

Reverse Volunteering In Action

Helping People Who Have Experienced Long-term Unemployment Prepare For Work



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INTRODUCTION

The Need for Change

While universities are often recognised for educating the relatively small proportion of people who access Higher Education, there is an increasing awareness that they can and should play a wider civic role. Universities can make meaningful civic impact by considering the resources they have and how they might be aligned to meet the needs of communities where they are based.

Abbey People is a community charity based in East Cambridge, one of the city's most deprived areas. They support local residents through education, employment, and mental health initiatives. Through early community listening discussions with Abbey People we quickly identified that many individuals experience long-term unemployment and face a range of barriers, including extended gaps in employment, caring responsibilities, and limited access to suitable opportunities. However, perhaps even more significantly, many had lost confidence, felt demotivated, and believed their skills were no longer relevant in the current job market.

As part of our civic impact programme colleagues from across the university came together to develop a response to the complex and often overlooked barriers faced by people who have been out of work long term. This project aimed to support individuals to rebuild confidence, recognise the value of their existing skills, and feel empowered to take the next step toward employment. In line with ARU's organisational culture which delivers inclusive education and our commitment to social responsibility, we have combined staff volunteering, institution resources and our relationship with community partners to respond to these barriers that affect this group of people.

Our Approach

We co-designed a 'reverse volunteering' programme to offer people who have experienced long-term unemployment the opportunity to gain meaningful experience of work within the university environment. Participants would have access to support and resources to help them develop workplace confidence, refresh existing skills, and build new relevant ones as a practical step towards securing quality, sustainable employment. This approach aimed to demonstrate how HE institutions can use their everyday operations as a platform for inclusive engagement and social impact.

PROJECT DELIVERABLES

In addition to the outcomes generated through the project activities, the project also aimed to produce a set of practical resources to support wider learning and replication.

These deliverables in the form of toolkits will provide blueprints that:

Community Organisations

University Engagement

Measuring Impact

Community organisations can use it to approach universities, other public sector organisations, and education providers, to encourage the development of similar projects.

Other HE institutions, other anchor institutions and large employers can use it to engage with community organisations who want to support more equal access to, and participation in, the recruitment pipeline in their communities.

Incorporate measurement tools that could be used by other HE institutions to measure the civic impact of their projects.

REVERSE VOLUNTEERING

Reverse volunteering is a concept developed during the project design phase that describes a two-way model where university staff volunteer their time and expertise within the university, drawing on the university's resources to support people who have experienced long-term unemployment, offering structured guidance and mentorship. At the same time, participants also voluntarily giving their time to engage with the programme, bringing their lived experiences, insights, and commitment to learning.

What makes this model distinctive is that staff add value without stepping outside their usual professional context and are able to see the power and the importance of volunteering by directly working with the beneficiary, while participants actively contribute to their own development by taking part in meaningful, voluntary learning. Framing participation as a form of volunteering recognises the value of the participants' time and contributions, reinforces their agency, and encourages a sense of shared purpose.



OBJECTIVES

THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF THE PILOT WERE:

01 Increase Workplace Confidence

To enhance participants' confidence in their ability to engage in the workplace and transition into paid employment.

02 Clarify Career Pathways

To help participants develop a clearer understanding of their next steps toward employment and skills that would be required, based on guidance received throughout the programme.

03 Broaden Career Horizons

To expand participants' awareness of job roles available, career prospects, and transferable skills they already possess.

04 Ensure Tailored Experiences

To provide participants with opportunities to experience work that aligns with their interests and skills, ensuring a meaningful and relevant placement.

05 Evaluate and Share

To Evaluate the project and share findings.



PROCESS

RECRUITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Participants were identified through a partnership with Abbey People, a local charity in Cambridge supporting individuals, in what is recognised as an area of high deprivation in Cambridge, through education, employment and mental health support.

Abbey People provided the profiles of people who were interested in participating. The profiles included their interests, previous experience and reasonable adjustments required to participate in the pilot.

The recruitment of hosts inside ARU was conducted university-wide by placing an advertisement in the staff bulletin, inviting staff to volunteer. Hosts were specifically sought in departments and roles that matched the interests of participants.

PRE-PROGRAMME PREPARATION

The ARU coordinating team & Abbey collaborated via a live tracker, which recorded participants' profiles, past work experience, and current interests. The tracker was regularly updated to ensure the team remained informed about participants' availability, changes in circumstances such as if they required child care to participate, if they required bus fare or if they had to miss a session due to other commitments.

Weekly situation meetings were held with Abbey People to review participants' progress, discuss any challenges, and ensure appropriate support was provided.

The participants were matched with workplace hosts based on their past work experiences and/or current interests.

The project dates and times were selected based on the availability of hosts and participants.

PRE-PROGRAMME PREPARATION

A checklist was developed to identify the key components for hosting including: selecting the project venue, completing a general risk assessment for the project, ensuring that line managers of staff volunteers complete a risk assessment for the experience of work sessions, informing relevant teams of the event like the security team, estates and facilities team and the university reception.

Project materials were developed, induction packs for staff hosts and participants. Pre- and post-evaluation forms for participants and training slides were developed.

Arrangements were made for participants' daily lunch and travel.

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

The pilot followed a structured approach:

Day 1:

Induction for participants, introductions, pre-evaluations using a 5-question survey and a one-to-one CV clinic. Participants' CVs were sent to the coordinating team in advance and a CV clinic was set up where each participant had a one-on-one session with a member of the coordinating team to help shape their CV based on their skill set.

Day 2:

Experience of work session with hosts (2-hour placement).

Day 3:

Experience of work session with hosts (2-hour placement), and an employability support session on CV writing, cover letter and job application guidance.

Day 4:

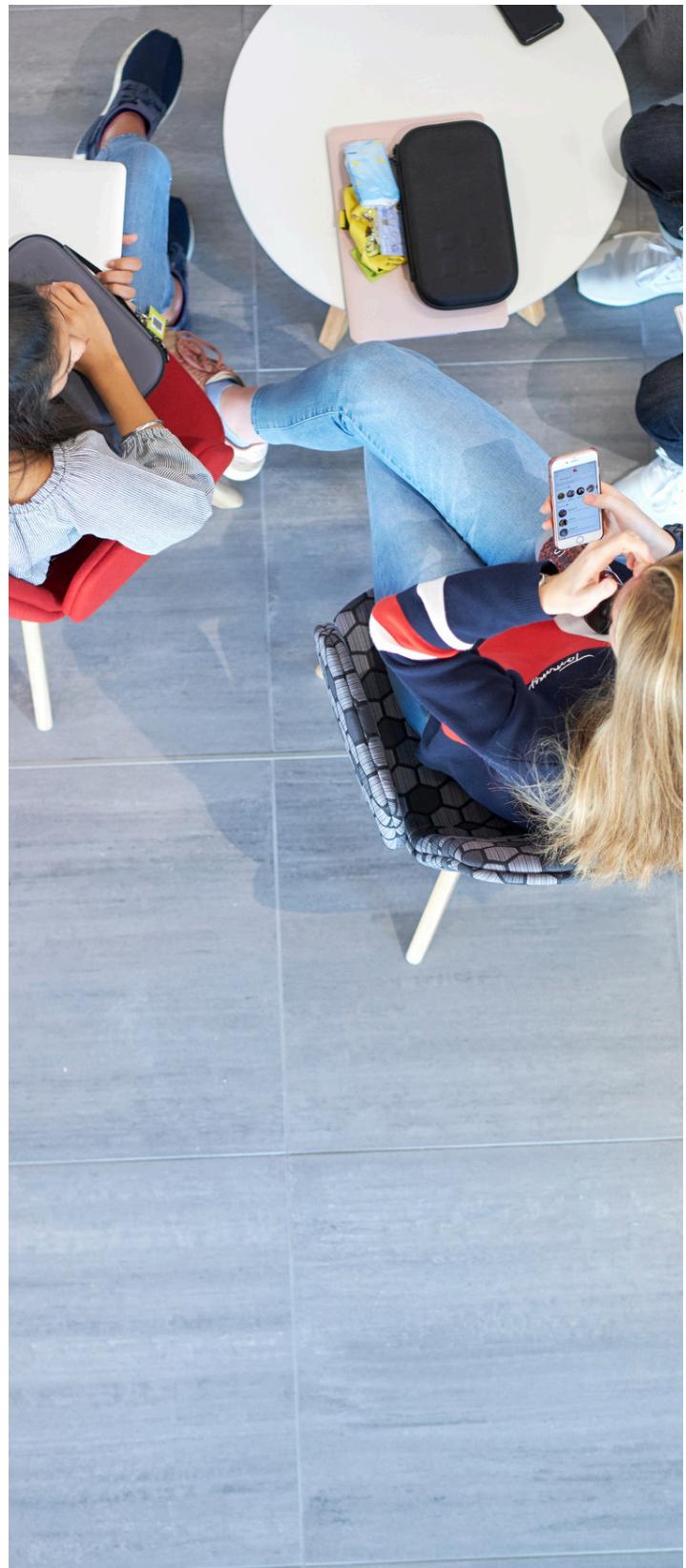
Experience of work session with hosts (2-hour placement).

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION CONTINUED

Day 5:

Employability support session on EDI, covered topics such as disability and managing long-term conditions in the workplace. Many participants were living with long-term health conditions, so EDI training was vital to help them understand their rights at every stage, from job applications to starting work. This included knowing they can ask for reasonable adjustments, such as receiving interview questions in advance or requesting changes to their workspace, to ensure fair and supportive employment.

The team conducted a post-programme evaluation to assess its impact and gather feedback. This was achieved through a 5-question survey and a structured discussion. Key insights and challenges were identified to refine the model for future implementation.



KEY OUTCOMES



01 Participation

Four participants engaged with the pilot and three participants successfully completed the programme.

02 Experience of Work

Four participants engaged in workplace sessions with 8 volunteer ARU hosts.

03 Employability Sessions

Three participants actively engaged with the employability sessions delivered by two ARU staff volunteers.

04 Recognition

Certificates were awarded to three participants who successfully completed the programme to acknowledge their proactiveness in seeking employment, a valuable addition to their CVs. Digital badges will be awarded to staff who volunteered to host participants, sharing their experiences and knowledge.

EVALUATION

To assess the impact of the project, pre-evaluation and post-evaluation forms were distributed to participants before the project commenced and after its completion. In addition, evaluation requests were sent to staff who participated in the project, as well as to Abbey People.

Verbal evaluations were also conducted with participants before and after the project, during which feedback was recorded. This feedback, along with responses from the surveys, provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of the project and its impact on participants. It also highlighted areas for improvement and opportunities for future development.

Evaluation Aspect	Pre-Evaluation Feedback	Post-Evaluation Feedback
Confidence in Returning to Work	Mostly low or neutral	Slight increase, with more clarity on next steps
Perceived Skill Levels	Uncertainty about relevance	Greater awareness of transferable skills
Concerns About Employment	Fear of discrimination and workplace adjustment	Some concerns remain, but more informed about options
Familiarity with EDI	Limited awareness	More familiar with workplace EDI
Next Steps	Unclear plans	Interested in volunteering, training, networking and applying for suitable jobs.

Pre-Evaluation Findings

Before engaging in the project, participants expressed a mix of uncertainty and apprehension about returning to work. The key themes identified were:

- **Confidence levels:** Most participants reported feeling unsure or neutral about their ability to return to work. Some cited a lack of recent experience, while others highlighted health-related concerns.
- **Skills perception:** Participants had mixed views on their skill sets. Some felt they retained useful skills, while others worried about their relevance in today's job market.
- **Concerns about employment:** Many mentioned fears related to workplace dynamics, age discrimination, and whether they would be able to adapt to the new working environment.
- **Value of EDI Principles:** Participants have limited awareness of EDI.
- **Next steps:** The participants were unclear about future employment plans and expressed the need for more work experience.

Post-Evaluation Findings

Following their participation in the project, participants provided feedback on how their perspectives had shifted. The key findings included:

- **Confidence Improvement:** While not all participants reported a dramatic increase in confidence, many felt more informed about the job market and better prepared for the next steps. One participant noted, "I now have a clearer idea of what to expect when I return to work".
- **Skill Awareness:** Participants generally felt more aware of their transferable skills. Workplace visits and networking opportunities helped them recognise their strengths.

Post-Evaluation Findings

- **Value of EDI Principles:** Several participants appreciated the focus on EDI, with one commenting, "I hadn't considered the importance of EDI in the workplace before, but now I understand how it affects hiring and job satisfaction".
- **Next Steps:** Some participants expressed an interest in volunteering or further training before re-entering the workforce. One noted, "I think volunteering will be a good way to ease back into work while gaining more experience".



VERBAL EVALUATION

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Participants felt more confident applying for jobs.

They agreed that the employability support sessions were essential in boosting their confidence and job readiness.

Participants valued the real-world experience of work gained during the programme.

Participants said exposure to the university work environment and talks with hosts helped them explore career options, identify new employment pathways and ultimately feel more prepared for employment.

They stated that they felt supported by the team for the entire duration of the programme.

One participant enjoyed all parts of the programme. Two participants expressed that their time with the hosts and the CV clinics were the most valuable parts of the programme.

When asked about their next steps, participants mentioned looking for volunteering roles at ARU or other organisations and applying for suitable jobs. One participant stated that he would be reassessing his current situation.

By the end, participants noted that they were significantly more familiar with workplace EDI principles, including the support they could expect and demand from an employer.

Participants felt comfortable with hosts who worked in areas they were familiar with. One participant even described the experience as comforting.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Participants wanted a more work experience. Although they felt more confident applying for jobs, they were still not confident as to whether employers would value their skillset.

Participants thought longer work placements, i.e., more days with longer hours, would provide deeper learning and help develop stronger professional relationships.

Participants felt it would be helpful to meet and speak with their hosts before their work sessions, i.e., have the hosts around on the first day of induction and introductions. They expressed that this would help them feel more confident approaching sessions and feel more in tune with the hosts.

Participants thought the pilot could have a different name to better reflect the experiences gained and skills built throughout the programme. example, "Prepare for Work".



STAFF REFLECTIONS

Staff Volunteer (Experience of Work Host)

"I did enjoy it. I would be interested in feedback; on reflection, I may have gone into a little too much depth, so I would be interested in what the participant thought of the sessions.

In terms of personal thoughts, I think the oversight was beneficial, I think that offering work experience would be good, although I fully understand it may not be possible due to logistics and the needs of the participants.

The CVs are brief and to have a period of work experience they can show a potential employer would really help".

Project Team

"It was a surprisingly good pilot. Normally, on a pilot, you expect to have to make a lot of changes. We did not have to evolve or change too many things on this occasion. We did put the effort in and we got it right the first time".

"A distinctive strength of this pilot was the integration of ARU's expertise in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). By drawing on the knowledge and leadership of our HR specialists in this area, participants gained valuable insights into inclusive workplace practices. This not only informed their understanding of their rights and expectations in employment, but also supported their confidence, sense of worth, and ability to advocate for job satisfaction in future roles. Sharing ARU's established EDI frameworks in this way added meaningful depth to the programme and is something we are particularly proud of".

"The participants were great to work with and I could see how much they had opened up and were speaking with more confidence by the end of the project. I was glad to see how excited they were to receive their certificates".

PARTNER REFLECTIONS

Abbey People

"This collaboration with ARU was a very good joint effort to offer individuals who have been long term off work a glimpse of what a different career path that matches their skills and interests could look like, as well as tools to be more confident when looking for the next step towards employment. Abbey People and ARU worked very closely to ensure the pairings with staff members were a good match and to co-design a meaningful experience of work.

For the participants that were able to attend, it offered structure, coupled with flexibility and reasonable adjustments, shadowing and mentoring opportunities, and a variety of interactive return to work workshops. Perhaps most importantly, it gave participants professional connections that they will be able to tap into if they wish to and there might also be follow up on work experience/volunteering".

Third Party Feedback

The project team received a message from a support manager and independent mentor at a local disability charity who had been supporting one of the participants prior to his participation in the pilot. The message read: "I have had one of my participants attend the pilot scheme that was run earlier in March. He enjoyed his time on the work experience, he came back with more confidence in applying for jobs and more focused on what type of work he was looking for. His overall mental health has improved". This amazing feedback shows that the pilot achieved what we set out to do.

KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rethinking Recruitment and Engagement

When designing marketing to recruit staff volunteers, every detail should be specified, e.g. location, times, dates, etc. It proves more productive to contact staff individually rather than using mass emails. This would ensure greater understanding and commitment to the project.

Broad marketing within the organisation should not be relied on solely. Direct targeted outreach to departments and staff proves more effective. Strong relationships with departments should be built and leveraged to ensure sustainable opportunities.

Roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined for all parties – staff, participants and facilitators to avoid confusion and ensure everyone knows what they are committing to.

Pre- and post-evaluations should be done for hosts as well as participants. In the case of this pilot, it was only administered to participants.

Strengthening Incentives and Recognition

Staff participation improves if volunteering incentives are emphasised, such as:

- Recognising their contributions as part of their professional development.
- Awarding digital badges would help in tracking and rewarding staff volunteer hours.
- Certificates of participation would help boost participants' CVs and highlight to an employer their commitment to personal development.

KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Logistics and Flexibility

The project could increase staff interest and encourage them to volunteer by generating public media awareness before, rather than after. It could also increase participants' willingness to participate fully, as some participants mentioned reading about the project and being excited to be involved. The project was featured in a BBC news piece and members of the project team were invited to speak on Cambridge radio and That's TV about the concept of reverse volunteering.

If the planning phase is too long or drawn out, the goal post may keep shifting. Participants may drop out due to various reasons, and staff may become unavailable.

A comprehensive risk assessment should be carried out for the entire project as well as by line managers of volunteer staff. These risk assessments must consider the health conditions of the participants, e.g., mobility issues or mental health challenges. This should be done with guidance from the Health and Safety team.

Programme design could be complex, requiring adjustments at any stage. For example, participants may drop out once the project has started, and staff volunteers need to be informed as soon as possible.

Staff volunteers may become unavailable. Alternative workplace hosts should be identified in advance to accommodate last-minute cancellations.

Create a personal agenda for each participant, as the dates and times may vary for the experience of work sessions with their hosts due to the varying work schedules of staff volunteers.

A comprehensive events checklist should be kept containing activities that must be completed before the commencement of the project, important contact information, dates, times and venues, etc.

KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Induction and Staff Preparation

Staff induction sessions are essential to ensure they understand participants' needs and their role in supporting them. Staff should receive basic training, i.e., "Safeguarding" and "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace".

Participants should be encouraged to attend the induction so they get to know the project team, work environment and the holistic picture of the project, which could make the entire process less overwhelming. It is important to consider that the experience can be overwhelming and dropout may happen.

Participants' profiles should be made available to staff hosts at the early stage of project planning so they are aware of the interests and needs of the individual they would be supporting.

Coordinating the project in teams of two or more could improve continuity and provide backup in instances of unavailability.

Other Support

Plans for support need to be made and confirmed early on during project design, for example, provision of travel and lunch.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the pilot programme has proven to be a success, effectively meeting the needs of the individuals it aimed to support. Through careful planning and execution, we were able to create a programme that addressed the specific challenges faced by this group, demonstrating the programme's relevance and importance. However, organising the project was quite complex, as it involved coordinating efforts from both volunteer staff and the participants. This volunteering duality required us to develop almost separate agendas to cater to the unique needs and circumstances of everyone involved.

The clear demand for the initiative has emerged as a significant outcome of this pilot, and we are actively working with colleagues to look at ways for staff to continue to volunteer in this way. Participants expressed that they found the programme to be beneficial, offering valuable insights and skills that they can use moving forward. While we are optimistic about the impact of the project, we recognise that it is still too early to determine the long-term benefits definitively. To that end, we are committed to maintaining contact with Abbey People to understand progress.

As part of our commitment to sharing knowledge and best practices, we have developed an action learning pack, which will detail the activities and methodologies employed during the project. This resource will serve as a comprehensive guide for other organisations looking to replicate our approach and foster similar initiatives within their own communities. By providing a clear framework of what was accomplished and the lessons learned, we hope to inspire and assist others in their efforts to support people who have experienced long-term unemployment effectively.

AFTERWORD

Following the success of this pilot, ARU is now focused on embedding the positive outcomes within the university's system to encourage capacity building and sustainability.

One of the strongest messages from participants was the need for more access to meaningful work experience within the university, whether through placements, shadowing or similar opportunities. In response to this we are working closely with colleagues in HR and have invited our participants from the pilot to test a newly introduced placement scheme for this purpose.

The feedback which we are currently gathering will help us to develop a model of engagement tailored to those who have experienced long-term unemployment, and to refine and improve the placement scheme. by doing so we hope to make it more accessible and impactful for the target audience within our university communities.

We are also looking at expanding our reach and working with more local charities that support people who have experienced long-term unemployment, offering new pathways for individuals to gain work experience within the university environment.



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TOUCH
WITH US!**



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