

Students' Attitudes towards Voluntary Services: A Study of Dhofar University

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore university students' attitude towards voluntary services in Sultanate of Oman and also to identify the obstacles that prevent them from participating in voluntary services. A questionnaire with close-ended questions was distributed to 500 students from Dhofar University. The findings revealed low rates of students volunteering. It also revealed that sport and cultural organizations were the main beneficiaries of students' voluntary activities as well as local agencies. The study found that altruistic motivations are most commonly cited as reasons to volunteer are religious believes. Promote national affiliation, wanting to fill spare time, and gaining work experience are also important motivating factors. Students were clear that they wanted their volunteering to make a difference and some preferred to select activities that allowed them to see more impacts. Student volunteers report many positive impacts on their own personal development, skills and employability. The major barrier to volunteering reported by students is lack of time owing to study pressures. The study also included a number of recommendations and suggestions with the aim of further strengthening university students' participation in voluntary services.

Keywords: students, volunteer, activities, attitude, university.

1. Introduction

Volunteering became a widespread phenomenon that has grown rapidly in the last ten years with hundreds of organizations. The increase in population and the rapid change of social and economic needs of the people make the governments alone unable to cope with the expectations of the citizens. This has led to the emergence of the voluntary sector to play a decisive role to play alongside government to respond to popular expectations. Voluntary sector has been flexible and pursuing different public programmes for people to make their life better. Their programmes apparently ease the burden of governments in providing people with access to development (Finlay, 2005).

In recent years Oman has effectively promoted civic activism and volunteering among its people as a platform for this process. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has paid a greater attention to voluntary work, incorporating voluntary work into different national fields for the Sultanate's annual award in a bid to encourage volunteerism with a wider participation in the country.

This government patronage of volunteerism has generated increasingly numerous volunteer initiatives in social institutions in the country. Today, universities and schools in Oman have been running a variety of volunteer programs by their student union/association, student club and societies. Youth, in particular are targeted, for evidence suggested that young people are more likely to be socialized into pro-social behavior (Hooghe&Stolle, 2003). A major motivation for the university students is the opportunity to gain work-related experience skills that can serve their education and career (Eley, 2003).

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Student volunteers make an important contribution to the work of voluntary organization ranging from small community groups to national charities, as well as to public sector. Volunteer -involving organizations place great value on higher education students and consider universities as valuable sources of talent, time and enthusiasm (Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006). Students, through their voluntary contributions to their communities, offer a huge and relatively untapped resource to deliver quality engagement between universities and the public, to break down barriers.

Volunteering can enhance students' academic and personal skill development, and sense of civic responsibility in addition to explore career choice and employability after graduation (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). Student volunteers are the potential NGO and charitable movers and shakers of tomorrow. However, students face a number of difficulties to volunteering, such as culture barriers, the rising costs of life that need to undertake more paid work, and time available. In addition, some students also have a negative perception of volunteering (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008).

1.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study mainly aimed to: examine the attitudes of Dhofar University students towards volunteering, assess the level of their participation in volunteer work, and identify potential challenges inhibiting them from delivering a voluntary service. The study will investigate how students perceive the motivations and benefits resulting from volunteering. Finally, this study also explored the role of the university in inspiring students to be also a volunteer for society.

1.2 The significant of the study

No research has taken place in this field in the Dhofar University. This study therefore has been the first attempt discussing university students' response on volunteering. This study for the first time will try to show the whole picture of student volunteer participation in a university environment. This study might be a tool to convince policy makers of the country for formulating concerned policies in future. The study might enable government and non-governmental voluntary organizations to establish a network in delivering voluntary services. The study might also lead universities in Oman to introduce volunteerism as a course at Diploma and undergraduate levels in future.

1.3 Research Questions

Research questions include:

- What are the attitudes of university students towards volunteering according to their college and specialization?
- To what extent do university students involve in voluntary work?
- What kind of voluntary work are university students willing to practice?
- What are the relations between motivations and benefits in volunteering?
- What are the challenges disturbing students' participation in voluntary work?
- What would be a viable mechanism to foster the university student's participation in volunteering?

2. Literature Review

Many international and regional studies on student volunteering have been conducted by many researchers. A comparative study done by eight researchers (Flanagan, and others 1999), the aim of the study was to examine the extent to which university students participate in volunteering in each country and its relation with their identity. There is a variation between these eight countries regarding to the percentage of students involved in voluntary work; Australia (28%), USA (51%), Sweden (19.9%), Hungarian (60.4%), Czech Republic (46.3%), Bulgaria (42.2%), and Russia (23.4%).

In other countries, for example, in Canada 7% of the students from age 20 to 24 years old reported that they were participating in community services (Hall, Lasby, Ayer & Gibbons), where 6.9% of students in England reported that they were required to volunteer as part of their study program (Holdsworth, 2010). A study cited by Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) indicated that 15% of general British students from four universities were involved in voluntary work, among them 7% organized through their university and 11% organized in other way. For students who participated in volunteering within specific programs, two Australian studies found higher level of involvement.

In two different Australian universities, McCabe et al.'s study (2007) found that 43% of Psychological students and Esmond's (2000) found 44% of Social Work and Psychology students were involved in voluntary work.

According to the Australian Voluntary Work Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007) found that 43.4% of the students aged 18 to 24 years engaged in voluntary work comparing with 20.1% for those of the same age but not students. These data reflect the positive relation between level of education and voluntary and support the notion that university students are more involved in volunteering than their age cohort.

A further key aspect of volunteering is the involvement of the staff. Kelly (1996) in a study of determining the extent of the commitment of higher education institution to encourage students to engage in voluntary work, he highlighted the importance of involving both the staff and the students in voluntary work.

3. Methodology

The study is an exploratory study embarking quantitative data. The participants of the study were 500 students for academic year 2015-16 from College of Arts and Applied Sciences, College of Commerce and Business Administration and College of Engineering of Dhofar University. A questionnaire with close-ended questions was distributed to the participants and their views and experiences on volunteering. Handy et al. (2006) demonstrated that different colleges of a university carried out different levels and types of volunteering. The questionnaire for data collection will be designed by researchers themselves.

Data was analyzed using SPSS 22 for windows to calculate the frequencies/percentages and mean scores in relation to the aggregate responses for the total sample and to compare across the three colleges. Cross-tabulations, chi-square test to determine the statistical significance of and relationship is used.

4. Findings

4.1 Student participation in volunteering

Table 1: Volunteering behavior among students

		Regular Volunteers	Occasional Volunteers	Non-Volunteers
Volunteering rate*	% n= 500	2.5% 13	33.3% 166	64.2% 321
Area of Volunteering	Health and emergency activities	2.6%	37.2%	60.2%
	Local Agencies	3.3%	37.5%	59.2%
	Sport and cultural activities	4.1%	35%	60.9%
	Community services	1.8%	36.4%	61.8%
	Environment	0.7%	20.4%	78.9%

*Percentage of the students volunteers and non-volunteers.

As shown in table 1, across the entire sample of 500 students, the student volunteering rate was very low (2.5%) where is almost two-thirds of students (64.2%) were non-volunteering. The highest rate was sport and cultural organisations (4.1%) followed by volunteered for local agencies (3.3%). The other area was serving the community (1.8%) and environment had the lowest rate (0.7%).

Table 1 also presents data on of. It also presents the frequency of volunteering involvement. Of those volunteering, there were higher levels of occasional (33.3%) and conversely comparatively lower engagement in regular volunteering (2.5%).

4.2 Benefits of student volunteering

Table 2: Benefits of Volunteer

		Regular Volunteers	Occasional Volunteers	Non-Volunteers
Career related	Gaining work experience	90.7%	79.2%	81.3%
	Opportunity to learn new skills	70.4%	64.2%	60.3%
	Professional Networking	69.2%	57.3%	58.1%
Valued-driven	Builds trust among people	65.7%	58.2%	58.1%
	Self-satisfaction	89.4%	82.5%	79.7%
	Extend friendship network	49.3%	52.5%	51.2%
Social	Recognition from colleges/friends	47.2%	43.7%	48.7%
	Social contact	80.2%	78.5%	78%

Percentage of respondents strongly agrees or agrees for the question “what do you think the benefits of volunteer?” The respondents’ to questions on the main benefits of volunteering is presented in table 2; responded were measured on a five-points Likert scale, and across-tabulation used to compare the responses of regular, occasional, and non-volunteers. The regular volunteers agreed most strongly, followed by occasional volunteers, then non-volunteers. This relationship exists for four main benefits: “gaining work experience”, “self-satisfaction”, and “social contact”, as well as “gaining work experience”. It is interested to consider the main benefit identified by the students is gaining work experience (90.7%) followed by self-satisfaction (89.4%). The counter relationship occurs for the benefit “extend friendship network” as fewer regular volunteers agreeing (49.3%), where occasional volunteers (52.5%) are similar to non-volunteers (51.2%). Other results on serving the community and build trust were not statistically significant across the three different levels on involvement in volunteering.

4.3 Motivations of Volunteer

Table 3: Motivations of Volunteer

	Regular Volunteers	Occasional Volunteers	Non- Volunteers
Personal values	55.7%	43.8%	40.2%
Filling spare time	86.8%	73.1%	70.9%
Serving community	74.2%	70.4%	70.1%
Promote national affiliation	96.5%	88.8%	85.4%
Religious believes	98.4%	90.5%	87.8%
Important to help others	95.1%	86.8%	78.9%
To make new friends	49.3%	52.5%	51.2%
To put on CV when applying for a job	69.2%	73.2%	79.4%

Why do you volunteer? Non-Volunteers: Why do you think people volunteer? Percentage of respondent strongly agreeing or agreeing. The statistically results support a continuum based on the extent of involvement in volunteering (regular-occasional-non-volunteer) in relation to volunteers’ stated motivations and the motivations perceived by non-volunteers (Table 3). “religious believes”, “promote national affiliation”, and “important to help others” were the most important motivation for all three groups, but this motivation was significantly more important for regular volunteers (98.4%, 96.5% and 95.1% agreed) than for non-volunteers (87.8%, 85.4%, and 78.9%), with occasional volunteers falling between the two (90.5%, 88.8%, and 86.8%). This regular-occasional-non-volunteer relationship—where the regular volunteers had the highest level of agreement—is also evident for two other items: “filling spare time,” and “serving the community.” The counter relationship is also evident. Non-volunteers had the highest level of agreement, followed by occasional and then regular volunteers, for one motivations: to put volunteering on the CV when applying for a job

4.4 Barriers of student volunteering

The reasons students give for not volunteering are highlighted in table 3 below.

Table 4: Barriers of volunteer

	Percentage
No enough time	89.7%
Lack of information	79.8%
Lack of institutional support	65.7%
No encouragement by the university, family and friends	57.2%
No volunteering center at the university	19.4%
I'm not sure how to get involved	10.6%
Negative attitudes about volunteer	9.3%
I just don't want to volunteer	6.1%

Percentage of non-volunteers who did not volunteer because of these reasons (all non-volunteer)

Time is often cited as a barrier to volunteering. As shown in table 4, the major barrier to volunteering reported by the students (89.7% of all non-volunteers) is lack of time owing to study pressure. Further analysis shows that students who do not involvement in volunteering due to lack of time are more likely to have other work commitments and family responsibility. Moreover, students identified that starting to volunteer can often appear to be too much like applying for a job, and this can lead to fears about the levels of time and commitment needed. A large number for non-volunteers (79.8%) suggest that the reason is lack of information followed by (65.7%) prior to lack of institutional recognition, support and award where staff within the institution do not value the role of volunteering. More than half of the responded (57%) insisted that there is no care and no encouragement by the university, they also stated that they did not participate because their families and friends were not involved. It is important to note that around a quarter (23.4%) did not involve in volunteering because there no center at the university. About 22.3% stressed that they are not being able to access information about volunteering and have difficulties in gaining to placement as well as not knowing where or how to start which can be offered by the center. 2.3% only have a negative attitude about volunteer. Interestingly only a minority of respondents (1.7%) is simply not interested in volunteering and felt that volunteering is not worth.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to examine pattern and attitudes toward volunteering among Dhofar University students with particular attention to the frequency of volunteering and perceived motivations, benefits and barriers. Students were divided into three subgroups: regular volunteers, occasional volunteers, and non-volunteers. The study identified low level of volunteering among students across the sample, yet there is remains scope for expansion. On the other hand, Occasional volunteering is more popular among students which is important activity between non-volunteering and volunteering regularly. This trend is due to time limited and should be recognized and utilized to enhance students' "volunteerability" (Finlay & Murray, 2005).

The study confirmed that the most popular beneficiaries of volunteer activities were sport and cultural activities. However, the wider community services through nonprofit sector may not benefit to the same degree. Moreover, the students are unlikely to involved in environment activities as they pointed out that the government took the full responsibility and there is a need in other areas to help people. Student volunteers reported many positive impact on their own personal development, skills and employability and gain high levels of satisfaction. Students acknowledge the greatest value on the personal growth and improvement in confidence and self-esteem as well as willingness to try new things. Moreover, the study confirms that volunteering provides experience that graduates can utilize when looking for work. For many students, volunteering is the only chance they have to meet people from backgrounds that are different to their own, they indicated that their understanding of other people had increased as a result of volunteering and experienced a wider range of friendships. Importantly, volunteering at university enhances students' likelihood of volunteering in the future. A majority of students think volunteering whilst at university has increased their willingness to volunteer in the future. Indeed, volunteering takes students into different communities and exposes them to a variety of social and business needs and issues which they would not otherwise access as part of their higher education (Rochester 2004).

The study confirms that enhancing employability is a major motivational factor for volunteering, and students feel that volunteering for the 'right reasons' is important and do not like to be told that they must volunteer, and the fact that students have freely chosen to volunteer is very important to them.

The study also confirms that the students are more motivated to volunteer by reasons connected to their personal values, such as religious beliefs and help people. Students were clear that they wanted their volunteering to make a difference and some preferred to select activities that allowed them to see more immediate impacts. Students from less advantaged backgrounds are more motivated to volunteer to enhance their employability. It is also worth noting that while people may think that they are entering into volunteering for certain personal benefits, for example, access to better employment opportunities, it is noted that the longer the volunteer is exposed to volunteering that there are transformational effects (Eley, 2003) and the benefits of volunteering come to be increasingly perceived as those related to the volunteering. The findings also show that students who receive support for their volunteering from their university are more satisfied with the experience of volunteering and report greater personal development benefits. Organizations that involve volunteers in their workplace high value on university students and see universities as valuable sources of time, talent and enthusiasm. The report emphasized that students experience positive impacts on their own personal development, skills, employability and also huge satisfaction that flows from volunteering. But all this does require support from university and colleges themselves and students' unions to make the most of the potential benefits.

The study suggested that there are a number of possible impediments to students volunteering. The data from the students reported that the main barriers to students volunteering is lack of time owing to study pressures. Further analysis shows that students who cite lack of time as a reason for not volunteering are more likely to face other work commitments and family responsibilities. Hence they are more likely to focus on their studies than take part in other activities (Gaskin, 2004). The data also reported that many students are not understanding what volunteering entails, or not knowing how to get involved in volunteering and they suggested that linking volunteering to students' academic subjects might encourage more students to volunteer (Hutton, 2007).

Students identified that starting to volunteer can often appear to be too much like applying for a job, and this can lead to fears about the levels of time and commitment needed. They also included institutional recognition, or lack of, as a positional barrier, where staff within the institution do not value the role of volunteering; this may affect the actions of a student who is considering volunteering. However, it is interesting to consider that some students are in fact already actively involved in their local communities, but they do not always recognise this as 'volunteering', seeing it as helping out family members/friends or offering help to mosque. It was also noted that female's students find it difficult to make the first step into volunteering, because they are afraid of not knowing anyone and shy to ask, or having to travel to new parts of a city where their families do not allow them due to cultural reasons. Students are also put off by the perceived bureaucracy that surrounds formal volunteering including application forms and interviews.

There is demand for information, training and awards, although some of these are already offered by students' affairs. There is also a strong demand from students for university to help find volunteering opportunities connected with their academic courses. The study confirmed that students contribute significantly to university life and these contributions should be celebrated and built upon (Morgan, 2008). It will be very helpful if volunteer is links with academic programmes. Importantly, volunteering at university enhances students' likelihood of volunteering in the future. Effective student volunteering programmes may be attractive to students thinking about the quality of their student lives and opportunities to support their employability at the end of a degree programme

There is much work to be done in further exploring the student perceptions of volunteering. The study sought to services a number of issues in order to achieve a step change in youth volunteering; such issues are; more opportunities need to be made easily accessible and attractive to students to have more involved in volunteering to ensure that achievements within are recognized and that volunteering placements are of a high quality. Interestingly, students who had reported that they want volunteering to be as part of their degree courses.

6. Recommendations

Volunteering can play an important role in developing students' community awareness and integration into communities outside the university. Yet it is evident that without adequate support, management and opportunities for reflection and placing volunteering in wider social context, student volunteering can fail to realise many of the potential benefits frequently attributed to it. Universities are going some way to help these benefits be realised, but much more could be done through increased investment and strategic. It is evident from the study that there exists a well-developed student volunteering network; however, there remain a number of significant gaps in students understanding.

In order to begin to tackle these gaps and to promote growth within the sector, it is crucial to develop a clear understanding of the various models of student volunteering and the inter-relations between these. This will assist us in our other tasks of building more positive engagement with wider policy around volunteering, and in collecting a rich evidence base to support future development and to demonstrate the impact of student volunteering. There is a need for more opportunities made easily accessible and attractive to students, to have more of them involved in volunteering, to ensure that achievements within volunteering were recognised and that volunteering placements were of a high quality. Central was the development of a framework which put the young person at its heart to support and encourage, and promote youth-led volunteering and enable peer encouragement of other young people to volunteer. This can be done by offering generic modules in that they not hosted by a specific academic department, and they can therefore be taken by any student studying any subject area. However, it is worth noting that some of these generic modules utilise course teams and tutors to help students link their voluntary work with their academic work. This also can be offered as cross-curriculum models, which enable students to choose an area more directly aligned to their course if they wish. Another encouragement by the university could be inject competition into the activity and award can be offered for the good work as the study reflected that there was no interest in any award which was not coming through the university itself. It is clear that the support within a volunteering placement is needed in order to have more young people involve and give their best.

Specific support and management needs to be considered of students volunteers, emphasizing young people's desire for flexibility, variety and ease of access to volunteering (Gaskin, 2004). These studies also find that young people have some clear ideas about how they would like their volunteering to be organised, for example seeking involvement in planning and decision making (Ellis, 2004).

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