

Accreditation of voluntary work

This information sheet outlines the issues involved in accrediting voluntary experience and lists useful addresses and publications for further information and advice. It is aimed at volunteer co-ordinators who are interested in formally accrediting the work of the volunteers in their organisation. The information on National Vocational Qualifications applies to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Much of it is also relevant to Scotland: an address for more information on accreditation in Scotland is given in the 'Useful Addresses' section at the end of this information sheet.

What is accreditation?

Accreditation is the formal recognition of the achievements of an individual, linked up to some internal or external standard. In other words, it is a process of confirming that someone's performance conforms to standards that are agreed or approved. In making an assessment, a person's previous experience and learning can be taken into account as well as what they currently do as a volunteer. This is called the accreditation of prior learning. An assessor is the person who actually decides whether an individual's performance is up to the required standard.

Why get involved in accreditation?

The possible benefits to volunteers and the organisation are:

For volunteers

- motivation
- increased skills
- increased likelihood of gaining paid work from voluntary experience
- personal development
- recognition of their contribution to the organisation.

For the organisation

- volunteers who are more effective and skilled in their tasks
- increased retention of volunteers
- easier recruitment of volunteers
- improved service/results of voluntary work.

Key issues

Accreditation clearly has a lot to offer volunteers and the organisations that they are involved in. If you are considering introducing accreditation into your organisation, you should first of all think through clearly what you hope to gain from it. This will make it much easier to select the most appropriate method for your organisation.

There are some key issues to consider before you decide to go ahead:

- Offering accreditation of voluntary work can result in attracting volunteers who may be better educated and who are doing voluntary work very much as a step towards paid work. You need to make it very clear that accreditation is for anyone, and not equate it with formal or written examinations. It needs to be properly presented and explained to avoid deterring people who may have had previous bad experiences in education or who are not very confident of their own abilities. If it is handled properly, accreditation can make a positive contribution to equal opportunities by enabling people who may have no or few qualifications to gain in confidence and skills.
- Accreditation can bring assessment and possible success or failure into voluntary work. Some people do voluntary work to avoid these pressures.
- For accreditation to succeed, the volunteer must be performing specific tasks which demonstrate particular skills. This demands a clear role description for the volunteer and may reduce flexibility. You will also need to keep proper records of all activities to provide evidence for accreditation.
- You must be prepared for some costs in time and money.
 - Initial costs may be incurred in the meetings and working groups involved. There may be the costs of engaging a consultant to assist in the preparatory stages or of a trainer to run seminars or prepare tutors.
 - Continuing costs may include materials and tutors' fees.
 - If volunteers pay for National Vocational Qualifications they receive a tax refund at the basic rate.
 - Grants may also be available from Learning and Skills Councils, or they can give advice on alternative sources of funding.

Learning and Skills Councils were introduced in April 2001 to combine the functions of Training and Enterprise Councils and the Further Education Funding Council. They are responsible for all post-16 education and training (other than universities) and operate through a network of 47 local Learning and Skills Councils. They can provide lots of information on initiatives in post-16 provision, and the main website has a large selection of useful links. (See 'Useful Addresses' at the end of this information sheet.)

What are your options?

There are two options open to you if you decide to go ahead with accreditation.

Internal accreditation

This involves offering your own award in recognition of the skills, ability and experience of the volunteer. You will need to set standards to judge against and work out the evidence you will require from volunteers to demonstrate that they have achieved these standards. Volunteers can then be given a certificate outlining their specific achievements.

Internal accreditation can achieve many of the possible aims outlined earlier. It is also cheaper than external accreditation. The main drawback of internal accreditation is that it may lack external credibility, which can make it less suited to volunteers who are doing voluntary work as part of their career development.

External accreditation

This involves using external criteria to assess your volunteers. Rather than drawing up your own list of necessary skills and competencies, you can use ones produced by an external recognised awarding body. This guarantees that standards have been defined and that the assessment of skills and competence is rigorous. External accreditation has more status for the volunteer. It is also more likely to be impressive to potential employers than an internal accreditation scheme.

However, there are some organisational issues that need to be overcome before it can be successfully implemented. To achieve the relevant criteria of external qualifications, volunteers may well have to complete tasks which are not in their role description and perhaps not readily available in your organisation. A possible solution to this is to liaise with other volunteer-involving organisations in your area to pool volunteer tasks. Your local Learning and Skills Council (address in telephone book) or Council for Voluntary Service should be able to give you information about other organisations offering accreditation. Most organisations offering external accreditation will be getting involved in National Vocational Qualifications, so it is important to have a basic understanding of their role.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)

These arose from a governmental review of Vocational Qualifications in 1986. They are designed to accredit the knowledge and skills that people can demonstrate through work experience. They are composed of 'elements of competence' which describe the skills,

knowledge and understanding required to meet a defined standard. These elements are grouped into units, which in turn are grouped into NVQs, each of which has a title and a level. They are designed to be extremely flexible – for instance, it is possible to do just one unit from an NVQ. There is not a specific NVQ for volunteers, but many of the tasks that volunteers undertake would enable them to gain all or parts of an NVQ in different subjects, such as Advice and Counselling or Management.

Assessment involves producing evidence to enable the assessor to judge whether the candidate is competent. This will involve demonstration (observation of work-based activity), completed work, supplementary evidence, such as oral questions, and the accreditation of prior learning.

Assessment is carried out by centres approved by an awarding or examining body: for example, education centres or Social Services Departments. Voluntary organisations can also become assessment centres, either in their own right or as part of a consortium.

Any organisations offering NVQs must set aside resources to:

- allow candidates the time and work space to collect evidence, undertake training and have contact with advisors and assessors
- enable qualified and/or experienced staff to become advisors and assessors
- develop policies and practices which generate evidence to meet the required standards.

Open College Network

The Open College Network (OCN) offers accredited training designed to overcome the anxiety some people have about the more formal aspects of training. The emphasis is on high-quality, accessible, learner-centred training rather than on the qualification. The learning programmes are designed for the specific working role or interests of learners and are locally accountable. OCN also offers units covering generalist volunteering roles. You can find details of your local branch of the OCN by contacting its main office (see 'Useful Organisations' at the end of this information sheet).

Learners receive a certificate showing the learning outcomes they have achieved at nationally recognised levels of study. OCN certificates recognise learning achievement rather than competence in a work task, as is the case with NVQs, though OCN certificates are currently not as widely recognised by employers or colleges.

The Sharing Credit Project (SCP) is developing training through the OCN. SCP is a consortium of voluntary sector organisations including the National Association of Volunteer Bureaux and the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service. SCP can offer information and advice to voluntary organisations. See the 'Useful Addresses' section for contact details.

Welfare benefits and NVQs

Unemployed volunteers who are working towards an NVQ through their voluntary work should still be eligible for Job Seeker's Allowance, if they fulfil the necessary conditions of being available for work and actively seeking work. NVQs are deemed as 'unadvanced education' by the Department of Social Security and as such should not affect benefit entitlement. If volunteers come across any problems with their benefits, they should contact the information service at The National Centre for Volunteering for advice (freephone 0800 028 3304 or e-mail information@thecentre.org.uk).

Accredited courses for volunteers

Some courses specifically aimed at volunteers have recently been introduced and cover general volunteer roles. For full information contact the organisations below:

Certificate in Interpersonal Skills for Volunteers. A distance learning course lasting from 36 weeks to 2 years. Free to anyone out of paid employment for 12 months or otherwise £120. Personal Development Unit, Centre for Educational Development, University of Wales, Lampeter, Ceredigion SA48 7ED. Tel 01570 424785.

ASDAN (Level 2) Certificate in Community Volunteering. Consists of 5 units: Preparing to volunteer; Skills for self management; Dealing with meetings; Working to good practice standards; Understanding needs, issues and responses. For further information contact: Steve Harper at ASDAN, Wainbrook House, Hudds Vale Road, St. George, Bristol BS5 7HY. Tel 0117 941 1126, e-mail: info@asdan.co.uk

Making a start

Whatever type of accreditation you choose, it is important to consult within your organisation the reasons and implications for getting involved in accreditation. Remember to involve volunteers in this process. Your local Learning and Skills Council will be a good place to start for advice on how to start an accreditation programme, and the organisations and publications given below will also be able to provide further guidance and information.

Work is also ongoing on developing accredited training for volunteer managers and fundraisers: information on this is available from VSNT0 (see below for contact details).

Useful Addresses

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority Scottish Qualification Authority

83 Piccadilly
London W1J 8QA
Tel: 020 7509 5556
<http://www.qca.org.uk/>

Hanover House
24 Douglas Street
Glasgow G2 7NQ
Tel 0141 248 7900
<http://www.sqa.org.uk/>
e: helpdesk@sqa.org.uk

National Open College Network

Kedleston Road
Derby DE22 1GB
Tel: 01332 591 071
<http://www.nocn.org.uk/>
email: nocn@nocn.org.uk

Voluntary Sector National Training Organisation

Regent's Wharf
8 All Saints Street
London N1 9RL
Tel: 020 7713 6161
<http://www.vsnto.org.uk>

Learning and Skills Council

Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Helpline: 0870 900 6800
<http://www.lsc.gov.uk>
email: info:lscgovluk

Bibliography

Show what you know: helping youth and community workers build a portfolio of their experience and learning.

Warren Redman and Alan Rogers.
The National Youth Agency, 17-23 Albion Street, Leicester LE1 6GD. Tel 0116 285 6789.
Price £7.95.

Certificate for volunteers.

Southampton City Council and Southampton Council for Community Service.
Obtainable from Southampton CCS, 18 Oxford Street, Southampton SO1 1DJ. Tel 023 8223855.
Price £5.00.

Credit where credit's due.

Tim Spinks

Wales Council for Voluntary Action, Head Office, Baltic House, Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff
CF10 5FH. Tel 029 2043 1700

Price £7.50 - voluntary organisations; £10 - statutory and private bodies.

Negotiating the maze: an implementation guide to S/NVQs in care for voluntary organisations.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints Street,
London N1 9RL. Tel 020 7713 6161.

Price £15.00.