

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This paper explores perceptions, and provides insights, from students who volunteer in policing whilst also studying the College of Policing licensed professional policing degree (PPD) in Wales. It examines issues that act as enablers and blockers to volunteering in this public service, which also provides opportunities to develop their employability towards the careers to which they aspire. The paper provides insights from students and makes recommendations of interest to multiple stakeholders locally, regionally, nationally and internationally regarding attracting and recruiting volunteers.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

Focus groups were conducted with students at three separate universities in the South and West of Wales. These undergraduate students were volunteers in different police forces and agreed to take part in connection with their experiences. The results were analysed using NVivo to establish commonalities.

### **Findings**

The paper provides empirical insights concerning the issues surrounding the way those undergoing the process for recruitment as volunteers within policing are either hindered (blocked) or assisted (enabled). It identifies specific problematic areas as well as areas which have been of assistance. Policy makers, educators and recruiters should be aware of such blockers and enablers when considering adopting volunteering as an opportunity to enhance student employability. It also has resonance for other forms of volunteering in alternate public services.

### **Originality**

The research is based upon the experiences and perceptions of those individuals who are actually engaged in volunteering.

## Research limitations/implications

This research is limited to those volunteers who are undertaking the licensed PPD at three separate universities in Wales. Although the research adds to the broader evidence-base with regards to volunteering and its use to enhance employability.

## Practical implications

The paper includes practical implications for multiple stakeholders including university programme educators, administrators and decision makers in policing with regards to volunteering, employability, programme structures and process management.

## Introduction

Higher education is expected to develop graduates who are employment ready, possessing key transferrable skills, being good communicators and adaptable team workers who also possess specific knowledge and abilities associated with their degree (Small et al., 2018). There is recognition across many European countries of the importance of improving links between education and employment (Cedefop, 2020). The development of student employability is however complex and multi-faceted (Jackson and Cook, 2023), but is essential not only to the student and their future employers, but also to higher education, local communities and the wider economy (Tibby and Norton, 2020). However, during and post Covid19 the opportunities for students to enhance their employability through significant face-to-face work placements have reduced and become restricted (Blackwell, 2021).

One possible solution to assist in the development of skills for employment is for students to engage in formal volunteering (Evans and Yusof, 2023). Jackson and Cook (2023) call for further research into specific aspects of employability beyond the traditional approaches. With Callender et al., (2019) adding how we need to better understand the volunteer experience. There is a specific need to explore wider options for volunteering within criminal justice to aid undergraduate policing students' development of their employability (Pepper and McGrath, 2019). Although for many reasons (including considerations relating to risk,

liability, access to information and wellbeing) the opportunities for students of policing to engage within the police service to enhance skills of employability are somewhat limited and, in some cases, declining.

Limited research has been conducted into the professional body licensed policing degrees, in particular the impact on the significant number of students studying the Professional Policing Degree (PPD) across England and Wales and their opportunities to formally volunteer with the police service in order to enhance their employability.

In response to a partially funded Welsh project to bring together expertise from both academia and the police service in Wales, researchers collaborated across three universities to explore aspects of volunteering in policing through the lens of higher education students studying the PPD who also volunteer within policing. This is an under researched area where research is required to establish what may be considered as ‘enablers’, those issues which encourage and support people to volunteer, and those considered as ‘blockers’, which act to prevent individuals from formally volunteering and a result may impact on their development of skills for employment.

The aim of this partially funded research was to explore with PPD students, who were also volunteers, what their experiences were of engaging in volunteering along with the challenges they face as a result of volunteering, in particular what blockers exist, what they felt were enablers which assisted the process of volunteering (or not volunteering) as well as suggestions that would make the process for volunteering easier.

## **Literature review**

Work-based learning is not new concept in higher education and can be traced back many decades (Atfield et al., 2021). Workplace experiences can be gained in a variety of ways including part-time employment, internships or integration within educational curricula through collaboration and partnership with industry (Brooks and Youngston, 2016). The importance of such employability for the individual student, higher education, industry and

the economy being widely discussed (Yorke, 2006; Tymon, 2011; Tibby and Norton, 2020, Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022).

Yorke (2006) describes a working definition of employability for use in higher education which establishes that graduates are more likely to gain employment in their chosen careers and be successful, benefiting a range of stakeholders, due in part to achieving specific skills, understandings and personal attributes. Jackson and Cook (2023) take this further to explore a range of human, cultural, social, identity and psychological capital developed by a learner through employability as they move from their higher educational studies to the workplace. However, the benefits of engaging in work-based experiences are not always appreciated by learners and more should be done to evidence the impact of such engagements (Brooks and Youngston, 2016; Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022). As a result, learners will be able to make informed choices as to whether engage in such activities or not (Brooks and Youngston, 2016).

The development of employability skills through work placements generally has a positive effect on both academic attainment and their employment outcomes (Atfield et al., 2021; Divan et al., 2022). Small et al., (2017) agrees, reporting how studies support the value of work placements for the development of student's employability, with Rees (2021) adding that when employability is embedded effectively within teaching, it supports and empowers the achievement of educational aims. Such work placements also enable graduates to 'stand-out' for employers from their fellow students who, for many reasons (such as lack of interest, available time, associated costs etc.,) may not have been on placements (Atfield et al., 2021). Embodying skills of employability can therefore make the difference between an employer recruiting an individual who does a task only when asked as opposed to an engaged employee who takes initiatives and thrives as a team member (McGunagle and Zizka, 2020).

However, Divan et al., (2022) highlight disparity in access to work placements by different groups of university students, which may be due to many factors including age, gender, disability, socio-economic group). In addition, those students completing placements remotely within the profession of social work report that the lack of direct face-to-face experiences may well impact on their readiness for the workplace (Blackwell, 2021). Morley (2023) identifies the huge fiscal burden placed on students who are required to complete mandatory unpaid work-based experiences in order to successfully complete a programme of

study. Further, in 2020/21, there were over 2,751,000 students within higher education across the UK (HESA, 2022), many of whom would be searching for opportunities to develop their employability in their chosen field, perhaps creating a competitive process for limited places.

Despite this, providing opportunities for students to take part in extra-curricular activities, such as volunteering, may be a viable alternate option to develop and recognise employability (Little and ESECT Colleagues, 2006; Evans and Yusof, 2023). Experiences gained through volunteering may at the same time assist charities and not for profit organisations who are facing significant financial challenges (Evans and Yusof, 2023).

Some voluntary opportunities, such as in the health care professions, directly relate to a student's undergraduate studies and career aspirations (Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022; Evans and Yusof, 2023), such student participation in both higher education and work-based learning develop great pathways to evolve their employability (Jackson and Cook, 2023). Work-based learning is regularly adopted within programmes for the professions such as social work and probation (Bramford and Eason, 2021). But for those degrees which do not have formal placements, engaging in volunteering by students enables them to apply their new knowledge and skills to real workplace situations, increasing their confidence and employability (Barton et al., 2019).

The good news for students is that the NCVO (2020) report an increased demand for volunteers to support the public sector, with the age profile of some public sector volunteering, such as the police special constabulary, being generally younger age groups. However, there is limited research on the recruitment of such volunteers within policing and the subsequent effect on their employability.

### *Volunteers in policing.*

Whilst it may be assumed that volunteers in policing are a free resource, their recruitment, training, supervision and management, provision of facilities, equipment, expenses and insurance mean this is not the case (Wolf et al., 2017; Bullock and Millie, 2017; Unison, 2019; van Steden and Mehlbaum, 2019; Pepper and Rogers, 2022). The benefits of engaging volunteers extend well beyond the economic to include their impact on society, communities

and individuals (Pepper and Rogers, 2022), although there has been some concern raised with regards to job-substitution (Unison, 2019).

Bullock (2014) suggests that the utilisation of volunteers by the police service can be associated with a range of positive outcomes including the improvement of legitimacy of the police by being a bridge between the police and the public, galvanising communities into action, whilst representing local strengths and the diverse needs within communities (Home Office, 2010). However, debates continue on their deployment, roles, benefits and impact in numerous countries including Germany (Reichl, 2022), the Netherlands (van Steden and Mehlbaum, 2019) and Sweden (Löfstrand and Uhnöo, 2020).

In terms of public sector volunteering in Wales, Clubb (2018) points to an aspiration for the future of volunteering to be well planned and resourced, and as a result enable partnerships to flourish. The Welsh Government (2021) describe how the universities across Wales are an important presence in their regions, providing education, research and attracting students, whilst supporting local communities, employment, local development and enhancing the regional economy. Research on university students' voluntary involvement with or for policing in Wales, perhaps as a uniformed special constable (SCs), is therefore valuable.

Other formal volunteering within policing, includes being a police support volunteer (PSV), perhaps supporting volunteer police cadet youth schemes embedded across the police forces in Wales. In the 1990s volunteering opportunities started to expand, with volunteers more formally taking up a range of roles with the police, including volunteering to staff police station front counters (Millie, 2019). It was at this time that the label of PSV emerged as a role (Bullock, 2014) to cover the activities of such non-warranted, and (usually) non-uniformed police volunteers. In addition, informal volunteering supporting policing includes other voluntary associations, such as neighbourhood watch or community speed watch. Both volunteer organisations have a community focus and links with the local police but are not formally recognised as volunteering for the police.

### *Special constables (SCs).*

SCs are volunteer police officers who commit to engage in frontline policing across England and Wales. These trained and uniformed volunteers have the same powers as a regular police officer when on duty. Recruitment opportunities for SCs are advertised by each force,

however there are national recruitment requirements and standardised expectations of training.

However, the number of SCs is at an historic low, having decreased by almost 60% over 10 years to under 7,840 (Home Office, 2023). There may be numerous reasons for this including competition for an individual's spare time, the recruitment of special constables into regular policing roles through the three-year 20,000 police officer recruitment programme and the removal of inactive SCs from administrative systems.

#### *Police support volunteers (PSVs).*

The roles performed by PSVs vary significantly within and between police forces. Subject to relevant vetting, a volunteer can assist with a wide variety of tasks, these include liaising with the public in police station front offices, general administration, role acting during training sessions or as a police cadet leader. In some forces, PSV's also use their existing professional skills, such as in information technology, to support policing. The Home Office (2023) report how there are slightly over 8,000 PSVs across the police service of England and Wales, with numbers remaining fairly static. Similar to SCs, each police force advertises roles for which they need voluntary support, with individuals being able to contact the force they are interested in volunteering with and negotiate their availability. Training offered to certain groups of PSVs appears to be focused on the volunteer's role and ensuring compliance with mandatory requirements (Pepper and Rogers, 2023). It is interesting to note that many police forces state that they welcome university students.

#### *Police Student Volunteers.*

A number of universities offer a Student Volunteer scheme. Such students volunteer with Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs), in many ways mirroring the roles of PSVs. Students engage directly with their local communities and in particular the student population, always volunteering under the supervision of NPT members. They may, for example, perform leaflet drops in student accommodation and housing in support of crime reduction initiatives. The recruitment of Police Student Volunteers is initially administered through the university, then through liaison with the NPTs.

Clearly there are benefits for both policing and the volunteers themselves for supporting the police service, but the number of individuals who are engaged in such activity appears to be reducing quite considerably. Pepper and McGrath (2019) also identify that participants in their research reported limited opportunities for undergraduate students of policing to gain relevant work experience within the police service.

Cedefop (2020) discuss the growth in Europe of vocationally focused learning within higher education. Across England and Wales, approximately 45 universities and colleges are licensed through the professional body for the police service, The College of Policing, to teach the Professional Policing Degree (PPD). The PPD is specifically for students who aspire to join the police service but have not yet been recruited. In excess of 1,000 students are studying this knowledge-based professionally focused degree. Students attend a normal semester-based programme of study and pay traditional university fees. The content of the programme must meet College of Policing required standards and is, to a limited extent, quality assured by the College of Policing. Students develop knowledge and understanding of subjects such as the roles and responsibilities of police officers, ethics, policing communities, roads policing, criminal law, research methods, evidence-based policing etc. The intention is that upon graduation, PPD students can be recruited by police forces as they will already possess the required knowledge, which can be formally recognised, then the practical skills required of a police officer can be developed and assessed within the workplace. There is no expectation that students will have work-based experiences of policing during their university degree study. However, McGunagle and Zizka, (2020) suggest that higher educational programmes which do not sufficiently develop employability skills, leave a gap between their students' studies and the skills required within the workplace. Therefore, one of the few options for PPD students to develop career focused employability is to become a volunteer within policing.

Some universities collect local data on student volunteering (and in some cases provide awards for volunteer commitment). It would be of benefit to better understand the numbers of students studying for professionally recognised degrees where work placements are either not available or in decline and students are turning to volunteering to evolve their employability skills. This current research specifically focuses on what 'blocks' and what 'enables' PPD students volunteering within policing. Such research can then better inform policy makers



when formulating the inevitable future plans to increase the numbers of those volunteering for the police service.

It is perhaps initially important to understand briefly what motivates individuals to volunteer their time within policing. Connors (2011) describes how motivations to take part in volunteering can be varied and blended from focusing on donating time, to taking part in interesting, worthwhile and challenging activities for personal and career development. Whilst exploring the initial and continuing motivations of PSVs, Pepper (2021) suggests that there is an increase in socially driven volunteers, whilst there was a decrease in the number of volunteers who saw volunteering as way of fulfilling their career goals. This focus of PSVs towards the good of the community is also reported during research into volunteer police cadet leaders (Pepper and Rogers, 2021). Whereas volunteer SCs often donate their time for either future career and personal development, or community focused values (Pepper, 2014; Pepper and Wolf, 2015). A subtle but noticeable difference between motivations for the roles, which may go some way to explaining the reduction in SC numbers as regular employed roles within policing became available, whilst PSV numbers remain fairly static.

This research aims to identify both enablers and blockers to volunteering in policing experienced by students whilst undertaking a College of Policing licensed Professional Policing Degree in three Welsh Universities.

## **Methodology**

The methodology chosen to recruit participants for this research was through the use of purposeful sampling of a specific selected group of students studying in one of three post-92 Universities in regions described by the Welsh Government (2021) as South East and South West Wales. The three universities had a total over 49,000 enrolled students (HESA, 2022), 419 of whom were students studying the undergraduate PPD licensed through the College of Policing.

Requests for participants were promoted by lecturers within classes and via email to all 419 PPD students. There was no existing data as to how many of these students volunteered within policing and as a result, how many participants would attend focus groups.

Participants for the research must have already been involved in volunteering in policing for any duration as special constables (SCs), police support volunteers (PSVs) or police student volunteers. Nine focus groups were planned (three in each university), although only eight focus groups were held as no-one attended the ninth. Participants voluntarily attended a single focus group of their choice at their university.

In an effort to gain the trust of potential participants, along with participants being open and insightful on specific aspects whilst reflecting on their local experiences, their anonymity and confidentiality was reinforced throughout. Focus groups were facilitated outside of class time, not only to minimise any disruptions to teaching, but also to assist in the maintenance of anonymity for those attending. There was no collection of demographic information, police force or specific university data, this would assist in ensuring anonymity and the inability to identify any individual or group of volunteers, even if individuals knew each other within either their university or volunteering role.

Whilst the target population contains some inherent biases, such as those hoping to become police officers, they would have unique insights as volunteers to freely express how the process of applying to the police for a volunteer role actually impacted upon them.

Skilled and experienced academics in each institution facilitated 45-minute focus groups, which followed a standardised script to generate discussion and gather primary qualitative data from participants. The focus groups were audio recorded, and facilitator notes were made, to assist in both interpretation and accuracy. Notes and recordings from all of the focus groups were later transcribed, combined and analysed by a single university researcher. NVivo software was used to assist in this analysis. Carefully managing and inputting the data, such an approach enabled NVivo to identify relationships between text, which then allowed the researcher to reflect upon the three pre-determined core themes within the research of 'what were the benefits of volunteering', 'the experiences of the volunteers when volunteering', and 'what the volunteers felt could be improved with the volunteering experience'. Such an approach assisted in categorising themed commonalities.

The research received ethical approval from the three Universities faculty ethics committees, and all participants were informed of their rights to withdraw.

## Findings and discussion

In total eight focus groups were conducted across the three universities involving a total of 35 participants, all of whom were volunteers in policing and also studying the PPD. This is 8.3% of the total number of students studying PPD's across the three universities. What is not clear is if the 8.3% is the total number of students from the PPD who volunteer within policing or a representative sample of those who volunteer, as this data is not collected centrally by the universities.

However, numerous comments were made within the focus groups with regards to the ability through volunteering to learn more about policing and develop new skills within the workplace that would transfer to employment. Insightfully, one student commented:

*“You’ll get more understanding ..... , not just straight into the police and overwhelmed and, umm, if you’ve been a special before then you kind of know what to expect. It’ll also look good when applying for jobs, say I have never done volunteering but [name] has, you know they’ve picked [name] over me because he’s had that experience being a special”.*

A number of themes emerged within the qualitative data collected from the PPD student respondents as issues that ‘blocked’ or obstructed individuals when it came to volunteering or ‘enabled’ their ability to volunteer within policing. The ‘blockers’, ‘enablers and future improvements detailed below represent the predominant themes identified.

### *Blockers to police volunteering.*

The time lags within the application process were cited by many respondents as being problematic and added to their frustrations. Such time delays in the recruitment of volunteers were also discussed by Pepper and Rogers (2021). Although one respondent reflected on the differences in the recruitment process dependent on role selected *“being a special is a lot more time consuming, the process is a lot longer and if you don't have the time to do all that, I'd say being a PSV is a lot easier, the process is a lot shorter”*. Several respondents mentioned the process took much longer for special constables as opposed to other police support volunteers. The NCVO (2020) report that 1 in 5 of the volunteers in their research

expected the process of engaging in volunteering in the public sector to be quicker than it was. Several respondents in the current research also mentioned having to recontact their chosen police force and follow up their applications months after they had been told they would be contacted shortly, with one respondent commenting *“initially my application was just automatically rejected and I asked why and they said, Oh, it was a mistake by the system”*.

One aspect of the recruitment process for volunteering within policing is vetting, the level of which varies depending on the role. The National Audit Office (2023) report how in November 2022 the United Kingdom Security Vetting (UKSV) business area of the Cabinet Office processed 36% of the required Counter Terrorist Check (CTC)/Security Check (SC) clearances within the expected 25-day turnaround time. CTC is one of the ‘lower’ levels of vetting, with processing falling well short of the UKSV target of 85% with 25 days. Of course, vetting is only one aspect of the recruitment process for volunteers, so this may in part be one of the reasons for delays.

The work/life balance between university study and volunteering was raised by many respondents. One respondent commented *“when you volunteer and you enjoy it as much as I do, when you have to do assignments ..... you then have to not do [volunteer policing] shifts, which is kind of annoying”*, another commented *“obviously you got to have that time to yourself as well, sometimes things can be overloading”*, with a third referring to how they donated between 70 and 75 hours the previous month. The work/life balance was also discussed in terms of respondents having to dedicate time to paid work and pay their university fees. This supports the findings of Barton et al., (2019), who suggest that finding the time to volunteer can be a challenge, with van Steden and Mehlbaum (2019) also highlighting the important aspect that organisations should only expect policing volunteers to donate limited time. Although the donation of high numbers of hours is probably welcome within the workplace, its impact on the student’s wellbeing, their studies and workplace effectiveness must be considered by all stakeholders.

The lack of information regarding what was expected of them in their voluntary role was cited as a blocker by several respondents, with one commenting *“at the time, it was really daunting”*, and another *“they don't know anything about the shift patterns”*. This supports the findings of the NCVO (2020) who discuss the need to manage expectations of volunteers,

ensuring that the key messages shared with potential volunteers aligns with the reality of the role.

For some not being able to drive was a barrier to applying for a police volunteer role, especially when volunteering for late shifts, as no late-night public transport was available, or when training was located at their 'out of town' force headquarters, as this restricted their attendance. A respondent commented *"just driving to the station, could be 15-20 minutes away from where you live, so hard sometimes to travel if you don't have a car"*, the same respondent continued "What about if you're on a shift and you finish it 2 in the morning?". As an example, in 2019/2020 over 1.7 million young people aged up to 24 attended higher education across the UK (HESA, 2022), slightly over 85,000 in Wales alone (ibid). Acknowledging that not all university students fall within this age range, the RAC Foundation (2020) report that in 2019, less than half of young people (46% of males and 44% of females) aged 17-24 held full driving licenses. This being the case, it is likely that if the police service wants students as volunteers to cover the full range of hours to support policing, and the university looks towards volunteering as a means of developing employability, they may well be significantly reducing the possibility of over half of students volunteering within policing due to the lack of their ability to drive, with limited alternate public transport options.

The lack of financial support, in particular expenses for travelling, meals etc., also appeared to be a negative barrier for some of the participants when they were considering volunteering or not. One respondent commented "if you go via bus or train or something that is paid for, they do pay you mileage". Morley (2023) highlights how some students have to choose between paying for transport to their placements or eating! Perhaps the messaging is not clear for police volunteers. The NCVO (2020) also discuss how in the region of 1 in 10 of those who volunteered in the public sector are left 'out of pocket'. Added to the comments from the current research, the result of not receiving, or at least claiming, expenses may be having a much wider impact on volunteering. This requires further research and exploration.

*Enablers to police volunteering.*

The awareness of voluntary roles within policing provided by the university lecturers and external speakers was cited as being very positive, with many respondents directly commenting on the value of specialist talks explaining about roles such as special constables. Rees (2021) discusses the benefits of ‘champions’ for employability within university departments. Perhaps having a ‘champion’ for volunteering among the lecturing staff, possibly even with the connections to existing volunteers, may be a good thing. However, given all respondents within the focus groups were studying the licensed PPD, probably with aspirations to join the police service, such a positive view towards the awareness of voluntary policing roles should not be surprising.

The opportunities for personal development and learning new skills enhancing employability were seen as positive drivers for volunteering for many of the focus group members. One respondent commented *“it’s a chance to put yourself in a position working with people in a vulnerable position and being around people under the influence of alcohol, drugs and ..... injured, so [it] helps build your confidence”*, another respondent said, *“you know how to speak to different people, and you learn new skills”*. This is supported by the findings in previous research into motivations to volunteer within policing nationally (Pepper and Rogers, 2021), the wider public sector (NCVO, 2020) and police volunteering internationally (Steden and Mehlbaum; 2019). In addition, the development of skills for future use (several respondents mentioned first aid training) were acknowledged by many of the volunteer respondents, noting that such volunteering in the police service would provide them with ‘life skills’ that were also transferable to other situations or occupations. This aligns with the ideas discussed by Jackson and Cook (2023), with students developing their capital enabling them to move between higher education and the workplace.

A very positive aspect of volunteering reported by many of the respondents in the focus groups, were the opportunities of being close to police officers as a way of learning more about the occupation of policing, one respondent commenting *“I learn a lot of knowledge and gain insight because we get to talk to a lot of police officers”*. This positively reported aspect aligns with the findings of Bramford and Eason (2021), who report how students benefitted from being able to put theory into practice during their placements. It also supports Pepper (2014) with regards to SCs who are motivated to volunteer in order to explore what policing is really like before applying to join the police service as a regular officer. Such

experiences and opportunities for personal development should be promoted more widely to potential volunteers.

Flexibility for the volunteers in choosing their shift patterns was cited by some as being important with one respondent commenting “*there's lots of different shifts currently they do and you can work with local NPT [Neighbourhood Policing Teams]*”, whilst for others the inflexibility was an issue, commenting as a special constable how “*we have to be here this day..... I can't do that with work*”. Exploring this further, many respondents cited that they had to combine their volunteering with work and/or studies. Varied class times during terms allowed for many respondents to meet their volunteering commitments, a number added that the university terms meant that they could increase their summer activity as a volunteer. Although the NCVO (2020) report an in-flexibility of volunteering within the public sector compared to broader civil society volunteering, findings from the current research go some way to contradicting this. This may be due to the combined volunteering roles providing responses in the current research, blending findings of roles and/or or more local understanding of volunteers within the police force. This would benefit from an in-depth evaluation followed by a transparent and consistent approach within and across forces.

In contrast to the ‘*blockers*’, a number of those who were particularly enjoying their volunteering experiences reported the ease with which the application process was conducted, and as such was viewed as an enabler to recruiting volunteers. This may be down to the chosen voluntary role and would also benefit from further research.

#### *Future improvements suggested by PPD students.*

PPD students were also asked, having been through the application process and volunteering, what they thought could be improved to assist more students volunteering.

The following were the main themes which emerged:

Respondents requested more ‘upfront’ information regarding what the role of a volunteer with policing entails, the commitment required and in particular (with regard to SCs), the expectations for volunteering on shift patterns and hours donated. Unsurprisingly a number of

comments were made that the process for applying to be a volunteer could be improved by making it much quicker, with one respondent commenting “*Stop the long process for us now*”.

Respondents within the focus groups also suggested alignment should be sought between universities and police training departments to ensure little or no repetition of subjects taught during the university programme and initial training as a volunteer SC. The approach of aligning curricula should prove more cost effective for policing, enhance the opportunities for volunteers to develop their work-focused employability, and would of course require closer relationships between the police training department and the university.

This is however a much wider subject of concern, as the College of Policing (2020) highlight how the learning contained within the special constables learning programme (SCLP) is aligned with the first year of the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) for new police officer recruits. The principal being that if a SC wants to become a regular police officer there should be no requirement for the learning already completed to be restudied (ibid). Therefore, the learning should already to some extent be aligned, embodying the concept of transferable work-based learning. This reported misalignment of the SC curriculum to that for the PCDA requires exploration by the forces concerned to identify the best options available and any barriers to its implementation.

## **Conclusion**

Formal volunteering is valuable in so many ways, including enhancing volunteers’ skills for employability (Small et al., 2017; Atfield et al., 2021; Divan et al., 2022). However, if it is also to be utilised as a means of augmenting undergraduate learning in the workplace, then this requires significant development through partnership working enabling, as Clubb (2018) suggests, partnerships to flourish. The research outcomes suggest challenges to overcome for students, higher education providers and those engaging volunteers for policing.

Little is known about what enables, or blocks, the recruitment of university students as policing volunteers. This current research suggests that the time taken to recruit volunteers to



policing from a professionally focused degree can be significant, with some roles taking longer than others. This can be problematic for students, who are studying either full-time or part-time and seeking workplace experiences to aid their employability. This is also problematic for police forces (and potentially other public services) who pay to recruit, train and equip volunteers, but may not receive a return on their investment, as students graduate and move away. Establishing the right balance for students between university study, volunteering and paid work is challenging for individuals to manage and for those recruiting to understand. The high number of hours volunteered by some students must be carefully considered by policy makers, providers of professional degrees and students, in terms of the impact of volunteering on wellbeing, studies and workplace effectiveness.

The information available when applying to become volunteers should be thorough, with requests from respondents for more details as to what is expected of them as volunteers in different voluntary roles, the need to work shifts and, if available, the flexibility to fit volunteering around their other commitments. In support of the findings of Morley (2023) that volunteers are often left 'out of pocket', the current research found that there was mixed understanding of what could and could not be claimed for in terms of travel and other expenses. Such key messaging, informing student choices as to whether to volunteer or not, require clarification by those managing the process for potential applicants.

Policy makers need to consider the impact of not being able to drive, or having access to appropriate public transport, can have on volunteering. Further research is required to explore the financial impact of public sector volunteering on students' desire to volunteer, with findings transferrable to a number of other professionally focused degrees.

Opportunities for the police service to recruit volunteers for policing, in whichever role, from licensed PPD students seems high. Student respondents in the current research appear motivated, knowledgeable and acknowledge the ability to enhance their employability through workplace learning. Aligning and recognising the learning from the licensed professional body curriculum that has already been completed by the students, may reduce training time and the need to attend sometimes hard to reach training sessions.

Although with limitations, this research provides insights into what enables and blocks students studying a professional body licensed undergraduate degree at three universities in

South and West Wales volunteering within policing and enhancing their employability. The findings are not necessarily broadly generalisable but contribute to the enhancement of the evidence-base and should be of interest to similar professionally focused undergraduate programmes and their industry partners.

Further comparative research in other regional or national contexts may have different outcomes and assist in informing the important debate with regards to volunteers and the impact of volunteering on employability in their chosen careers.

### **Recommendations for policy makers**

The process of recruiting volunteers from professional degrees generally (and those focused on policing specifically) requires review to ensure the timeliness of processing and ongoing communication with applicants. The information provided and communicated to potential volunteers needs to be as thorough and informative as possible. When recruiting volunteers from professional degrees, emphasis should be placed upon the fact that the role involves personal learning and development, including those transferable skills to enhance employability.

For the purposes of recruiting undergraduate students there should be a closer alignment between police forces and the universities in order to ensure a smoother process of providing volunteers. This should include recognising and/or aligning the curriculum studied to prevent repetition for volunteers during their training and make the most of opportunities for work-based learning.

All stakeholders should develop a broader understanding of the impact of volunteering on the volunteers themselves, including their wellbeing, other commitments and existing abilities, such as the ability to drive. As a result, volunteers may require flexibility in the times and locations where they can donate hours.

### **Acknowledgement**

Thank you to the All-Wales Policing Academic Collaboration (AWPAC) who provided partial funding for this study to empower collaboration and inform policing.

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