of Volunteering	Characteristic of Work Placements/ Programmes
	Unpaid/No Financial Gain	Always	Sometimes
	Benefit to Community	Always	Sometimes
	Voluntary/Choice	Always	Sometimes

Are there distinguishing features of work experience/placements/programmes?

Student/work placements are normally part of a structured course/programme which includes course work and monitoring of key learning objectives connected to them and which are bound by formalised agreements or contracts. They are also always time bound i.e. six weeks – one year placement. In some instances, people can also receive an 'allowance / payment' for taking part in the course. In some cases this can mean a person is financially benefiting, in other cases it may actually mean only a reimbursement of out of pocket expenses.

Over the last 15 years, work has been done to encourage volunteer involving organisations to organise and professionalise how voluntary effort is utilised. It could be argued that the evolution of volunteering has also helped to blur the boundaries with other forms of unpaid work such as work/student placements and traineeships. This includes offering more structured support and training for volunteers, setting learning objectives and carrying out training needs analysis to ensure volunteers can carry out their role adequately. A new type of volunteering was created by HMRC called 'voluntary worker', these are people who receive 'subsistence' to cover the costs of carrying out their voluntary role on a full time basis but who would not fall under employment law, be entitled to the national minimum wage or be taxed on the subsistence payments. All of this progress has been a positive step for volunteer development and there is evidence that volunteer managers/leaders who apply good practice leads to more organised volunteering, more satisfied volunteers and greater retention (Skills-Third Sector).

It could be argued that work placements or traineeships have the individual's interests at the centre, with benefits to others as a by-product. However, motivations for starting to volunteer are also multiple and varied and can include self interest as the initial motivation, even though this can often change to become much more altruistic. For example, volunteering is increasingly popular as a form of work experience for school age people, people who are unemployed and those thinking about a career move i.e. real workplace experience, developing skills, building up CV etc. Furthermore, today as volunteer roles evolve to fit with the lifestyles, time availability and interests of individuals, time bound volunteering opportunities are also more common.

Perhaps the easiest indicator for distinguishing volunteering from other forms of unpaid work is whether the unpaid work is part of a structured course/programme where people have to carry out a placement in order to complete the course.

Again this may not be a completely water-tight way of separating volunteering out. For example, the National Citizen's Service Programme for young people is a structured Government programme which has a volunteering element to it. Young people have a 'choice' in whether they talk part in the Programme, the activities are chosen because of their public benefit and they do not receive payment over and above expenses connected with carrying out their volunteering.

Key Characteristics of Work Placements/Traineeships - Found in Volunteering?

Table 2		Characteristic of Work Placements/ Programmes?	Characteristic of Volunteering?
	Part of a structured course/ programme	Always	Sometimes
	Monitoring of key learning objectives	Always	Sometimes
	Specific start date	Always	Sometimes
	Time bound i.e. 6 week – 1 year place-ment	Always	Sometimes

Practical Reasons for Getting the Role Title Right
From a practical point of view providing individuals with an appropriate 'role title' will help identify key personnel responsible for different roles and will indicate the best management approach to take. What someone is called normally determines the protocol that is followed and who has responsibility for the individual, regarding risk assessment, insurance cover, day to day support etc.

It is important for volunteer involving organisations to be aware of the conditions, if any, under which people come to them to carry out 'unpaid work' For example, some individuals will request an opportunity to work unpaid in order to meet the requirements of a course or programme; in some cases a placement officer/case worker will approach the organisation first to set up a formal arrangement - this can make identifying the appropriate process to take clearer. However it isn't always that easy!

Key Messages for Volunteer Involving Organisations

1	**Identify and label the programmes/unpaid work opportunities clearly.**
2	**Have appropriate protocols and policies for volunteers and unpaid workers i.e. volunteer agreement, placement agreement, learning agreement.**
3	**Include motivations for engaging with your organisation as part of initial introduction. This is useful in matching the right people to the right role i.e. tasks and time commitment.**
4	**Before accepting referrals from schools, institutions, authorities be clear on the details, including the expectations and responsibilities of each party.**

In conclusion, some forms of unpaid work which are not commonly called volunteering can count as volunteering, if the principles of volunteering still apply i.e. unpaid (no financial gain), benefit to society and choice. For example, some unpaid internships can be counted as volunteering, but the more common title used is intern. Sometimes student placement and traineeships can actually be counted as volunteering because the key tenets of it still apply. It is not always possible to define them as two separate entities and by doing so one could be missing the voluntary contributions being made under another name, as well as weakening the links with volunteer management practices and the support infrastructure for it. However it is also important to keep the core values of volunteering true, otherwise there is danger of its value becoming diluted as well as risks of mismanagement of individuals and possibly exploitation.

Perhaps the key message for those organisations that may be involving 'volunteers' as well as other forms of unpaid workers is to use the key characteristics as set out in table 1 and table 2 as markers for establishing role titles and then apply the most appropriate policies and protocols to those individuals. Written good practice advice in relation to volunteer involvement i.e. including volunteering and the law, is available from the publications section of the Volunteer Now website.

This is a working paper which does not presume to have all the answers or to have covered all angles of the debate. However, it is intended to encourage conversation. Please feel free to put your point of view or experiences across on this matter in the civic engagement page of the Volunteer Now website - http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/civic-engagement or by emailing policy@volunteernow.co.uk if the discussion forum is closed.