



## Successful partnerships with third sector organisations to enhance the healthcare student experience: A partnership evaluation <sup>☆</sup>



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### SUMMARY

There is limited research surrounding academic partnerships and more research is needed to educate universities, and the private, public and third sectors about the benefits and limitations of such partnerships. The aim of this study was to outline the unique partnership between Macmillan Cancer Support and De Montfort University and to evaluate the progress of this partnership. A qualitative approach was employed which involved interviews with nine members of the partnership's steering group. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The results showed that a partnership between a university and a third sector charity can have mutual benefits for all those involved, particularly for students and those affected by cancer. Furthermore, the module to develop volunteering among families affected cancer, created through this partnership is now being considered by other universities as a way of providing holistic and non-traditional lecture based learning experiences. Recommendations are made for future partnerships between third sector charities and universities.

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### Background

University–community partnerships can be described as 'the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination activities (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 1998, p. 239). Partnerships between universities and public sector organisations or the private sector are well established and have been shown to benefit both parties including students. Buys and Bursnall (2007) argue that these benefits can include new insights and learning, better informed community practice, career enhancement for both the students and the facilitators, improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, additional funding and more frequent and higher-quality publications (Davies, 1996; Landry and Amara, 1998; Kellet and Goldstein, 1999; Mead et al., 1999; Amabile et al., 2001; Hollis, 2001).

Joint partnerships are based on agreed models of working. Sargent and Waters (2004) model of academic collaboration suggests that partnerships between universities and outside parties go through cycles of

four specific phases to form a partnership. The first phase, the *initiation phase*, focuses on the motivation for each partner to be involved. Motivation is often instrumental (specific knowledge, complementary skills and employment advantages), intrinsic (building friendships/relationships, the enjoyment of working together) or a combination of the two. The second phase, the *clarification phase* allows those involved to identify issues relating to the duration, scope, collaborators and goals of the project. The third, or *implementation phase* allows for roles and responsibilities to be identified. Finally, the *completion phase* refers to how the partnership rates the success of the project in terms of objective, subjective and learning outcomes. Additional interpersonal (trust, communication, mutual respect) and contextual processes (support from faculty members, information technology and administrative staff) are also placed as highly important within successful academic partnerships (Buys and Bursnall, 2007).

Despite these numerous benefits, there is limited research surrounding academic partnerships. Davies (1996) argues that both academic and community partners are able to benefit from collaborative research within academic partnerships; however community partners may be less aware of these benefits within their day to day operations (Buys and Bursnall, 2007). There is a call for more research to be able to educate the public, private and third sector about the benefits and limitations of the partnerships they are involved in (Buys and Bursnall, 2007). By doing so, research outputs can be used within the university, the public and private sector and community to guide teaching and improve relationships within academia and the local community.

Partnerships between universities and third sector organisations are less common but have potential to benefit partner organisations,

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students, and local communities and develop citizenship between all of these. A prime example is the De Montfort University and Macmillan Cancer Support partnership, created to improve students' educational experiences and employability, increase volunteering opportunities and create direct links to the local community. The aims of this paper are to:

1. Describe the unique partnership between DMU Macmillan Cancer Support.
2. Discuss a partnership evaluation.
3. Provide recommendations for the development of partnerships between universities and third sector organisations.

#### *The DMU Macmillan Partnership*

De Montfort University (DMU) currently holds partnerships with private and public sector organisations such as Hewlett-Packard, BBC, the National Health Service Social Care, and Social Work. These relationships have been beneficial in developing students that are fit for practice.

As part of DMU's ambition to contribute to the local community and improve the student experience, DMU and Macmillan embarked upon an innovative joint venture: a partnership between a university and a third sector organisation. Macmillan Cancer Support is a high profile national charity which aims to improve the lives of those affected by cancer by offering a variety of services including advice, guidance, volunteering, fundraising, campaigning and support from health care professionals. DMU and Macmillan aimed to provide students with valuable volunteering experience.

Initial discussions were held in November 2012 and a formal partnership was agreed in 2013, creating the DMU Macmillan volunteering module. The aim of the partnership was to provide volunteering experiences for students and at the same time benefit cancer sufferers, their carers and their families. The module supports students from DMU to help improve the lives of local people affected by cancer. The purpose of the module is to develop relationships with Macmillan, other local volunteering organisations and the wider community. The intended outcome is for development of student key skills and employability. Governance of the partnership project has been via a Steering Group.

The volunteering module is hosted within the School of Nursing and Midwifery, is open to students across the faculty and attracts 15 credits at level 5. The module includes workshops and training sessions which are delivered jointly by Macmillan and DMU staff. Students are required to undertake 100 h of volunteering placements and complete an academic assignment. A range of volunteering opportunities have been developed that allow students to work with other partner organisations within the locality. The module runs across three years which allows students to spread their volunteering placement hours.

In a short space of the time the module has proven to be successful, earning several award nominations for the partnership, the module, and the student volunteers. Twenty-two students enrolled on the first intake, completing up to 100 volunteering hours each and over four hundred students attended the information day for the second intake. The partnership achieved national recognition when it was discussed in the Houses of Parliament as an exemplar of excellent practice, generating interest from other universities aiming to implement similar partnerships.

#### *Partnership Evaluation*

Evaluation of the partnership took place after one year to identify strengths, weaknesses and benefits. As part of the evaluation, steering group member agreed to be interviewed.

#### *Participants*

The steering group was set up to govern the partnership and is chaired by the University's Pro Vice Chancellor. Membership includes representation from Macmillan (Service Development, Learning & Development, Inclusion, Communications, Fundraising, and Information) and DMU (Research, Nursing & Midwifery, Administration, Student Union, Palliative Care and Communications). All fifteen DMU Macmillan steering group members were invited to take part in interviews. Nine members agreed to be interviewed.

#### *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the telephone, depending on availability and preference of participants. Participants who were unable to attend for interview chose to exchange information via email. In these cases, participants were sent a list of questions. The interviewer then followed up with additional questions via email. Interviews were carried out by a research assistant. The interview questions were generated by the steering group members and focussed on the following themes:

- Individual roles within the partnership
- Key elements within the DMU Macmillan Partnership
- The value of the partnership
- Achievements and challenges within the partnership
- Benefits of the partnership

#### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the research assistant. Transcriptions and written responses were coded into descriptive themes with each data item given equal attention in the coding process. Individual themes were grouped together into main themes. Themes were checked against each other and back to the original data set. The generation of themes was also checked by a second member of the steering group and themes were reviewed by the entire steering group to confirm they were representative and valid.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

The project was an evaluation of a new initiative and did not require university ethical approval. However, confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were still maintained. All steering group members were involved in the design of the project and were fully informed regarding the interviews. Steering group members were able to opt in to be interviewed. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and written consent was obtained.

#### **Findings**

Nine interviews were conducted with members of the steering group from both DMU and Macmillan. Of the nine interviews, eight were conducted via email and one over the telephone. The telephone interview lasted around 30 min. The following main themes and sub-themes were generated:

- Partnership (uniqueness, challenges, and mutual benefits)
- Benefits (students and society)

#### *Partnership—Uniqueness*

The main discussion theme within the interviews was the partnership. Almost all participants described the partnership as something new, unique and original:

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