Enriching the university experience through volunteering: a pilot project

Abstract

This article details the first year of a collaborative effort between a campus-based university and its local Victim Support scheme. The key innovative component was that student volunteers were trained to provide support to peers who experienced crime. Not a formal evaluation, this paper outlines how the work appeared beneficial to the university, its students, and Victim Support. The first two benefited through improved on-campus service to victimised students and to those who were trained and worked as volunteers. Victim Support benefited from increased numbers of volunteers and consequently, improved services. Some implementation difficulties are also described. This study provides a platform for further efforts and their more formal evaluation.

Key words

Voluntary sector, victims, students, access to services, peer support

Introduction

Crime in the 'Ivory Tower'

Despite recent decreases in crime (van Dijk and Tseloni, 2012) victimisation remains a concern for students, their families, and university staff (Hart and Colavito, 2011). Higher Education Institutions in the UK have witnessed a 28% increase in admissions over the preceding decade, with 2.49 million students enrolled in the academic year 2009/10 (Universities UK, 2011). With research suggesting that per annum as many as one in three students will be a victim of crime (Barberet et al., 2003; Home Office, 2009), the issue of 'students as victims' has received significant attention from the British government, police and university authorities (Morrall et al., 2010, p. 823).

Victim Support

The national charity 'Victim Support' provides emotional support and offers practical advice to victims of crime in England and Wales. It has grown since its inception in 1974 to become the longest serving and largest victims' organisation in the world; receiving over 1.1 million referrals per annum (Victim Support, 2012). The organisation is independent of criminal justice agencies and reliant on a network of specially-trained volunteers to deliver services which support victims of crime - with additional services extending to witnesses of crime and those affected by homicide. Support is delivered by providing an independent person to talk to in confidence via a telephone helpline,

appointments at local-based offices, or home visitation; with the objective being to provide a free and available service to any individual post-victimisation and to reduce the incidence of psychological distress (Victim Support, 2012).

Central to this service, Bisson and Deahl (1994) argue, is the assumption that talking through an experience enables a victim to process traumatic events. Victims value the opportunity to discuss their emotions and may also benefit from practical advice (Bisson and Shepherd, 1995). Victim Support offers such practical guidance (for example assistance in compensation-claim completion), as well information on security improvement and crime prevention, and navigation to external agencies for support where appropriate (Victim Support, 2012).

Victim Support is the leading organisation of its kind: however students as a demographic are under-represented both as service users and as volunteers. The recognition of universities as an untapped reserve of capable, flexible, and multi-cultural volunteers fuelled the effort reported here to launch a peer support service run by students for fellow students subject to crime.

A vulnerable demographic

Certain sub-populations find themselves at greater risk of criminal victimisation (Grove et al., 2012a; Hindelang et al., 1978) with students being at a particularly high risk (Home Office, 2009). Sloan et al. (1997, p. 149) argue that students are "misled into

assuming that they [are] enrolling in 'ivory towers' and not 'hotspots' for criminal victimisation".

Students are the "archetypal easy victim" owing to their low level of vigilance and relaxed attitude towards protective behaviours (Morrall et al., 2010, p. 823). Characteristics of student lifestyles identify them as a specific 'victim community' beyond the well-established increased risk associated with their age bracket (Morrall et al., 2010, p. 822).

The greater than average likelihood of students owning high value electronic devices (Morrall et al., 2010) amplifies their risk of acquisitive victimisation. Insurance company 'Endsleigh' (2012) reported the average value of a student's hi-tech belongings alone to be worth £1,981. These 'CRAVED' products possess characteristics that appeal to potential criminals: being concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable and disposable, where disposable means they can be easily fenced (Clarke, 1999).

Dubbed the 'i-crime' wave, the theft and robbery of these highly attractive targets has increased dramatically in the last two decades – in direct contrast to the overall trajectory of crime in decline (Farrell et al., 2010; Harrington and Mayhew, 2001; Roman and Chalfin, 2007). Tilley et al. (1999) attribute a specific vulnerability to burglary to a combination of students' employment status, accommodation type, household occupancy patterns, tenure and income. Evidence that 85% of students routinely leave property unattended and doors unlocked (Fisher et al., 1998) coupled with the lack of power to

improve physical security measures, serves to further increase their vulnerability to burglary.

Students' lifestyles lend themselves to increased exposure to victimisation in cases of both violent and acquisitive crime (Fisher and Wilkes, 2003). Drug and alcohol consumption amongst student populations is widely recognised (Webb et al., 1996; Dowdall, 2007; Gebhardt et al., 2000; Sloan and Fisher, 2011) and arguably a contributory factor in the increased victimisation of violence, property damage and sexual assault (Fisher et al., 1998). These student-rich opportunities for crime produce distinctive student victimisation trends. Barberet et al. (2003) conducted research in seven higher education institutions in the UK East Midlands region. They reported that the previous year had seen 12% of students experience a theft or attempted theft, 10% a burglary, and 8% a form of criminal damage. In the same time period, 8% of students had experienced a personal crime – including crimes of violence such as assaults and sexual offences (Barberet et al., 2003). Fisher et al. (2003) observe that much of the existing literature investigating the phenomenon of student victimisation retains a narrow focus on sexually motivated crime. Whilst sexual victimisation is thought to be prevalent in student populations, students are far more likely to experience a property crime than a violent, or indeed sexual, crime (Bromley, 1992; Fisher and Wilkes, 2003; Fisher et al., 1998)

Theft is the most prevalent of campus crimes (Bromley, 1992) – being reported at up to five times the rate of violent victimisation (Sloan et al., 1997) and burglary

victimisation at twice the rate of violence (Fisher and Wilkes, 2003). When violent victimisation in the student community does occur, it can be typified as predominantly intra-racial and intra-gender (between males), and involving strangers of a similar age (Baum and Klaus, 2005; Hart, 2007). The exceptions are sexual victimisation and stalking (Fisher et al., 2000; Brantingham and Brantingham, 1999). Students' risk of such victimisation varies drastically by location and time of day, with Hart (2007) reporting the rate of off-campus violence as twenty times the rate of on-campus victimisation.

Violent victimisation is often "a traumatising and life-altering event with a number of social, personal and economic consequences" (Kaukinen, 2002, p. 432). Morrall et al. (2010) observed the effects on student health and social behaviour post-victimisation across three UK universities, and found a sizeable minority of students suffered serious negative psychological effects, and that the fear of crime altered their socialisation. The vast majority of those negatively affected did not seek health intervention (Morrall et al., 2010). Furthermore, 54% of students who experienced a hate crime victimisation considered the termination of their studies as a direct result (NUS, 2012). Given the impact of victimisation on student behaviour, universities should consider issues relating to student retention and support. There may be additional consequences of crime unique to the student experience, such as the theft of a laptop preventing coursework submissions, or the effects of victimisation impairing a student's ability to complete assessments. Moreover Morrall (2006, *cited in* Morrall et al., 2010, p.

824) suggests the 'ripple effect' from personal suffering to social suffering as a result of criminal victimisation creates a tertiary victim: in this case the broader student population.

Two distinct features of student victimisation captured the attention of Victim Support, Loughborough University and Loughborough Students' Union; fuelling their collaborative efforts to pioneer a student-led, peer support project for students who had been subject to crime. First was the high level of *repeat* victimisation - with 4% of students experiencing 25% of crime (Barberet et al., 2003) – a phenomenon reported to be even more prevalent amongst minority groups within the general student population (NUS, 2012). Whilst repeat victimisation may be preventable, it is crucial to engage students with strategies tailored to their needs (Grove et al., 2012b). Part of this need is the provision of adequate and easily accessible support services.

Second was the dramatic under-reporting by the student population. Relevant research suggests that student levels of reporting are significantly lower than in the wider population (Hart and Colavito, 2011). Barberet et al. (2003) study found that 60% of crimes experienced by students were never reported to the police. In Sloan et al.'s (1997) large-scale study examining reporting trends amongst 3,400 college students, the authors found that more than *three quarters* of crimes on campus are not reported to any authority (defined as campus police, security guards, or police). Broken down further, 82% of violent crimes are not reported, 79% of thefts and 78% of burglaries (Sloan et al., 1997). Fisher et al. (2000) found an overwhelming majority of rapes (95%) involving college

students failed to be formally reported. Affluent and older individuals are more likely to report their criminal victimisation (Hart and Colavito, 2011). Most students do not fit these criteria. Students are also likely to report victimisation at a level significantly lower than similarly aged non-student counterparts (Baum and Klaus, 2005; Hart, 2007). This suggests that the decreased propensity to report crime synonymous with a younger demographic, is further exacerbated by an individual's student status.

Pease and Farrell (2007) describe a 'cultural bias' towards under-reporting from particular sections of society, including university students. Reasons for under-reporting included: considering the incident a private or personal matter; considering the costs of crime a small loss (Hart and Colavito, 2011). In cases of sexual victimisation the fear of victim-blame is cited (Orchowski and Gidycz, 2012; Campbell et al., 2001). Some sub-groups within the student population have an even lower propensity to report their victimisation, namely male victims (Felson et al., 1999; Hart and Rennison, 2003) victims of a hate crime (NUS, 2012; Fisher et al., 2003; Hart and Rennison 2003), and international students (Shepherd, 2012; Marginson et al., 2010). This latter category of victims has become an increasingly recognised problem as, in the last decade, the number of non-EU students studying in the UK has more than doubled, with figures rising 11.7 per cent between 2008/09 and 2009/10 alone– a rate of increase approximately four times that of UK domicile students (Universities UK, 2011). In 2010/11, over 480,700 international students were enrolled in UK higher education (Shepherd, 2012). Graycar

(2010) identified that ostensibly wealthy international students may be perceived as possessing valuable goods, and are thus vulnerable to victimisation, reflecting findings elsewhere (Spolc and Lee 2009; Shekhar and Saxena 2010). International students often struggle more during encounters with formal services when compared to home students (Marginson et al., 2010), which may add to their difficulties reporting crime.

The barriers to reporting noted above result in underestimation of the problem of student crime. Whilst Victim Support works independently of the police, 97% of their referrals come from the police service after a victim has reported a crime. Therefore, as students do not report the crime they have suffered, police are unable to bring Victim Support to their attention. As a result many student victims will not receive an opportunity for emotional support, preventative advice and direction to necessary services that voluntary sector victims' organisations - such as Victim Support - provide (Dillenburger et al., 2008).

Although victims can self-refer to Victim Support, this (and other non-police sources) accounts for just 3% of services provided (Victim Support, 2011). Therefore a noticeable gap in Victim Support's client base is that of young adult victims of crime: particularly within the student population.

Project objectives and implementation

An informal partnership was established between Victim Support, Loughborough University and Loughborough Students' Union to facilitate a service along the lines

suggested above. It differs from existing counselling and support service models traditionally provided by Universities by having a crime-specific focus, harnessing the expertise and training skills of traditional Victim Support volunteers, and disseminating both practical advice and emotional support tailored to the needs of individual victims. The project failed to launch fully in the first academic year, and the full extent of demand and uptake of the service is therefore as yet unknown. The project, it is argued, has great potential and the new ground all parties have had to tread offers lessons for others hoping to bring other voluntary services onto a university campus.

Project aims

The primary aim of the project was to ensure that students who became victims of crime during their studies were able to access the necessary support to maintain or restore their wellbeing. Secondary aims included the trial of a previously untested peer-support model of voluntary service delivery to victims in an under-represented student demographic; creating additional employability-skills provision for students; and minimising disruption to victims' studies. It was considered possible that the project may, at a later date, be extended into provision for the wider community.

Project implementation

The project start was delayed due to a convergence of factors. Volunteers were fully prepared, trained and equipped to begin their peer to peer support on schedule, yet the service failed to launch on campus as planned. The project instead launched in the short term as an additional community service staffed by student volunteers, whilst publicity issues were negotiated and staffing transitions completed. Some key challenges and possible solutions for future projects are outlined below.

Due to the multi-agency involvement and organic growth of the project, clear leadership was not firmly established. This arguably triggered some avoidable delays to the project, and underpinned other problems arising later in the project's execution. A steering committee which included members outside of the immediate project committee could provide direction to similar projects in the future. An important part of the partnership involved the development of a mutual understanding of how the voluntary experience must be adapted for the student population, whilst keeping the core training at the level and depth required for consistency within Victim Support. All parties met regularly to develop responses to these challenges. The use of student volunteers presented unique challenges and rewards for the project. In order to minimise attrition at all stages of recruitment, training and assessment were timetabled to avoid university holidays when students often take up employment and/or leave the town. Negotiating suitable training sessions which did not clash with study commitments was a priority, as six full days' attendance were required from volunteers. Victim Support trainers worked

flexibly to accommodate lecture attendance, and provided some Saturday sessions whilst timetabling the majority of sessions to run on Wednesday afternoons, which are kept free for extra-curricular activities at Loughborough University. However, a change to trainers' normal working patterns was not considered sustainable, and so the programme was adapted to allow for a more intensive mode of study. This could be taken further, with knowledge elements of the programme delivered in a distance-learning format, allowing skills-based training to be delivered in a shorter timeframe.

Two key issues needed addressing before the project's on-campus launch. First, the living situation of students who are victims of crime tends to preclude the possibility of home visits (a staple feature of traditional Victim Support service) due to shared accommodation wherein the sole private space is a bedroom, which is self-evidently inappropriate. Accommodation within the Students' Union was therefore identified to provide volunteers with a neutral base. Student volunteers were also provided with access to phones so that support could be given remotely. Elements of the 'home visit' protocol remained in the training for the student volunteers, in the eventuality that the project, or indeed individual volunteers, would extend support into the community at a later date, or continue their volunteering experiences post-graduation. Owing to low take up of services on campus during the pilot period, volunteers began community level support immediately on completion of training.

The second issue was a context-specific concern regarding confidentiality and perceptions thereof. The close-knit community embodying Loughborough University increases the potential for volunteer and client to know each other, or come into contact after the support has been offered. The training team specifically dedicated part of the training to appropriate protocol in that situation.

Project outcomes

Despite the teething problems experienced whilst implementing the pilot project, many of the core objectives have been met. Victim Support has successfully increased the number of volunteers within a younger demographic by working specifically with students. The pilot programme attracted students from across a broad spectrum of degree programmes. Around one fifth of the students in the original project's intake were finalists. This limited their involvement to a single year as student volunteers, although Victim Support as an organisation may still benefit from their continued involvement after graduation. Whilst Victim Support in the UK is a national organisation, each area has separate branches which are independently managed. This makes the monitoring of volunteer movements difficult after graduation: a volunteer registered to support victims in one area may not be linked to the area in which they were trained.

The students have benefited from their voluntary experiences. Whilst they were unable to participate in the peer support project this academic year, Victim Support

facilitated their working with victims in the community. The students have therefore increased their employability skills and had a valuable addition to their CV as originally intended.

Links between Victim Support, Loughborough University, and Loughborough Students' Union strengthened over the first year of the pilot project. There is now a strong working relationship, which promises to provide opportunities for future mutually beneficial research projects. Recognition of the pilot project's potential has ensured funding from Victim Support to continue into a second year, and paved the way for four further higher education institutions to trial campus-based Victim Support services. These include Leeds University, the University of Kent, and the University of West London. These institutions will build on the experiences of this project, and precede a planned nationwide rollout.

Toward the end of the original one-year pilot phase of the project, the team worked to recruit further student volunteers. As of April 2013, seventeen students had been trained to support victims of crime - with ten active volunteers at any one time - and ninety-nine victims had received support. The volunteers also engaged with Victim Support more broadly, participating in promotional activities and fundraising.

Discussion

Benefits to universities

Collaboration with charitable organisations presents a multitude of benefits for a higher education institution. In this instance, extending student support was the primary goal. However, further advantages were apparent. These included raising awareness of crime and its prevention, as well as broadening the range of volunteering opportunities for existing and future students. This fits well with the employability agenda which is increasingly visible at many universities and colleges. The potential to strengthen the relationship between 'town and gown' is also evident via extending the remit of the project to incorporate the wider community.

Jacoby (2009) argues that a gradual shift in the role of higher education has occurred - with academic performance no longer monopolising the focus of establishments but instead allowing for community involvement and investigation of social problems to permeate a university's objectives. A university has a responsibility to instil a sense of civic duty, responsible citizenship, and a connection to the wider community in their undergraduates (Bryant et al. 2012). Presenting a diverse and expanding range of volunteering opportunities, such as the present support project for victimised peers, is a way for universities to respond to the call for the renewed focus on civic education, as well as enrich the quality of students' experience whilst conducting their studies (Bryant et al., 2012; Brewis et al., 2010).

Opportunities for voluntary involvement gained initial popularity in American institutions during the 1960 and 1970s (Sergent and Sedlacek, 1990). Studies have since

identified the positive impact traceable directly to these university-based schemes: including involvement in campus programmes contributing to student development (Astin, 1985), improved student retention rates (Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek, 1987), and even increased academic success (Astin and Sax, 1998; Hunter and Brisbin, 2000).

The rise of 'safety' as an influential factor in international students' choice of university (Shepherd, 2012) heightens the onus on universities to ensure the protection of students and to promote a sense of safety. A service like Victim Support could therefore have a double impact. As well as addressing the needs of victims and potentially reducing repeat victimisation, voluntary schemes of this type could prove an asset for the marketability of universities by providing additional opportunities and support for students.

Benefits to volunteers

Victim Support provides extensive training to its volunteers, providing valuable transferable skills which expand volunteers' skill sets and curricula vitarum. Whilst additional career preparation such as participating in voluntary activities does not guarantee a job, participation in student organisations and work experience related to career goals is related to success in achieving an appropriate level of career (Sagen et al.*,* 2000). Victim Support volunteering may therefore be of particular use to students who wish to work with vulnerable groups.

Prior studies have examined how community service participation (e.g. volunteer work, service learning experiences) affects student development and various college outcomes. On the whole, this body of research suggests that service work is beneficial in terms of boosting academic achievement (Astin and Sax, 1998), nurturing social consciousness (Astin and Sax 1998; Einfeld and Collins 2008; Jones and Abes 2004; Taylor and Trepanier-Street, 2007), and improving both mental and physical health (Wilson, 2000). A primary benefit articulated by students themselves, is the opportunity to 'burst' the university bubble that volunteering provides: a benefit which 61% of student volunteers believed enriched their experience of University universally (Brewis et al., 2010). Reinders and Youniss (2006) observe the enduring influence of volunteering on future decisions to engage in civically-responsible behaviours. Brewis et al. (2010) extend this to suggest that volunteering can even offer clarity regarding future career choice.

Astin and Sax (1998) found that even after controlling for background characteristics, participating in domains circling public safety and human needs, had significant and positive impacts on students' racial understanding and commitment to serving the community. Such personal development is apparently not transient, but can be linked to post-university retention of civic values when opportunities to reflect are built into their volunteerism (Bryant et al., 2012; Astin et al., 1999).

Sergent and Sadlecek (1990) discuss the importance of finding the right volunteer for the right opportunity, The Victim Support approach on campus of providing different

options for getting involved – including face to face support directly with victims of crime, fundraising, or helping out in other practical ways (e.g. fitting alarms for elderly) - means that there are opportunities suited to a range of student talents. Understanding motivation is also important as most volunteers have a mix of egoistic and altruistic reasons for volunteering (Sergent and Sadlecek, 1990). By ensuring that they get something tangible in return for their input, retention may be increased for the voluntary organisation.

Benefits to victims

The collaborative project was principally designed to benefit members of the student population who become victims of crime during their time at university. This group possesses characteristics that increase their vulnerability to certain crime types, yet whose reluctance to report crime to police creates a notable gap in the current Victim Support client base. Students' hesitancy to bring victimisation to the attention of formal agents - especially prevalent in cases of violent crime, crime between intimates (Kaukinen, 2002) and sexually motivated crimes (Ullman, 2010) - translates to a significant number of victims denied contact with Victim Support through the traditional route of police referrals. These individuals therefore miss out on the support system, crime prevention material, and additional services that Victim Support is able to offer.

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of 600 students' unions; amounting to over 95% of higher and further education unions in the UK and representing the interests of over 7 million students (NUS, n.d.). Recommendations from the NUS (2012, p. 7) include establishing a multi–agency approach to tackling (hate) crime; encouraging universities to found "partnerships with local police authorities, voluntary sector organisations and local authorities", as well as providing flexible options to report crimes and establish stronger support networks. Whilst the inception of the pilot project introduced in this paper preceded the release of this NUS report, the objectives were broadly supportive of this approach to crime victims, and aimed to create an atmosphere of support for victims by drawing on resources available from a range of agencies.

Kaukinen (2002, p. 433) argues for the importance of exploring "*informal* social networks in addressing violent crime". The project sought to benefit student victims by providing such an informal, approachable and local point of contact where crimes could be discussed confidentially without requiring the reporting of such crimes to police. The NUS (2012) investigated students' motivations to report an incident and discovered that students were more likely to discuss the incident if they could remain anonymous, talk through non face-to-face contact, or speak to someone of their ethnic or cultural social group. This pilot project made a conscious effort to address similarly identifiable issues, with attempts to recruit a diverse range of volunteers, and providing telephone support as

well as a drop-in service with confidentiality assured. This has provided the opportunity for student victims of crime to access appropriate support as needed.

Although outside the immediate scope of this paper, another possible benefit of an on campus Victim Support service was the potential to reduce high figures of repeat victimisation via prevention advice. Students experience a disproportionate amount of repeat victimisation – six in ten victims on campus in a 2003 study were targeted on multiple occasions (Barberet et al., 2003). Victim Support may be ideally placed to support these victims (Farrell and Pease, 1997). The occurrence of crime may be regarded as "a good predictor of where and when a further crime will occur" (Farrell and Pease, 1997, p. 101). The distinct patterns unique to the student experience of victimisation could be utilised to predict, and offer information to prevent, future victimisations. Research suggests the need to inform victims of the risk of repeat victimisation and assist them in disseminating crime prevention advice to reduce the likelihood of a repeated exposure to crime (Farrell and Pease, 1993). Victim Support can issue such practical prevention advice to repeat victims (Farrell and Pease, 1997). Further research could examine the scope of Victim Support on campus as a vehicle for delivering crime prevention advice to the student population.

Benefits to voluntary organisations

Last, but by no means least, the voluntary organisation itself can benefit in several ways from collaborations of this type. These benefits are not merely limited to the scope of the project, but can include knowledge transfer and research opportunities.

Cowie and Olafsson (2000) studied the benefits of peer to peer emotional support in the case of bullying; benefits which could arguably be extrapolated to cases of student victims of crime. Provision of peer support for the student demographic has been identified as a particular challenge for Victim Support (Victim Support, 2011). International students are perceived as susceptible to criminal victimisation without alerting authorities, police or alternate support networks (Marginson et al., 2010). The multi-cultural demographic evident in a university setting provides opportunities to recruit international and multilingual volunteers, which in turn provides opportunities to reach otherwise under-represented groups. The collaboration outlined herein has served to address several such identified needs for Victim Support, as well as their clients.

More broadly, voluntary organisations may find the use of the student population to be particularly beneficial. By attracting volunteers at the beginning of their careers, there is ample opportunity to retain a new generation of lifelong volunteers. In this way, voluntary organisations could benefit not just on a local level, but also as national organisations.

Concluding comments

This study has detailed the first year of a collaborative effort to improve support to students who have been victims of crime. Whilst the initial uptake was slow, the project volunteers successfully supported victims of crime in the community, and the project continued to run into the following academic year. It is hoped that lessons learned from this pilot project may prove useful for future collaborative efforts between universities and charities.

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