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## 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
- improved 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.

- All training provided for volunteers, whether accredited or not, must be relevant to the volunteer's role. If not, this could be seen as offering a gift or perk in return for the volunteer's work. This can have significant implications for the legal relationship between a person and organisation.

## **What are your options?**

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

### **1. 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.

## **2. 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 allow candidates to 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, unlike NVQs, and OCN certificates are currently not as widely recognised by employers or colleges.

## **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 Volunteering England for advice (freephone/textphone 0800 028 3304 or e-mail [information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:information@volunteeringengland.org)).

## **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, web: <http://www.volstudy.ac.uk>

**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](mailto:info@asdan.co.uk), web: <http://www.asdan.co.uk>

OCVA currently runs this course, every Spring. Contact the Volunteer Centre for more information.

It is now possible for volunteers to complete a Certificate in Community Volunteering (CCV) course through distance learning and online wherever they may be in England.

A CCV website has been developed, which enables students to access information, resources and materials to help them to build a paperless portfolio via the Internet. Volunteers can get lots of help and support through regular e-mail contact with an experienced CCV tutor. It is available via City of Bristol College from where the CCV has been successfully piloted as a distance-learning course with some members of AYME (Association of Young People with ME). They said they found the course structure allowed them the flexibility of working at home

and the ability to work at times that fitted around their illness. It may be possible to arrange some face-to-face contact with tutors and other volunteers (eg through planned workshops, summer schools) if this is what students would like. Organisations may find it easier to offer the CCV to their volunteers by providing links to the course from their own websites. This gives more volunteers the opportunity to get their voluntary experience recognised and accredited. For further information about the Distance Learning CCV, visit

<http://www.asdan.org.uk/ccv.php?cont=distance> or contact [tom.drywood@cityofbristol.ac.uk](mailto:tom.drywood@cityofbristol.ac.uk)

### **Youth Achievement Awards (UK Youth and ASDAN)**

The Awards are designed to encourage young people to get more involved in selecting, planning and leading activities within their peer group or the local community. They were initially developed for use in the youth work sector, but are now awarded through schools, colleges, national charities, youth offender institutions, Connexions partnerships and training providers. The awards were recommended as a tool for recognising personal development through volunteering in the Russell Commission report on youth action and engagement (the government's report of 2004 which led to the founding of the national youth volunteering charity **v**). For further information about YAA contact: [yaa@ukyouth.org](mailto:yaa@ukyouth.org), <http://www.ukyouth.org/whatwedo/Programmes/YAA/>

### **Train to Gain** (this is now open to volunteers)

The Train to Gain scheme helps people to undertake training through their workplace and is run by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The scheme was opened to volunteers in November 2007, after originally being focused on employees and their employers. An employer/volunteer- involving organisation can meet with a skills broker to assess the needs of their employees and volunteers, and then arrange a tailored training package and identify funding. Further information: 0800 015 55 45, [traintogain@lsc.gov.uk](mailto:traintogain@lsc.gov.uk) , [www.traintogain.gov.uk](http://www.traintogain.gov.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.

### **Alternatives to accreditation**

Award schemes are a popular method for recognising the achievements and commitment of volunteers. There are award schemes which specifically focus on voluntary groups, such as the Queen's award for voluntary service, and others which recognise individual volunteers. Other award schemes, such as the Public Service Awards, offer a category for volunteers or community champions within a broader award scheme. Examples can be found at <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/awards>

### **Useful Addresses**

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority  
83 Piccadilly  
London W1J 8QA

Tel: 020 7509 5556  
email: [info@qca.org.uk](mailto:info@qca.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.qca.org.uk/>

National Open College Network  
The Quadrant  
Parkway Business Park  
99 Parkway Avenue  
Sheffield S9 4WG  
Tel: 0114 227 0500  
email: [nocn@nocn.org.uk](mailto:nocn@nocn.org.uk)  
<http://www.nocn.org.uk/>

UK Workforce Hub  
Regent's Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RL  
Tel: 020 7520 2490  
Email: [workforcehub@ukworkforcehub.org.uk](mailto:workforcehub@ukworkforcehub.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.ukworkforcehub.org.uk/>

Learning and Skills Council  
Cheylesmore House  
Quinton Road  
Coventry CV1 2WT  
Helpline: 0870 900 6800  
email: [info@lsc.gov.uk](mailto:info@lsc.gov.uk)  
Website: <http://www.lsc.gov.uk>

### **Suggested reading**

Opening Doors  
An accreditation guide for the voluntary sector  
Lindsay McCulloch  
RSA Project 2001, in partnership with NACVS

Would you credit it?  
A guide to S/NVQs for the voluntary sector  
VSNTO 2001

Credit for Learning  
A report on the use of S/NVQs in the voluntary sector  
VSNTO 2000

All of the above can be downloaded, free, from the 'useful publications' section of the Workforce Hub's website (look in 'Resources'): <http://www.ukworkforcehub.org.uk>

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For more information, please contact

Volunteering England Information Service

[Information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:Information@volunteeringengland.org)

Freephone/textphone: 0800 028 3304 (10.30am -12.30pm and 2-4pm Monday to Friday)

[www.volunteering.org.uk/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/)

Volunteering England

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