UCL

Development Education Research Centre

Discussion Paper

Student Volunteering and Global Citizenship at UCL

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Introduction

This paper is based on a small study of UCL student volunteers doing placements through the Volunteering Services Unit (VSU) in 2016. The research aimed to identify the extent to which UCL students who engage in volunteering activities through UCL see a connection between their experience and UCL's mission of equipping graduates to be 'global citizens'. We were interested in how students understand the concept of global citizenship, how aware there were of this agenda at UCL, and to what extent their understandings aligned with UCL goals. We were also keen to explore whether students made links between volunteering and global citizenship, as well as how their volunteering and ideas about global citizenship related to their degree.

As a result of our research, we hope to contribute to the debates and evidence for education for global citizenship within higher education and specifically identify ways in which UCL's VSU can support students to have greater opportunities to develop the attributes outlined in UCL's Education for Global Citizenship programme.

Background

Volunteering has often been heralded as improving participants' confidence and communication skills, as having a role to play in increasing employability, and being able to contribute to the production of a vibrant civil society (cf. Saloman et al 2004, Dekker and Halman 2003). International volunteering, in particular, has also been explored in terms of its potential to support development of global awareness and global citizenship (Lough et al, 2014; Killick 2012; Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Devereux 2008; Simpson 2004).

Recent research has also emphasised a link between international experiences (including volunteering and studying abroad) and global citizenship within higher education, and explores the potential for young people to gain skills and experiences to help them to engage with global issues (Jones 2010, Rhoads and Szelényi 2011). There has been less empirical research, however, which explores the potential for local volunteering to support the development of global citizenship (a notable exception is Bamber and Harkin, 2011). There is, however, a significant body of conceptual writing from the fields of development education and global learning which argues for the complicated interconnections between the 'local' and the 'global' and which questions the necessity of international mobility in the formation of global awareness and citizenship.

Rather, in what ways can young people engage with global issues within a local context?

This research, therefore, starts from the proposition that, especially in a highly diverse multicultural setting such as London, there is significant potential for 'local' volunteering to support the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes for global citizenship.

Methodology

In order to be able to explore students' perceptions and understandings of their experience, the research was designed as a qualitative, interview based study. The study was approved through the standard UCL IOE Research Ethics process.

Sampling

A considerable number of UCL students volunteer alongside their degree programme, either through VSU or independent arrangements. In 2016, 2,008 students volunteered through the VSU (5.7% of the UCL student population). For this study, we selected participants who had volunteered relatively recently and who were volunteering on projects with themes of community and/or social action, where there were more likely to be connections between the experience and UCL's conceptions of global citizenship. They came from across UCL departments and were engaged in a range of different placements.

We interviewed a total of 54 current students, the majority of whom were women (44). This corresponds to trends within VSU more broadly (of whom 77% of volunteers are female). Most were undertaking an undergraduate degree at UCL (36), with 17 postgraduate taught and 1 postgraduate research volunteers.

Data collection: Interviews

Student volunteers were interviewed before starting their volunteering and again towards the end of their volunteering experience, in order to get a sense of how their understandings of their experience might have developed.
A team of interviewers, made up of academics in Development Education Research Centre, UCL Institute of Education, colleagues in the VSU, and UCLU Marketing and VP (Education & Student Affairs) office each completed 5 or 6 interviews either

face to face or via Skype. The initial interviews were conducted at the beginning of the spring term, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and covered topics including;

- Students' motivations to volunteer, including the relationship between volunteering and their degree, what they hoped to gain and what influenced their decision to volunteer

- Students' understandings of the concept 'global citizenship', whether they saw themselves as 'global citizens' and if they had taken part in other elements of UCL's global citizenship programme

- Students' opinions on different definitions of global citizenship, and for which they felt most affinity (examples included OXFAM and UCL's definitions, see appendix 1)

- Students' perceptions of any links between their volunteering work and global citizenship

- Students' perceptions of how their education and family experience contributed to their decisions to volunteer and their understandings of global citizenship

Of the original group of volunteers, 27 agreed to be interviewed a second time at the beginning of the summer term (approximately 4 months later, although this varied depending on the length of their placement). All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and students were asked to check the transcriptions before they were analysed.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was taken to interpret the collected interview data (Silverman, 2006). The research team identified a number of pre-existing themes based on the literature review and interview questions, and emerging themes from an initial read through of the interviews. Interviewers worked in pairs to code their own and each other's interviews in line with the agreed coding framework. Any new themes that emerged were shared with the research team so that they could be applied to all interviews. Each interviewer also provided an initial summary of the analysis of their interviews as a first stage in interpreting the data. These were collated and informed the presentation of the findings below.

Findings

This report outlines the initial findings from both rounds of interviews, outlining students' broader motivations, their understanding of global citizenship in general and whether students feel that volunteering brings them closer to achieving or identifying with UCL's global citizenship attributes.

Motivations to Volunteer

Perhaps unsurprisingly, student volunteers' motivations are varied. Many discussed the personal gains and opportunities for enjoying their activities, for socialising, and particularly for overseas students, learning more about London and the UK. Thus volunteers often chose options that tied into their pre-existing hobbies, academic interests and future career goals. Some specifically mentioned undertaking volunteering related to their programme of study, wanting to improve their CV, become more competitive in the job market and gain particular skills or real life experience relevant to their studies. In contrast, others deliberately chose to do something completely different to their studies.

Often equally important though was students' desire to help others and engage in community building. Although some participants were undertaking their first voluntary experience, many had volunteered previously, citing volunteering as something they had always done, as part of their way of life, or noting a strong history of volunteering in their family. Some were motivated by the aims of the particular organisation they volunteered with, feeling these were worth supporting and of special interest. Other students had not thought deeply about their motivations, it was just something that they just did, either because it was the right thing to do or they had always done it.

Some differentiated between types of volunteering and corresponding motivations, splitting activities into those they saw as more altruistic (e.g. soup kitchen) and for the benefit of others, and activities that were of more benefit to them as individuals because they were career related or social in nature. Thus motivations may well be connected to the choices student volunteers make about what kind of volunteering to engage in (cf. Holdsworth 2010).

Understandings of Global Citizenship

Our interviews revealed a range of understandings of global citizenship. We introduced discussion of global citizenship in our interviews with an initial open

question asking respondents what the term meant to them. This elicited responses that may be grouped into three themes. Global citizenship as: 1) a particular form of action and participation in civic life, 2) specific personal qualities and/or outlook, 3) connections beyond country of origin.

Thus global citizenship is often conceived of as something that people do, whether this is understood as a particular career choice such as working in international organisations to influence policy or provide aid, or as a form of personal growth or journey in the sense of having a global outlook, and interacting with diverse people from different places.

Global citizenship was a term that seemed most relevant to those students who were socially, economically and culturally mobile. This was particularly the case for those students who had some kind of international/ multicultural experiences, such as attending an international school or through family links. One participant, for example, feels her mixed race heritage and childhood in different countries is part of her identity as a global citizen:

> "On a personal level, it kind of also means to me, kind of the bringing together of heritages and cultures through like, call it, globalisation or whatever you want. Personally, I'm half Spanish, half Chinese, so I feel like a global citizen just because of my blood."

Another notes;

> "I see myself as part of this mobile population... I feel somewhat a part of that, of these people that, who knows where we'll settle and how long we'll settle for, and in that way, the term 'global citizen' could be applied."

Privilege, particularly the ability to travel and/or be exposed to different peoples, cultures and places seemed key to many definitions. Students also identified that this has a clear connection to understandings that were based on personal qualities and outlook, such as being informed about the world, respecting difference and learning about others. The ability to develop these traits was predicated on having access to other places and people or to live in diverse communities such as large cities. Connections with globalisation were therefore also a common theme. Interpretations were not always positive, however. An American interviewee critiqued global citizenship as "culturally imperialist", arguing that different cultures have different values and denoting anything as global or universal could mean imposing your values on others.

To deepen our discussions with students in the interviews, we then showed them two definitions of global citizenship, and asked their thoughts on these definitions and which they felt was closer to their own understanding. We used definitions from UCL and Oxfam (see appendix 1). Many students felt that the UCL definition placed

more emphasis on skills and employability, and the Oxfam definition related more to the qualities of a global citizen, such as an awareness of global diversity and a commitment to social justice. While Oxfam's tended to be identified as aspirational, many students felt UCL's made more sense for them at this stage of life and in light of their personal goals. This suggests that students prioritize different aspects of global citizenship in relation to their own position and stage in life. Our data indicates that the way in which students engage with this term are also likely to be context-contingent, backing up the suggestion that global citizenship is a fluid concept.

Perspectives on the links between volunteering and global citizenship

The two stages of interviews allowed us to consider whether students' views or understandings of global citizenship had changed, whether through having had more time to reflect on the ideas we discussed in the initial meeting or as a more direct result of their volunteering.

After volunteering, some interviewees did have additional comments and thoughts about global citizenship, whether they were critiquing it or seeing it as relevant in a different way than they originally thought.

> "…thinking about it more in relation to what I've been doing it seems to maybe make more sense. Especially… and living in London as well I've kind of, through volunteering, seen the different migrant communities here and the international aspects of it."

However, most interviewees were not new to volunteering so their current volunteering activities did not seem to represent a turning point in their motivations or in their views of volunteering or global citizenship. Indeed, many interviewees seemed to have skin-deep opinions about global citizenship; this was the case even during second interviews. It seems to be a concept that many students had not reflected on during or since their volunteering. This could be due to the type of volunteering experiences that perhaps did not relate to what they consciously considered to be global citizenship attributes. Generally, it was only those students who saw a connection between global citizenship and the community they were working with who made a connection between their volunteering and global citizenship. Two interviewees, for instance, were involved in volunteering as tutors in their native language (one teaching Chinese, the other Malay). Both noted that this allowed them to engage in 'cultural exchange' with their students, sharing experiences and knowledge of their home contexts as well as life in the UK.

Where change was noted, this seemed to come more from new experiences, rather than simply through further reflection, indicating the importance of experience in shaping understandings of global citizenship. One interviewee, for instance, had little knowledge of the concept of global citizenship in the first interview and did not see clear connections between this and her volunteering with a London-based NGO. However, she came to the second interview with quite different ideas as a result of further volunteering as a student facilitator in the UCL Global Citizenship summer school. She noted that teaching and discussing global citizenship with other students had supported her own learning in ways that were different to her previous learning through her studies, and had given her a more critical perspective on global issues.

Recommendations

Although this study was limited in scale, a key issue that clearly emerged is that while there are a number of potential ways to link local volunteering to global citizenship, more could be done to make these links explicit to student volunteers. Many of the students interviewed were quite ready to see themselves as global citizens – particularly due to previous international experiences or personal links – but they did not necessarily see volunteering in London as making a contribution to this. This suggests that it could be helpful to integrate opportunities for reflection on global citizenship within the volunteering experience. Examples might include asking student volunteers to write reflective diaries or bringing student volunteers together in groups to reflect on their learning during their placements.

It is also worth noting that for many students the motivation to volunteer may not be directly rooted in a desire to develop knowledge and skills associated with global citizenship, but rather a desire to improve employability or to 'do good' in a local community. In those cases, a strong focus on global citizenship may in fact decrease the attractiveness of the volunteering opportunities on offer. Even for those students in this study who could see potential connections between local volunteering and global citizenship, making these links was often a challenge and was unlikely to be at the forefront of their motivations or learning.

The study suggests that motivations to volunteer are therefore likely to have a significant impact on whether and how students see links between volunteering and global citizenship. However, there is relatively little existing literature in this area, which highlights a need for more research in the future. In addition to further exploring student volunteers' perspectives on local volunteering and global citizenships, this would also make a contribution to the existing literature on programmes which more explicitly set out to cultivate global citizenship, including

study abroad or taught global citizenship programmes such as UCL's. How do these diverse types of experience contribute to the development of global citizenship attributes, skills and knowledge? What are students' motivations to participate in different kinds of 'global citizenship' programmes? There is also a need for research with organisations who offer volunteering opportunities. What connections do they see, if any, between their volunteering placements and global citizenship? How could they help support students in developing global citizenship attributes whilst volunteering? Exploring these questions will help to better understand the perspectives of both student volunteers and volunteering providers.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

UCL Definition and GC Programme

Education for Global Citizenship at UCL

Studying at UCL is much more than attending lectures and sitting exams. We're proud to have a diverse student body that engages with the whole range of opportunities on offer, who leave us as 'global citizens'.

The UCL Global Citizenship Programme allows students to develop and demonstrate the qualities of a 'global citizen', whether by responding to some of the real-world questions tackled by the UCL Grand Challenges, or working with a local voluntary sector organisation to meet the needs of the local community.

The Programme offers a real and transformative experience for students participating and for our external partners.

Global Citizenship attributes

At UCL we want our students to become not just experts in your disciplinary fields, but global citizens, who:

- look beyond their individual and local interests and see the complexity of an interconnected world
- understand the nature of the challenges that face that world
- are aware of their social, ethical and political responsibilities
- are ready to display leadership and work together to change the world for the better
- are able to solve problems through innovation and entrepreneurship
- prosper in a global jobs market that values the skills UCL provides

By taking part in the UCL Global Citizenship Programme, you will have additional opportunities to develop and demonstrate these characteristics alongside your degree programme and extra-curricular activities.

OXFAM'S Definition of Global Citizenship

Oxfam sees the global citizen as someone who:

- Is aware of the wider world and has a sense of their own role as a world citizen
- Respects and values diversity
- Has an understanding of how the world works
- Is passionately committed to social justice
- Participates in the community at a range of levels, from the local to the global
- Works with others to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place
- Takes responsibility for their actions

The UCL Institute of Education is a world-leading centre for research and teaching in education and social science, ranked number one for education worldwide in the 2017 QS World University Rankings. Founded in 1902, the Institute currently has more than 8,000 students and 800 staff. In December 2014 it became a single-faculty school of UCL, called the UCL Institute of Education.

The Development Education Research Centre (DERC) was launched in November 2006 with funding and support from the UK Department for International Development . It acts as the hub for knowledge generation, new thinking and quality output on development education, global learning and global citizenship.

The UCL Volunteering Services Unit (VSU) is a team based in UCLU who are dedicated to connecting UCL students with charities, community groups and volunteering projects across London.

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