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Putting the “Uni” into Community

A three-year mixed methods pragmatic sequential evaluation of an innovative voluntary and community sector collaborative partnership with a UK University

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A three-year mixed methods pragmatic sequential evaluation of an innovative voluntary and community sector collaborative partnership with a UK University

Jessica Jackson, Amelia Woodward, Jennifer Raschbauer, and Sue Dyson

Abstract

Evidence for a triangular partnership of individual student volunteers, universities, and voluntary and community sector (VCSE) groups show multiple benefits. This paper presents a 3-year mixed-method pragmatic sequential evaluation of an innovative and ambitious project, which aimed to bring assets of the VCSE and higher education together. The researchers conducted yearly focus groups and semistructured interviews with key individuals involved in the project with additional online questionnaires with students and local VCSE groups. Universities around the UK increasingly build partnerships with VCSE organizations and communities, but these are not without their challenges. This evaluation has highlighted that successful partnerships are those whereby partners can exchange values and aims they deem worth striving for, and where they are urged to continually consider these intended outcomes of the partnership during the process.

Keywords: *Volunteering, University, Partnerships, Community, Students*

Poner la “Uni” en la Comunidad

Una evaluación secuencial pragmática de tres años de métodos mixtos de una asociación colaborativa innovadora entre el sector voluntario y comunitario con una Universidad del Reino Unido

Jessica Jackson, Amelia Woodward, Jennifer Raschbauer y Sue Dyson

Resumen

Existe evidencia de los múltiples beneficios de colaboraciones tripartitas entre estudiantes voluntarios, universidades y grupos del sector comunitario y voluntario (VCSE). Este artículo presenta una evaluación secuencial y pragmática de una investigación de métodos mixtos que duró tres años acerca de un proyecto innovador y ambicioso, cuyo objetivo es unir las ventajas de la VCSE con la educación superior. Los investigadores realizaron grupos focales anuales y entrevistas semiestructuradas con actores claves involucrados en el proyecto y aplicaron cuestionarios en línea adicionales con estudiantes y grupos locales VCSE. Universidades alrededor del Reino Unido establecen cada vez más asociaciones con organizaciones y comunidades VCSE, pero éstas no están exentas de desafíos. Esta evaluación ha sacado a la luz que las asociaciones exitosas son aquellas en las que sus socios pueden compartir valores y objetivos comunes que consideran que valen la pena perseguir, y donde están deseosos de cumplir estos objetivos a lo largo del proceso.

Palabras clave: *Voluntariado, Universidad*

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There is a growing body of evidence, which highlights the benefits of a triangular partnership of individual student volunteers, universities, and voluntary and community or not-for-profit sector (VCSE) groups (Cooper, 2014; Gazley et al., 2012; Handy et al., 2010; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). Embedding volunteering in higher education has been advocated as an opportunity to acquire employability skills (Barton et al., 2019; Cheung & Liu, 2017; Holmes et al., 2021; Hordósy & Clark, 2018; Williamson et al.,

2017). However, there has also been a more nuanced discussion regarding the benefits, which enhance the student's theoretical and experiential learning, personal development, and social action (Green, 2018; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; McFadden & Smeaton, 2017; Paull et al., 2015). Additionally, the works of Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) and Prah (2016) argue that universities need to change their model, as institutions with power over knowledge, in the pursuit of sustainability through community colearning. For example, if courses and experiences are cocreated between universities and communities, it can develop students who can successfully work and contribute within those communities.

In the United Kingdom, service-learning and civic engagement are increasingly integrated into higher education and community development programs (Goddard et al., 2016). These initiatives are designed to bridge academic learning with real-world experiences, fostering a sense of social responsibility among students. Universities often partner with local organizations, enabling students to engage in community service projects that address societal issues, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability. The approach is seen as a way to develop civic-minded graduates, who are not only academically skilled but also committed to contributing to the public good, aligning with the broader goals of social justice and active citizenship in the United Kingdom (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

This paper presents a 3-year mixed-method pragmatic sequential evaluation, conducted by independent researchers, of an innovative and ambitious project, which aimed to bring assets of the VCSE sector and higher education together. To achieve this, Derbyshire Voluntary Action, an infrastructure charity, with over 350 member VCSE organizations with a focus on health and well-being created a partnership project with the University of Derby. The partnership "Community Chesterfield" was launched in September 2019 with an ambition to coordinate an exchange of knowledge and skills between its regional higher education institution, the University of Derby, and the local community of Chesterfield. This project created opportunities for cross-sector shared learning, skills development, volunteering, and placements to encourage university members to support local VCSE organizations across the county and to address some of the challenges in communities. This collaborative partnership was a 3-year funded project by the UK's National Lottery Community Fund (2022), which invests in organizations across England to tackle its most entrenched social problems in innovative ways.

The theoretical underpinnings for the project stem from the recognition that colearning partnerships promote mutual benefits in smaller communities and help overcome a lack of community resources (Groulx et al., 2020; Mosier & Ruxton, 2018). This approach is rooted in social capital theory, where trust, networks, and shared norms enhance collective action and resource mobilization within smaller communities (Andriani & Christoforou, 2016). By engaging in colearning, both sectors can leverage their unique strengths—academic research and practical experience—to address local challenges more effectively. This collaboration helps bridge resource gaps, fostering resilience, and sustainability in communities that may otherwise struggle due to limited access to expertise or funding. Moreover, the framework aligns with community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles, ensuring that knowledge creation is inclusive, contextually relevant, and directly beneficial to the communities involved (Amauchi et al., 2022).

Chesterfield has a population of approximately 104,000 (Office of National Statistics, 2022). A large proportion of this population is considered to be living in the most deprived neighborhoods in England, and life expectancy is significantly lower than the national average (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2018). This means there is a high level of demand for health, well-being, and social needs, often provided by VCSE organizations. Therefore, within this context, the purpose of such a project meant the university could contribute, as a substantial economic driver, to a local level (Leal Filho et al., 2019).

The project's main aims were as follows:

1. To enhance the skills and capacity of the local voluntary sector to effectively address the community's health, well-being, and social needs,
2. To facilitate a future workforce, which understands the diversity of the voluntary sector and enables them to make a positive contribution within their local communities.

The project intended to achieve these aims by activating community partnerships between the higher education institutions and the voluntary organization groups. The Community Chesterfield team, employed by Derbyshire Voluntary Action, would situate themselves within the higher education institution premises to build these links with university staff. However, it would be community led, to respond to local needs and nurture mutual shared learning between students, institutions, and community groups.

Methods

The evaluation utilized mixed methods pragmatic sequential explanatory design. Pragmatic in that its evaluation context, the project, was the driving force of the evaluation question (Saunders et al., 2009). Sequential in that the evaluation seeks to explain patterns of change throughout the 3-year project by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data analysis (Taguchi, 2018).

The evaluation had two main objectives:

1. Critically analyze the project’s capabilities to activate collaborative partnerships between higher education, VCSE organizations, and students.
2. Ascertain the attitudes, motivations, and extent of volunteering in the University’s undergraduate population throughout the project’s duration.

Data Collection

To analyze the project’s capabilities to activate collaborative partnerships between higher education, VCSE organizations, and students (objective 1), the researchers conducted yearly focus groups and semistructured interviews with key individuals involved in the project. These were conducted using a combination of face-to-face and online avenues. Participants were asked 12 questions, grouped under three themes (see Appendix 1): (1) understanding the partnership, (2) engagement with the partnership, and (3) lessons from the partnership. A consistent approach to data collection was used in both the focus group and individual interviews by using one interview schedule, thus ensuring the evaluation objectives were addressed, and for consistency of data analysis. Both focus groups and interviews took place between January 2019 and March 2022, within the three periods of the funded project, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A total of 22 (yr1: 4, yr2: 4, yr3: 14) one-to-one interviews were conducted over the 3 years with a duration range of 28 to 68 minutes. The interviews were with those from the university and DVA who had been identified as working closely with the project over the years. They included health and social care lecturers, program leaders, business school lecturers, and those from the wider university. A total of three focus groups were conducted over the 3 years with the project team, which had a duration of 59 minutes to 1 hour and 38 minutes. Participants were assigned a number to protect anonymity.

Additionally, a Voluntary Sector Community Group a 13-item bespoke survey instrument was employed to evaluate the impact of the project on voluntary groups using a combination of yes/no answers. Questions 1–4 covered issues around support for voluntary sector groups, aspirations, challenges, and confidence. Questions 5 to 11 focused on the voluntary sector group’s knowledge of and experience of the project, with the final two questions focused on a vision for the future and the ability to adapt to change/challenge. The survey was distributed to 160 voluntary sector organizations registered on the project’s network. Organizations responded to the survey during September 2020 (year 1) $n=31$, September 2021 (year 2) $n=20$, and March 2022 (year 3) $n=25$. An additional document analysis of strategic and engagement group meeting minutes and annual reports. In total, there were 16 documents collected as qualitative data sources and included in this analysis.

To achieve objective 2, to ascertain the attitudes, motivations, and extent of volunteering in the university’s undergraduate population throughout the project’s duration. The researchers adapted a validated 26-item self-report multiple-choice attitudes toward volunteering questionnaire for use as a survey instrument (Dyson et al., 2017) to ascertain the extent, variability, and attitudes toward volunteering. The

questionnaire obtained student characteristics, their understanding of the local voluntary sector and 18 questions regarding students' volunteering experience, including history of volunteering, current volunteering status, volunteering since studying at university, barriers to uptake of volunteering opportunities, and attitudes toward volunteering. The survey was distributed by program leaders for all students at the Chesterfield campus in year 1 (November 2019–January 2020), year 2 (April 2021–June 2021), and year 3 (November 2021–January 2022).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the validated questionnaire were analyzed using comparative descriptive statistics to identify correlations over the 3 years and are presented as numbers and percentages unless otherwise stated (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017). This evaluation design was able to maximize the knowledge acquired from the investigation. Qualitative data were analyzed using a general inductive approach. Inductive analysis refers to approaches, which primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher (Azungah, 2018). To explore how different stakeholders described their experiences of partnership working, the nature of those partnerships, the achievements, and their influence on the partnership, thematic coding was applied to the interview data. Initial codes were identified with the key themes informed by the research objectives. Themes were identified iteratively through the processes of repeated familiarization, coding, and recoding. Codes were reviewed and organized into categories, which were then discussed. The different data sets offered complementary strengths, which revealed individual and contextual factors influencing the evolution of the project. Ethical approval for the evaluation was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee.

As in all research, it is helpful to understand our positionality and our lens on the data. The authors (JJ, SD, and AW) led the data collection and analyses. All three are researchers from the University of Derby and have expertise in healthcare, volunteering, and psychology. The other author (JR) is from Derbyshire Voluntary Action. The three researchers worked as a team having regular discussions to ensure the study was guided by their collective knowledge and expertise. Although the interviewers were independent of the partnership, as they were situated within the university, this may have influenced their responses. It is likely our knowledge of the partnership may have influenced our interpretations of the data. To avoid speaking for the data, all authors made efforts to bracket existing biases or assumptions.

Results—Voluntary Sector Community Groups

The total organization respondents who fully completed the survey each year were comparable (yr1: $n = 31$, yr2: $n = 20$, yr3: $n = 25$). Respondents were asked about the perceived level of support for voluntary organizations provided by local health and social care infrastructure. Their view of support decreased in year 2 (41%) and 3 (40%) in comparison to year 1 (50%). The organizations were also asked to share their view on whether they thought they could make meaningful contributions to beneficiaries. This view on meaningful contribution increased (yr1: 38%, yr2: 45%, yr3: 48%). The organizations were also asked to indicate how confident they felt in coping with challenges within the organization. The majority stated that they did feel confident, and this stayed consistent through the 3-year duration (yr1: 61%, yr2: 63%, yr3: 60%). The organizations were asked if they knew the project. The majority indicated that they did have knowledge of the project, and this was consistent over the 3-year duration (yes = yr1: 75%, yr2: 72%, yr3: 74%).

They were also asked if they had had any direct contact with the university. In year 1, the majority of organizations indicated that they did have contact with the university (yr1: 68%). This decreased in year 2 (55%) but increased again in year 3 (72%). The organizations were also asked if they had hosted a student volunteer, placement, or project. In years 1 and 2, the majority had never hosted a student (yr1: 75%, yr2: 82%). The reasons given were that there were no opportunities within their organization, and they did not

have the capacity and the restrictions of the pandemic. However, in year 3, six organizations stated that they had hosted a student and that these placements were of great benefit to them.

The organizations were also asked about access and/or attendance of training events or opportunities provided through the project. Over the 3-year duration of the project, year 2 had slightly decreased compared with year 1 (yr1: 59%, yr2: 50%). However, this had significantly increased in year 3 (78%). For those who did not attend, the main reasons given were that they did not think the training would directly benefit their organization. For those who had attended the training, there was an overwhelming indication that the organizations had benefited (yr1: 84%, yr2: 60%, yr3: 78%). The organizations stated that they felt better informed, acquired new skills, were more confident and better connected. Training in marketing, management, and governance were mentioned as having particular benefits. The majority of the organizations stated that the training had resulted in changes or improved the quality of delivery of their services (yr1: 65%, yr2: 60%, yr3: 83%).

The organizations perceived level of support for voluntary organizations provided by local health and social care infrastructure decreased, and this could be explained by the impact of the pandemic. However, the view that they could make meaningful contributions and could cope with challenges increased. In year 3, access to training and being able to host students had increased and the feedback of these indicated that they were of great benefit to the organizations.

Results—Student volunteering survey

There was a total of $n = 62$ respondents who fully completed the survey for 3 years. The majority of these students were undergraduates and ranged from years 1, 2, and 3 within their program. The gender of the respondents reflects the global trends within the health and social care workforce being predominately female World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). The respondent's age also reflects the wider trend that health and social care programs attract both young and mature students (Wilkes et al., 2015).

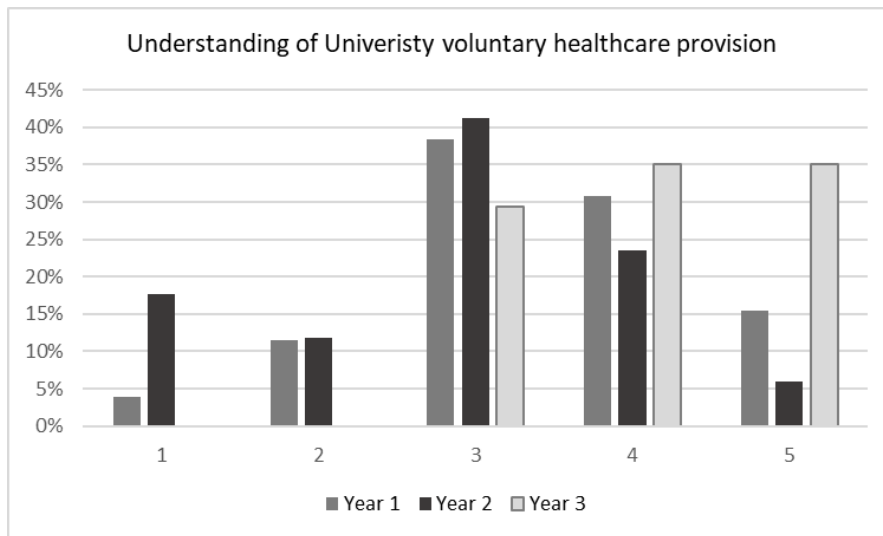
There was a large group of respondents who had children and/or caring responsibilities (see Table 1 for respondent characteristics). It has been recognized that adult students with existing families have different needs and experiences of university than those who do not (Panacci, 2015). The majority of the respondents chose White British as their ethnic group, which reflects the demographics of this area. The respondent's understanding of the university's voluntary healthcare provision decreased in year 2 but increased in year 3 (see Figure 1).

Table 1.*Survey Respondent Characteristics*

Respondent Characteristics	Year 1 = n 26	Year 2 = n 17	Year 3 = n 19
Respondent sex			
Female	24	15	19
Male	2	1	–
Non-binary	–	1	–
Respondent age range			
19–29	10	4	8
30–39	10	5	6
40–55	6	8	4
55+	–	–	1
Relationship status			
Single, never married	12	6	6
Married/domestic partnership	12	9	9
Widowed, divorced, or separated	2	2	4
Child <16 living with the respondent			
Yes	18	9	13
No	8	8	6
Carer responsibility			
No	19	11	17
Yes—1–19 hours per week	7	4	2
Yes—20–49 hours per week	–	–	–
Yes—50 or more hours a week	–	2	–
Respondent with health problem or disability			
No	20	16	15
Yes—limited a lot	2	–	–
Yes—limited a little	4	1	2
Ethnic group			
White British	20	13	15
African	5	4	2
Other	1	–	–

Figure 1.

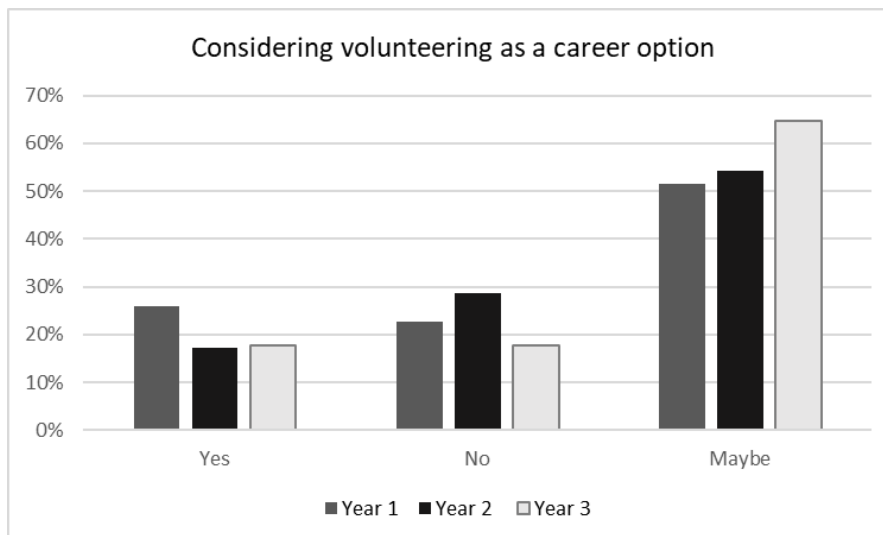
Percentage of Understanding of Voluntary Provision (1 = No understanding to 5 = Full Understanding).



Respondents were asked if they were considering volunteering as a career option. The 3-year data are consistent in that the majority of respondents stated “maybe” (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Respondents Considering the Voluntary Sector as a Career.



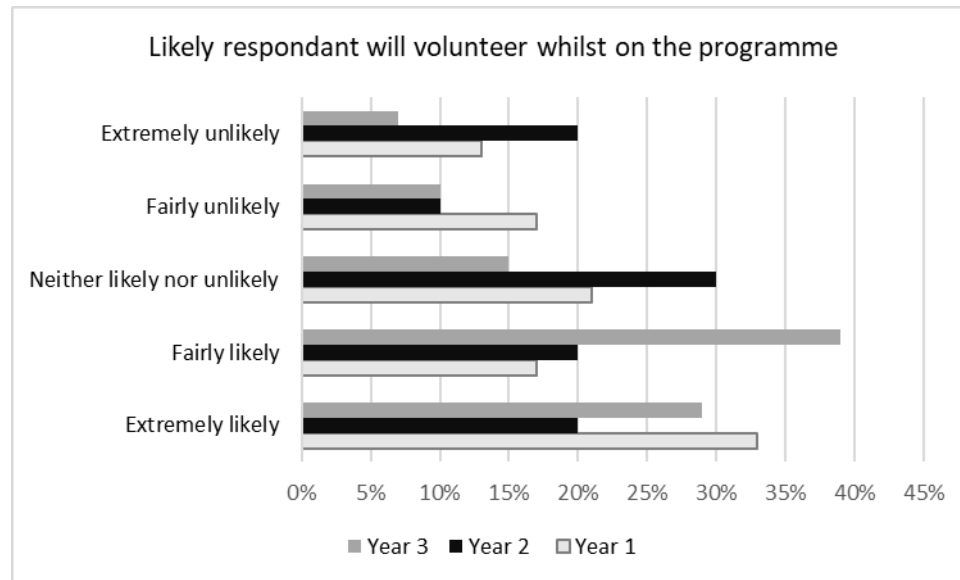
There were a total of 43 students who had experience volunteering before they became university students (see Table 2). The common reasons why they have previously engaged in volunteering included: it connected to their interests, they wanted to help people, for personal development, or they thought it would improve employment perspectives.

Table 2.*Percentage of Students with Experience of Volunteering*

Experience of volunteering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Yes	19 (68%)	13 (50%)	11 (65%)

Respondents were asked how likely they were to volunteer while on their program. The data indicate a varied range from extremely unlikely to extremely likely across the 3 years (see Figure 3). Year 2 data indicate that respondents are neither likely nor unlikely to volunteer than year 1 data. However, year 3 data indicate respondents were more likely to volunteer than in previous years. The respondents reported that linking volunteering opportunities to their academic subject and/or career and having one-off volunteering opportunities and training program would increase their likelihood of volunteering.

Throughout the 3 years, the important barriers to volunteering included the demands of their course and having too little time. In years 1 and 2, the respondents stated that their confidence was a barrier. However, in year 3, this was unimportant. Additionally, the year 3 data reported that the university seemed supportive of volunteering, they could access information about opportunities and that volunteering would be beneficial.

Figure 3.*How Likely Respondents were to Volunteer on their Current Program.*

The student survey showed an increase in knowledge of voluntary healthcare provision and the partnership for the 3 years. The global health pandemic (COVID-19) seriously impacted on-campus learning for the University of Derby students throughout the academic year 2019/2020; however, overall, the students who responded indicated a positive attitude. The challenges and barriers included time constraints and a lack of information about volunteering consistently. This is because these students at the University of Derby prioritize course/program requirements over the uptake of volunteering activities.

Qualitative Findings

Table 3 presents the key themes identified from the analysis. These include Understanding the Partnership, Engaging with the Partnership and Lessons learned from the partnership.

Table 3.

Themes from the Partnership Analysis

Partnership Analysis	Sub-nodes
Understanding the Partnership	Stakeholder Roles: Evolving and clarity on roles and responsibilities. Objectives: Alignment of goals between partners. Communication: Methods and effectiveness of communication. Shared Values: Common principles and vision guiding the partnership.
Engaging with the Partnership	Participation: Levels of involvement and engagement from each partner. Collaboration Mechanisms: Tools and methods used for collaborative efforts. Challenges: Obstacles encountered in maintaining engagement.
Lessons Learned from the Partnership	Successes: What worked well and why. Failures: What did not work, and lessons drawn. Best Practices: Strategies for future partnerships.

These themes developed over the 3 years of the study. Participants were able to reflect on the partnership and what it had achieved over the 3 years. This included the impact on different groups and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding the partnership

Initially, in year 1, there was a collective recognition of their aspirations and potential to develop and build on the original proposal. The partnership project was seen as an evolving entity. The range of views expressed indicated the organizations were positively engaged in the partnership project because it was a good fit with their espoused world-view of the health and social care sector. The values of, for example, one university staff member stated, “The fact that there is a university that’s based here and we have a voluntary sector that’s also here, connecting the two makes sense.” A project team member adds “Let’s be creative, let’s work with partners to find some solutions to some of the daily challenges that our groups have, that’s brilliant.”

Engagement appeared contingent on this predisposition toward this kind of work for all members of the project team. However, while the project team were self-selected for their role, the university team had more happenstance in that those staff members who engaged with the partnership did so because the objectives of the project fit with their world-view. For example, a university staff member explained, “Okay, so I think to start with it felt like oh here’s another thing that we’ve got to be a part of and it was gifted to me a bit by default.”

In year 2, the project team made a considerable change in terms of team members and conceptualization of the project. The DVA team talked of the “evolving” nature of the project, and how they viewed the project as a “pilot,” which was understood and perceived as beneficial. For example, “I think we’ve learned a lot along the way. We’ve had to evolve, we’ve had to, it’s been a very organic project I think because we’ve had a lot of unexpected changes and probably a few changes were expected but not in the initial, but just unknown, unknown things. So, we’ve adapted. It’s been a journey.”

The evolutionary aspect of the project was seen as necessary, one of adaptation, viewed as winding, as opposed to a straight path. In other words, a learning journey for the team. University staff also remained tentatively positive about the partnership. However, unlike the project team who were trying to find ways to adapt to change, the university staff discussed the potential for the project to flounder, due to a lack of financial commitment after the initial funding, a lack of shared vision for the future of the project, and the pressure of work commitments post COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, there were concerns raised for the amount of time spent over the last year interviewing new staff, settling new staff into the project, and essentially rewriting key roles. For example, one university staff member stated “So, I think if the funding ends, I worry that the university is going to say, ‘Right, it was a great project, but we don’t need it anymore because we might have to support the funding’.” And that is a worry because they are growing in knowledge, and they have scope to expand the reach of the university. Another added, “So, in the last year there has been loads of change. For me, I think the biggest challenge is the staffing, in terms of how that’s changed and evolved over the last year.”

In the final year of the partnership, there was a feeling that the right team was now in place with the right skill mix, which had enabled the partnership to thrive. There was a feeling that the team were now able to be performing well and at their most productive. They were continuing to develop, and the time spent on building relationships at the start was beginning to pay off. As one focus group participant articulated; “We are more productive. I think it’s because we now have those strong relationships with people, we need to have strong relationships with. The first year we spent trying to build relationships, trying to work out what was possible, meeting university colleagues, working out who we could work with, and working out who was interested in working with us. We about figured all of that out and then lockdown hit. Then we had to reshift everything to what is possible. What’s possible? Let’s focus on that. I think that was all going very, very well and then I think in that next period, we got everybody performing” (DVA focus group).

It was clear that the team felt proud of what they were now achieving with the project. Both university and DVA respondents acknowledged the successes of the project particularly around enhancing student learning and the success of the online training with the VCSE organisations and the online events connecting people. Some of the challenges experienced at the beginning had been overcome. It was felt that they could now say that they were achieving everything they set out to do, even if it was not exactly what was envisioned at the beginning.

The University of Derby team and respondents also felt the partnership was thriving in many ways, and they valued the skills and involvement of the Community Chesterfield team in their teaching activities. However, there was a feeling there now needed to be more time to embed the collaboration. The impact of COVID was felt to have not allowed the partnership to reach its full potential, and things were just getting started again.

The partnership vision had once again been brought to the forefront in the last few months as thoughts were turning to the future and how to make the project sustainable. Connections with those involved in business and knowledge exchange had been formed to ensure the best way to move forward. Although this was partially felt as a restrengthening of the partnership, it also raised the issue of the university and the DVA having different markers of success, and this was continually being negotiated to move the partnership forward together (e.g., Financial value vs. social value).

Engagement with the partnership

In year 1, the project team appeared fully engaged with the partnership, for reasons that their personal life and work aspirations/goals were well aligned with those of the project; an alignment that increased the team’s capacity to cope with the initial challenges in setting up the partnership. The motivation to overcome barriers to the achievement of organizational objectives appeared commensurate with a desire to achieve personal objectives. However, a degree of dissatisfaction was experienced when the ability to meet personal and work objectives was compromised. For example, a project member stated “Because we’ve had

frustrations for a while and probably because I felt that I needed to get the volunteering off the ground more quickly than we’ve managed to do and so, yes. I feel that I’m not.”

In year 2, the project team acknowledged the many barriers to project work, which had meant the team needed to revisit the staff base to ensure the right people were in place. There was a suggestion this had not been possible at the outset as the team were unsure as to what was needed, which relates to the perception of partnership as evolving. The project team recognized the importance of having the right skill base and a new understanding of “success” in terms of project aims and objectives. For example, one project staff member stated, “We had a new staff arrive by which of course the big elephant in the room is COVID and lockdown, so, but they have brought a lot of expertise and experience to the organization.”

The university team recognized the role the university had played in supporting the partnership through the intern scheme, whereby university students are offered an opportunity to be placed with the project through the careers department. An intern scheme was viewed as a positive engagement with the partnership through the remit of the project. For example, a university staff member stated, “It’s embedded the university in the Community and the voluntary groups are seeing more students that are beyond health and social care and getting done to the essence. So, a lot of them (students) tend to be around marketing, social media, research elements about maybe writing up some research, doing little bits for community groups.”

The final data collection point allowed participants to reflect on engagement and working within the partnership. The new roles were thought to have improved the project and increased engagement, especially with the addition of a team member with marketing expertise. The skills and value of the team were also appreciated by the academic staff: “They’re able to see the opportunities as well before we’ve even perhaps identified where they are, so their offerings. I think their structure as well is fundamental to that, They’re able to put us in touch with the right people. They’ve got the underpinning structures and processes that make it easy.”

It was felt that through the different activities and events, there had been increased engagement with the project as time went on. Project staff members felt that they were more respected by the university now, as this comment highlights; I think we are better respected. We are well respected now and recognized for what we are doing. Whereas I didn’t feel like that before. I feel like we are recognized now and people know who we are (project team members). Evidence for this increased, trust came from the fact that rather than the university and lecturers were coming to ask for support and input on their modules rather than them approaching the university staff. Trust, communication, and mutual respect are placed as highly important in successful academic partnerships (Buys & Bursnall, 2007).

Many more people from the university and academics who had been involved with working with the partnership were interviewed in year 3 and while they could all see the value of the project; it was still felt that more people needed to be engaged for the project to reach its full potential. COVID and changes in roles from UOD staff members meant that there had been some challenging times and reconnecting and engaging with the team at Chesterfield was important now. It was clear that many students had become involved with Community Chesterfield project through placements, experts by experience sessions, and through modules and online training. The value of this to future health professionals was continually alluded to in the interviews with both DVA and University of Derby staff.

Lessons from the partnership

The university indicated lessons needed to be learned from year 1 to year 2 to maximize the benefits of partnerships. For example, one university staff member highlighted, “So as the year has gone on and we have a better idea of what we are doing with our programs and we can kind of see a little bit more now how we can marry up some of what they want from us.” A project team member added “We’ve worked damned hard at delivering all of the objectives and where we are at the moment, ten months in it’s the ones that have been achievable that we’ve done and the ones that have been unachievable, we haven’t done.”

In year 2, the project staff reflected on how they adapted to the restrictions as a result of the pandemic and saw ways in which they could capitalize on moving the enterprise into a virtual environment to have a greater reach across the university. For example, “there’s big potential, we could go down the route that says working jointly in this way we create something on a much larger scale.”

In year 3, there had been some change in focus of the partnership, as they were looking toward the end of the project funding. Discussions around the sustainability of the partnership and future aspirations had meant that links had been made between different members of the university, which had proved beneficial and likely to stay beneficial going forward. There was a feeling from many respondents that there needed to perhaps be a more central link with the university rather than it being limited to health and social care to enable the partnership to reach its full potential. The next steps discussions and relationships with the university had highlighted differences between the university and the DVA. Most notably, measures of success (i.e., business/financial value vs. social value) were felt to differ between the organizations involved, which could be challenging “scale encompassing many more colleges is key.”

Because we do operate in different worlds, across different values. It’s challenging at times to have conversations where you feel like you’re on the same plane. Ultimately your measures of your success are all different. Yes, that’s what we’ve discovered, particularly in the last 18 months of the work. The two worlds bumping up together. It didn’t always work as we wanted it to. I think eventually we sort of concluded that we were better off not trying around that and focusing our efforts elsewhere.

All those we interviewed talked about their visions for the future of the project and how they felt about the project they had been involved in. All interviewees agreed that more time was needed to embed the collaboration and focus needed to turn to evidence of the impact. All felt that it was a mutually beneficial partnership. UOD staff members felt that, now the pressures of COVID-19 were being relieved, there could be more engagement in learning, and working more closely with the Community Chesterfield team could only be of benefit to the students and staff. Increasing placement opportunities and embedding the work of the Community Chesterfield team and the value of volunteering into more courses were felt to be of benefit to the community and the university.

There was also a determination to move back into more face-to-face activities and learning opportunities to increase engagement and reach more people. Additionally, the project focus is on capturing work around what impact the project has had so it can be reported and used to secure further funding. There are ambitions to work more with the whole university to have greater reach and in particular the business side of the university to ensure the potential of the project is reached and sustainability can be secured.

Discussion

The importance of voluntary and community or not-for-profit organizations and higher education institutions to work synergistically toward achieving mutual goals cannot be overestimated (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). Universities and the voluntary sector share a commitment to advancing knowledge, fostering social responsibility, and promoting civic engagement. Both prioritize inclusivity, aiming to provide opportunities and support to diverse communities. They value collaboration and partnerships, working together to address societal challenges and create positive change. Additionally, they both emphasize the importance of ethical practices, transparency, and accountability in their operations.

The benefits of collaborative working include interorganizational cooperation, the ability to address shared problems more effectively, to impact organizational learning, and to produce a higher quality service, or new skills as a result of the partnership (Rees et al., 2012). However, collaborations/partnerships such as these are not without challenges, namely the potential for mission drift, possible loss of autonomy of one or other partner, the potential of unrecoverable institutional costs in setting up the partnership, and the expenditure of considerable institutional time and resources in supporting collaborative activities (Shaw, 2003).

These challenges may have a significant impact on the likelihood of success, making systematic evaluation from the outset key to understanding the challenges, and implementing necessary measures to achieve collective partnership goals. At its heart, partnership suggests at least two agencies with common interests working together, in a relationship characterized by some degree of trust, equality, and reciprocity. University–community partnerships are driven by the achievement of mutual goals (Strier, 2011). This project was set up with the ambition to coordinate an exchange of knowledge and skills between its regional higher education institution, the University of Derby, and the local community of Chesterfield.

Concerning the project partnership, the desire to achieve mutual goals guaranteed a measure of success from the outset, which was, in turn, positively impacted through the self-selection of motivated individuals who later became the project teams. This is important since the successful embedding of organizational goals within projects involving separate and complex organizations requires time, which may be dependent upon external influencers, for example, the prerequisites/parameters of funding/awards. A shared notion of ideal cooperative relations and their behavioral and conditional requirements may involve substantial deliberation, which ideally should take place before funding applications (Jansen & van Bierge, 2015).

Communication is key to a successful partnership. Partnership attributes, communication behavior, and conflict resolution techniques are related to indicators of partnership success (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). The project partnership may have been better served through clear lines of communication from the outset, with key individuals identified and reporting channels set up. There appeared to be some communication challenges, including access to emails, which impacted timely discussion around project goals.

It is worth noting also, that the conceptualization of both the project and the partnership occurred at some distance from the project team members and the university, due in part to the time spent in project development, preparing the project proposal for funding, submitting the application, awaiting the outcome, setting up the project, and recruiting the team. Concerning the university, no specific team was set up to oversee project implementation. Rather, motivated individuals self-identified who later became key “persons of contact” for the project team. This *ad hoc* approach proved successful, if not without an element of serendipity, in other words, an outcome happening by chance.

This approach continued throughout the project, but as the project team became more well known within the university, people were approaching them from the university. Future partnerships may benefit from trying to ensure that there is a larger team involved on both sides of the partnership from the initiation stages so that they can take it forward from the beginning. Alternatively, more staff could be given time to contribute to such partnerships, such as it being built into workloads to ensure consistency.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges for the project in terms of adapting services to new working arrangements and social distancing requirements. For example, online training replaces face-to-face training, and online delivery of courses replaces face-to-face teaching for HE students. Similarly, work-from-home policies impacted academics and voluntary sector personnel alike. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for new ways of working, greater integration of services and time and resources being progressively directed toward facilitating access in better and more effective ways. For example, smaller voluntary groups at some geographical distance from campus were able to access online training for the first time. Despite overcoming the challenges of COVID, many from the university felt that more face-to-face contact would benefit the partnership going forward and help increase engagement with more people in the university.

Those who had been involved in the partnership from the beginning were able to reflect on the development of the partnership over the past 3 years. It was clear that despite the impact of COVID and the continual refocusing of the Community Chesterfield team, the partnership was thriving and both the community the voluntary sector, and the university including students were benefiting from the collaboration. Universities are large complex organizations that engage with external stakeholders in multiple and often disconnected ways, and the voluntary community sector is also as large and diverse so being able to have an intermediary with knowledge of both sectors is key to successful collaboration (Weakley et al., 2021).

Through this project, the Community Chesterfield team were able to facilitate relationships between the university and the voluntary sector. The Community Chesterfields’ understanding knowledge and relationship with the voluntary sector and their increased understanding of the university processes and dynamics, as the project developed, enabled them to recognize, and respond to opportunities to connect and engage more students VCSEs and academics to mutual benefit. This is a key function of social capital theory (Andriani & Nasution, 2022). The strengthened ties between these groups increased the flow of resources, information, and support, leading to mutually beneficial outcomes. Social capital theory emphasizes the value of these networks in promoting collective action and achieving common goals.

Ultimately, the project's success demonstrates how social capital, through improved relationships and engagement, can enhance the effectiveness of community-university partnerships.

Challenges remained in terms of struggling to fit in with university rules and using different operating systems to communicate; however, the team had worked around these and continued to work well with different areas of the university despite the challenges faced. Moving forward, the focus is very much on looking at the impact the project has had and making it sustainable so universities, students voluntary organizations, and service users continue to benefit.

Conclusion

Successful partnerships are those whereby partners can exchange values or aims they deem worth striving for, and where they are urged to continually consider these intended outcomes of the partnership during the process. On the other hand, partnerships, which cannot demonstrate equal participation and the articulation of the voice of the stakeholders may struggle, especially in the "set-up" stage to realize the original vision/ideas. Universities around the UK increasingly build partnerships with voluntary organizations and communities, but these are not without their challenges. The need to secure positive outcomes for the communities served by both partners is paramount and should remain at the forefront of the project, in other words long after the initial engagement activities, including initial setup.

A key factor in determining success is the enduring relationship between the partner organizations beyond the life of its funded duration. Reflection on the partnership of those involved could see how much the project had developed, and how many connections had been made between the university and the voluntary sector. There was also a feeling of how much more they could achieve with more time to embed the collaboration more firmly within the whole university. The value of getting the link to be with the whole university rather than one college will be of great benefit to the partnership going forward.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Sharing the Vision
1. What do you think about the ‘Community Chesterfield’ project?
2. How did you come to hear about the ‘Community Chesterfield’ project, that is, who introduced it to you?
3. Did you understand what the ‘Community Chesterfield’ project was all about and your role in the partnership/collaboration?
4. How long have you been in your current role, at your organization? Has anything changed in that role since you became a ‘Community Chesterfield’ project team member?
Engagement with the Partnership
1. Have you been introduced to the other ‘Community Chesterfield’ project team members (if yes then explore more, e.g., how often do you meet: if not then explore more)?
2. Did you receive support from your organization to participate in the DVA/UoD collaborative/partnership?
3. Were you given an opportunity to say that you did not want to be a project team member? (If yes then explore in more detail, if no, then explore in more detail)
Learning from the Partnership
1. What do you feel are the benefits/disadvantages of partnership/collaborative working, the ‘Community Chesterfield’ project?
2. Could anything have been done differently, or better?
3. If you had the opportunity to be involved in another similar partnership/collaboration in the future, would you take it? (If yes then explore, if no, then explore)
4. Is there anything else you would like to add, or anything you would like us to feedback to the Community Chesterfield project team?

Conflict of Interest

This evaluation was conducted by researchers who formed part of a Health and Social Care Research Centre. It was funded by the National lottery and all researchers were impartial to the project. There were no conflicts of interest. All authors contributed to the study’s conception and design.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this evaluation was obtained from the research team’s University’s Research Ethics Committee.

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