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# **Geography, Citizenship and Volunteering: Some uses of the Higher Education Active Community Fund in Geography**

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## **Geography, Citizenship and Volunteering: Some uses of the Higher Education Active Community Fund in Geography**

*ABSTRACT Voluntary work with local communities has been advocated as beneficial for geography students, higher education institutions and the public, but has been poorly developed in the UK. The Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) has been recently established by the Government to encourage staff and students in higher education to undertake voluntary work in local communities. This paper reports on the use of HEACF funding to develop voluntary work projects for geography students at the University of Plymouth. It examines the student experience of voluntary working and concludes that it helps students to develop as both geographers and active citizens in their local communities.*

### **Introduction**

Voluntary work with local communities has been advocated as beneficial for students, higher education institutions (HEIs) and the public (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995). Many universities have student societies that engage with charity or voluntary work, but it is rare that work with local communities is part of the geography student's learning experience. Although it has been recognised that student projects, dissertations and theses can be a useful source of information for actors engaged with developing local communities (Moseley, 2003), these kinds of studies are all too often *of*, rather than *with* or *for*, local people. Mohan (1995, p.130) has argued that geography students should engage more fully with their local communities, 'not just as passive observers but as active participants and contributors'.

Recently, Government funding has become available to encourage students and staff in higher education to work more closely with local people in a voluntary capacity. This paper reports on the use of funding from the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) to support geography students undertaking work in community-based projects in Plymouth and Cornwall.

## **Voluntarism, Citizenship and Geography**

### *Volunteering and Geography*

In secondary education, voluntary work has become embedded into the national curriculum with the introduction of citizenship classes in primary and secondary schools. This teaching of citizenship aims to develop an appreciation of three ideas: social and moral responsibility; community involvement and political literacy (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). Voluntary service is used to enable learning in all three of these areas.

Although there are fears that the introduction of citizenship into schools may lead to the erosion of geography in the national curriculum (Brown, 2001), geography has been identified as a key way of delivering citizenship education (Lambert and Machon, 2001). Indeed, geography has always played a key role in the teaching of citizenship, albeit from perspectives that have sometimes been imperialist (Marsden, 2001) or nationalist (Butt, 1996; Matless, 1996). However, The Geographical Association (1999, p.167) notes that geography can develop citizenship by:

- teaching young people how to take part in decision making processes;

- developing an intelligent understanding of European and global links, fostering a sense of interdependence of people and places;
- improving knowledge and understanding of the concept of sustainable development, and the skills to act upon their understanding as part of, for example, Local Agenda 21 initiatives.

Although the use of personal development profiling, fieldwork, dissertations and modules that focus on governance and citizenship that may encourage students to do voluntary work, it is rare that geography students in the UK work with local communities as part of their studies. Drawing on evidence from the USA, Mohan (1995) suggests that geography students should have a 'greater respect for the local' through 'service' or voluntary work schemes. This kind of engagement has three benefits.

First, it can aid students and staff by the application and transfer of skills learnt in a geography degree, including the strengthening of academic knowledge and the development of techniques as 'students work alongside people on real projects' (Buckingham-Hatfield, 1995, p.144). Further, voluntary work helps students to develop new personal transferable skills, such as responsibility, confidence and self esteem.

Voluntary work is not unique in this respect. It is recognised that work-placement activities, which are often embedded into the curriculum, can also aid in the development of personal skills, work experience and career development (Horner and Gardiner, 1998; Shepherd, 1998; Yorke, 2004). The effective use of assessment can

aid in the development of these skills by encouraging students to reflect on their experiences and identify how they have applied and developed skills (Hogg, 1998; Moon, 2004).

Secondly, however, voluntary working offers other benefits that more formal work placements perhaps cannot. In particular, it can lead to stronger links between HEIs and the public. Buckingham-Hatfield (1995, p.145) points out that student volunteers can be the first and perhaps only positive experience local people have of students and notes that ‘a fuller, more productive understanding is reached which in turn can have a positive impact on reducing barriers between the university and the community in which it is housed’.

Thirdly, taking the two previous points together, a stronger engagement with the community can improve student knowledge of civic and social issues and increase student awareness of ethical and moral issues (Mohan, 1995). In short, it can promote good citizenship and help turn students into ‘active’ citizens. It is this aspect of voluntary working that has appealed to successive British Governments and, more specifically, New Labour’s recent initiatives to encourage students to undertake voluntary work.

#### *Volunteering, Citizenship and the State*

Over recent years, UK Governments have been encouraging voluntary work and working (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003). The Thatcher Government adopted ‘active citizenship’ policies that encouraged individuals to undertake proactive work in their local communities, for example as school governors, members of parent-teacher

association or co-ordinators of Neighbourhood Watch Schemes (Kearns 1992, 1995; Crow and Allen, 1994). Such thinking emphasised the duties rather than the rights of citizenship and, in particular, the responsibility to be an active, contributing member of one's local community.

However, voluntary work has been criticised for its uneven uptake. White, male, middle-class, middle-aged people with high educational achievement and employment status are most likely to volunteer for formal or informal activities (Attwood et al., 2003). This has led to an accusation that voluntarism favours elite interests and tackles the symptoms rather than the causes of social problems (McLaughlin, 1987; Rogers, 1987; Yarwood and Edwards, 1995). Active citizenship has been viewed as part of a political project aimed at strengthening central government at the expense of local authority providers (Kearns, 1995), so much so that Wolch (1990) has argued that the voluntary sector has become a 'shadow state', providing services for, but outside of, the state. This apparent undermining of the local state might be taken as part of a wider, post-Fordist regulatory shift in governance (Hill, 1994; Goodwin and Painter, 1996), although others have argued that charity has always played a key role in the provision of welfare services (Bryson et al., 2002). Voluntary working has also been opposed by the left (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003), who raise concerns about its effects on job creation and its emphasis on the individual, rather than co-operative working.

Despite these concerns, the New Labour Government has embraced the concept of voluntarism, although it has emphasised the promotion of active *communities* rather than individuals. Funding and support has been made available to expand the

voluntary sector, notably through the launch of the Active Communities Directorate (ACD) by the Home Office in May 2002, which aimed to:

‘support strong and active communities in which people of all races and backgrounds are valued and participate on equal terms by developing social policy to build a fair, prosperous and cohesive society in which everyone has a stake and to ensure that active citizenship contributes to the enhancement of democracy and the development of civil society.’ (Home Office, 2004).

Under the ACD, the Active Community Unit (ACU) has supported a number of initiatives, including the Millennium Volunteers Project aimed at making volunteering ‘cool’ amongst 16-24 year olds and the Experience Corps aimed at recruiting a ‘grey army of helpers’ from the over 60s. These initiatives are aimed at two of age groups least likely to volunteer (Attwood et al., 2003) and have been supported by television adverts encouraging members of the public to participate in voluntary activities.

As part of the effort to encourage more young people to volunteer, the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) was established in November 2001 with the aim of encouraging students and staff of higher education institutions to undertake voluntary work in their local communities to ‘enhance the key role played by higher education institutions in their local community’ (HEFCE, 2004). The HEACF has two main aims. First it tries to encourage staff and students to volunteer in their local communities in order to help them develop employment skills and ‘gain new perspectives’. Second, it is also hoped that this activity will benefit local people

by helping to 'enhance the quality of life in disadvantaged sections of the community'.

Round one of HEACF ran between March 2002 and August 2004. All English HEIs were eligible to apply for funding between £10,000 and £500,000. In all, 131 institutions were awarded a total of £26,750,000 under the HEACF. A second round of funding, principally to support existing projects, will run between September 2004 and July 2006, with £10,000 to £185,000 being made available to individual institutions. As this article goes on to explore, this has led to enhanced opportunities for geography students to work within local communities.

### **University of Plymouth's Geography with the Community**

The University of Plymouth achieved £395,028 from the first tranche of funding and used it to establish the Active in Communities Project (UoPACP). UoPACP aims to develop volunteering activities in the community, raise awareness of the value of volunteering and encourage the development of skills and training of volunteers (see <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=7126> for more details). These aims contribute to the University's teaching and learning policy that seeks to develop people 'who are equipped and confident to play a constructive and creative role in society throughout their lives'. As part of their work, UoPACP encouraged academic staff to make applications for funding to support voluntary activity in their subject areas. A successful application was made by the School of Geography for £1,000 to fund a project entitled 'Geography with the Community'.

‘Geography with the Community’ was established in the second semester of 2003/4 with the aim of providing opportunities for geography undergraduates to participate in community-based projects in Plymouth and the South West. It aimed to:

1. give students the opportunity to apply and practice skills taught as part of their degree in community-based projects;
2. provide students with voluntary working experiences to enhance their skills profile and provide experience relevant to future careers;
3. strengthen links between the University of Plymouth and the local community-based projects.

The project ran as a pilot scheme in the School of Geography from February to June 2004 in partnership with four different departments of two local authorities (hereafter these departments are referred to as the four ‘partners’). As this was a pilot project, personal contacts were used to establish these although, in subsequent years, wider publicity could be used to attract other projects and partners relevant to geography students.

All second and third year geography students were informed about the HE funding and opportunities to volunteer on these projects. Those who expressed an interest in a project were given further details about it and invited to attend a briefing meeting with the partners. Here, the projects were outlined in more detail and the students who wished to undertake the work were invited to sign a student volunteering agreement.

This agreement outlined the student’s responsibilities as a volunteer worker, especially in regard to following safe working practices and appropriate health, safety and ethical guidelines. Likewise, partners also signed contracts saying that they would inform about and provide students with safe working conditions. As of these placements were voluntary in nature, there were no assignments associated with them and the students were not assessed on their work. However, as an added incentive, a certificate of achievement is offered by UoPACP to students who log forty hours of voluntary work and attend its training sessions. Nineteen students (Table 1) signed up for four projects in and around Plymouth that were offered by the partners. It was anticipated that students would spend an average of half a day a week on these projects over the course of a 12 week teaching term. The following sub-sections briefly outline these opportunities.

<b>Year</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Year</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>
<b>Male</b>	4	1
<b>Female</b>	8	6

**Table 1: Profile of student volunteers**

*Caradon Parish Plans*

This project was part of South East Cornwall’s Community Strategy that aimed to work in partnership with various actors to ‘build and sustain a better future for people living in South East Cornwall’ by providing opportunities for stronger communities, a better quality local and living environment and improved individual wellbeing.

Students were offered the opportunity to work with Caradon District Council in developing Parish Plans for rural Cornwall. A Parish Plan is a statement of how the local community sees itself developing over the next few years (see Moseley, 2003) and aims to:

- reflect the views of all sections of the community;
- identify which features and local characteristics people value;
- identify local problem and opportunities;
- spell out how local residents want the community to develop in the future;
- prepares a plan of action to achieve this vision.

The Parish Plan Group (PPG) is made up of parish councillors, representatives of local groups and residents living in the parishes under appraisal. A PPG aims to attract members from all age groups, although in practice middle aged residents tend to dominate their composition (Moseley, 2003). As part of this initiative, the local authority was using a range of community consultation techniques, especially questionnaires and focus groups, to plan for the needs of these communities.

Two groups of four students worked in two separate parishes that were undertaking parish plans. In the first parish, the students were consulted by local authority workers about the design of a community questionnaire and were involved as facilitators at community meetings. Subsequently, they were offered paid work to analyse the findings of the community survey. In the second parish, students attended a community consultation exercise and acted as facilitators for it. However, their involvement beyond this exercise was limited.

### *Saltash Oral Histories*

This project was administered by the South East Cornwall Museums' Forum and Cornish Braids (a Cornish Audio Visual Archive project). The aim was to create an audio-visual archive of Saltash that would be a valuable historical, geographical and cultural source for local people and future generations. The project included a launch event, interviews with local people, publicity and publishing a CD and booklet on how to undertake oral projects.

This project only attracted one student, perhaps because the title implied more relevance to a history than a geography degree. She was involved in the launch event and undertook interviews with elderly members of the community. Both the student and the local authority were very positive about her role in this exercise.

### *Caradon Environmental Audit*

This project was also part of South East Cornwall's Community Strategy (see Parish Plans, above). The aim was to help the local authority to prepare a report that provided baseline data and information on different aspects of the local environment. The report was aimed for local residents and visitors and aimed to provide them with easy to read and understand information about different aspects of their local environment.

Five students initially volunteered for this project that involved a secondary analysis of various environmental criteria. This entailed liaising with various actors and organisations in the county, analysing data, report writing and giving presentations on

findings. Only two students were able to complete this project, although both they and the organiser felt that their time had been well spent.

### *Plymouth East End Urban Regeneration*

The East End Renewal Area of Plymouth was declared in May 2000. It is a ten year programme focusing on the regeneration of three communities in Plymouth (Cattedown, Coxside and Prince Rock) which together comprise the neighbourhood which has become known as the 'East End'. Its current projects include:

- housing renovation;
- improvement to a local park;
- commercial improvement;
- the development of a community village;
- various community projects.

This work is funded by central government, the National Lottery, the European Union and Plymouth City Council and is managed by a team of officers employed by the City Council. This team work closely with representatives from the three local residents' associations as they view resident involvement as key to the success of regeneration in the area.

Four students took part in this project. Two students worked in the partnership's main office, one undertaking statistical analysis of Best Value Practice and another examining census data for a social regeneration project. Both of these placements led to the active involvement of students in the partnership, with long term benefits.

However, two other students were offered a placement with an education project in the city that was less successful.

## **Evaluation**

These projects were evaluated using semi-structured interviews with students and partners. These discussions were structured around the four main elements of the Personal Development Profiles used by the School of Geography at the University of Plymouth: skills, knowledge, personal experience and careers. Discussions were also held with the four partners to research how the value of student volunteers to their work and the local communities under their remit. The following sections use evidence from these discussions to examine the benefits and problems of this initiative to engage students with voluntary work. In doing so, some attention is given to whether voluntary work can offer something above and beyond more formal work placements and, in short, whether it is capable of developing a sense of citizenship amongst students.

### *Initiation*

It has been argued that volunteering provides a way for people to ‘give something back’ to their communities and to develop social awareness and skills. However, students did not appear to be this altruistic in their motives. The main reason that students volunteered for the GWC programme was ‘to gain experience’ or, more bluntly, ‘to have something to put on their CV’.

However, when probed about their reason for participating, a wider range of motivation emerged. Most students wanted to gain insights into the working practices of organisations, and local authorities in particular, or jobs that they were considering as a career. Although student participation might best be described as more pragmatic than altruistic, one student revealed that he wanted to ‘put something back into the community’ and to help other people.

Students choose individual projects on the basis on academic interest. Thus, the rural community project appealed to students taking a second year module on rural social geography that included a section on rural development. Projects that could be linked to dissertations also held some appeal, although, perhaps surprisingly, only two students mentioned that this guided their decision to volunteer on a particular project.

### *Skills*

The voluntary placements provided students with a good opportunity to practice, transfer and apply key skills from their undergraduate degree. These included the analysis of data, report writing, questionnaire design and analysis, presentations, interviews, interpersonal skills, team working and time management.

However, students felt the opportunities to develop new skills were limited. Very few reported that they were given any formal training for their projects. However, one student was trained in the use of a software package and another was given training on interview techniques for oral history project.

It might be concluded that these kinds of voluntary projects given students the opportunity to apply and practice the technical skills they have already acquired, rather than developing new ones.

### *Knowledge*

Students usually chose projects that linked most closely to their option modules and voluntary work was used to gain a better insight into particular aspects of geography. For example, eight students undertook the rural community project as it gave them insights into the module 'People in the Countryside' that includes a section on community-based rural regeneration. One volunteer likened it to being part of a 'giant case study'. Others experienced at first hand some of the frustrations of community work: noting that only certain members of the community took part and that often participation relied on key workers or volunteers. This confirmed some of the theory that had been taught in lectures and students found it relevant to be able to observe these ideas in an empirical context and to be able to understand what was happening by referring to theory in lectures. Some students also made use of this case study in their exam answers.

As well as improving academic knowledge, the students also gained a better understanding of their locality. For nearly all the students it was the first time that they had visited the localities that their projects were based in. As the student on the 'Saltash Stories' project noted: 'I learnt loads about Cornwall and also how people from as far as America value their Cornish heritage.'

It was disappointing, though, that only one student from a third year module on geography and citizenship decided to take part in the scheme. A key part of this module examines voluntary and partnership working and so it was a shame that some of these students did not participate to get more knowledge. However, as the module takes a critical standpoint on the practice and theory of voluntarism, the students may have been too cynical to take part!

### *Personal Experience*

Only five students said that they had undertaken voluntary work in the past and two of these said that this had been via school placements. Two students undertook regular voluntary work, one in the University of Plymouth Chaplaincy and the other leading a scout troop, whilst another had done 'a bit of conservation work'. It would therefore appear, that the scheme was attracting new volunteers. It was pleasing to hear that all students would be prepared to undertake more voluntary work in the future.

Four of the students involved in one of the rural regeneration projects were often paid vacation employment. Two students who were engaged in the urban partnership project worked undertook further work in the summer vacation. One of these used his contacts and experience to develop a dissertation project.

### *Careers*

Some of the students had undertaken the projects because they were considering following a career in local government. All the students said that the experience had provided them with valuable insights into the work of local authority/partnership employees. Their first impression was that these were 'busy' jobs and many students

observed how much time these people spent networking, talking to members of the community and organising people and time. In short, it gave them a sense of the interpersonal and time management skills needed in such posts. However, some students found this rather daunting and said that, because of these pressures, they would not want to follow these careers! However, nearly all of the students said that the experience was valuable and a useful addition for their CV.

### **Views of the Partners**

Interviews were also held with the lead members of the local authorities who had liaised with the students and organised the voluntary placements. Emphasis was placed on establishing the value of students to these organisations and to the wider community as a whole.

All four partners were found the students to be useful in their work. This was in two main ways. First, they were impressed by the skills that students could bring to the projects. One partner commented that the geography degree had, in her words, ‘up-skilled’ students to the extent that they could make critical contributions to the design of community questionnaires and could make suggestions about the kind of rural issues that the Parish Plans needed to focus on. Likewise, the partner co-ordinating the environmental audit valued working with students who had a good knowledge about environmental issues and environmental decision making. It would therefore appear that the partners found the students to be well trained and educated. Consequently, as noted above, only three students needed specific task-related training as, according to the partners, they were already well skilled.

The second aspect that students brought to their post was 'enthusiasm'. All the partners were impressed at the students' keenness to get involved with the project and to contribute actively to them. The partner running the Parish Plans project also reported that members of the public found the presence of students at public meeting to be stimulating as it was rare that young people attended them. She felt that this helped 'to give the project some impetus and the meetings some energy'.

In short, all four partners found the students to be an asset to their work, both in terms of their specific skills as well as their drive and effort. None of the partners said that students hindered their work or created extra work for them. It was pleasing to report that all four have committed their organisation to running the projects in future years and to offer wider opportunities for geography students.

### ***Problems***

Three main issues were identified as problems. First, the success of projects relied heavily on the enthusiasm and commitment of the local authority partners. This was illustrated very well in the rural regeneration project. The group that worked in one parish were full of praise for the local authority partner who worked with them. They reported that he made them feel included in the project and an important part of his team. They also valued his willingness to consult them and offer listen to their comments on his questionnaire. By contrast, the group that worked in the other parish felt that the partners there were too busy to involve them in the project. Consequently, the students did not feel part of the project and their interest waned in it. Likewise, the partner responsible for establishing an educational project as part of the urban regeneration programme was ill, meaning that this project was severely delayed.

Consequently, the students lost interest and wanted to dedicate their time to exam revision by the time the partner was able to work with them.

Time was the second issue. The Geography with the Community programme took some time to establish because it had not ran before. Consequently, by the time some projects got started, it was close to Easter vacation, fieldtrips and exam revision. Some students felt unable to balance their revision and other work commitments with the voluntary work. As a result, not all of the students were able to engage fully in their project and so many of the benefits discussed above did not apply to them.

Finally, it is well recognised that volunteers can be fickle (Smith, 1992) and that their enthusiasm and commitment can wane over time (Banister and Norton, 1988). While many of the students were praised for their work, some undoubtedly lost interest or felt that their project or volunteering was not for them or did not meet their expectations. Likewise, while some were prepared to make the effort to liaise with members of the public and local authorities, other were perhaps more reticent in this area. For example, one group complained that a local parish councillor had not introduced herself, although it appeared that the student group made no effort to introduce themselves either. Some students will, of course, make better volunteers than others and will have more skills to offer. As the partners were well experienced in working with volunteers, they expected and could accommodate these variations in interest.

All three of these points are well recognised in the theory and practice of volunteering (Butcher et al., 1993; Allison et al., 2003) and confirm that voluntary working is most

effective when supported by partnerships with other agencies (Taylor, 2000). In future years the projects will have more time to be established and even more attention will be paid to liaising between students, partners and University of Plymouth staff.

## **Conclusions**

Citizenship in the school curriculum aims to improve social and moral responsibility; community involvement and political literacy. Using these terms, it is possible to evaluate the importance of voluntary work in developing citizenship and skills amongst students.

The largest benefit has been in community involvement. It has been argued that voluntary work promotes citizenship and stronger linkages between the university sector and its local community. The experience at Plymouth certainly involved students with members of the local public and students reported that they enjoyed meeting and working with lay people. Indeed, partnership and voluntary working has often been criticised for failing to engage young people and for only providing opportunities for middle aged groups of residents. One student noted he and his colleagues were the youngest people involved in his rural regeneration project, ‘by a long way’. He felt that the community benefited from the presence of younger people and were keen to listen and take on board their viewpoints. One of the students involved in the urban regeneration project was also a resident of the area under its remit and chose to participate to help her local community.

Students also felt that their communities would ultimately benefit from their work and, for some, this prompted their action. Thus, one student noted that ‘the public will benefit immensely from the project ... benefits will include better social and health provision for the communities that need it.’. Likewise, another student felt that ‘the public will eventually benefit from having a completed State of the Environment Report’. Some students also felt that the community, and the organisations that they were working for, benefited from their time and expertise.

This said, students were working through local authorities and local authority partnerships and so student involvement was indirect, rather than direct. While these partnership reported positive inputs from the students and appreciated their work, it is not know what the public thought about their involvement and whether they appreciated the input from the University of Plymouth.

In terms of political literacy, the experience was also positive for students. They all gained insights into partnership working, the role of local authorities and how decisions were made as part of community consultation exercises. In the best cases students were able to work with the partners to see this process at first hand. However, even when students felt that their partners were too busy to deal with them fully, they at least gained an appreciation that partnership working revolves around ‘busy people’ trying to make useful connections. All left with a better working knowledge of volunteering and community working and an appreciation that, although community-based partnerships are worthwhile, they can sometimes be difficult to manage and influence.

It was far harder to evaluate whether volunteering had improved students' social or moral characteristics, however defined. Most had undertaken volunteering to gain work experience, rather than for altruistic reasons. This said, nearly all of the students said that they would do more voluntary work and many felt that their contributions were important in these schemes. Indeed, one student was keen that more young people should involve themselves in local partnership working and decision making. However, when asked directly, only one student felt that the experience had improved him as a 'citizen'. This was because he had enjoyed working with new people from outside the University of Plymouth. However, several students said that volunteering has given them a 'good feeling' and that this would prompt them to volunteer again.

Although volunteering is often cheap, it is never free. However, less than a quarter of the £1,000 allocated to this project was spent. It was intended to use this to fund mainly student travel and any training. The low uses of expenses partly reflects the proximity of many projects, the desk based nature of some work and the sharing of cars for transport. Consequently student volunteering costs little to establish but the availability of funds is a catalyst for staff and students alike. It gives staff the incentive to apply for and set up a project (although all good projects should be funding fed rather than funding led!) and students the re-assurance that their work will not leave them 'out of pocket' and that they have 'nothing to lose'. Without HEAFC funding and the work of the University of Plymouth Active Community Unit, it is extremely unlikely that these projects would have been established. Funding should therefore continue in order to help to create subject-specific (geography in this case), formal, volunteering opportunities.

There are plans to run the programme again next academic year. It will run over year rather than a term, hopefully enabling students to engage in it fully without exam pressure. Closer monitoring will be used to ensure that students are supported fully support by their partners. In the longer term it is hoped that the success of this pilot project will lead to more local partners and students wishing to involve themselves in it. Students will continue to develop by undertaking volunteering but, as importantly, closer links will be established between the university, its staff and students, and local people and places. Consequently, it is hoped that volunteering can help students to learn with, rather than about, local communities.

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