
practice

Twenty-five years of VSSN: notes from a collegiate birthday celebration

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Introduction

To celebrate the 25th birthday of the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) in March 2021 (see [VSSN, 2021](#)), Angela Ellis-Paine with VSSN Steering Group colleagues organised a virtual meeting to reflect on VSSN's history and to toast the success and future of the network and the field of voluntary sector studies. Chaired by Rob Macmillan, the meeting brought together founder and current members of the network, who were invited to reflect on topics including the history of VSSN, the growth of our field in the UK since 1996 and the future research agenda.

The presenters (in alphabetical order) and their allocated topics (on which they were invited to speak for no more than three minutes) were: Mike Aiken (activism); Pete Alcock (voluntary organisations); Chris Cornforth (governance); Helen Cameron (bridging research, policy and practice); Jane Cullingworth (the future for VSSN); Peter Halfpenny (VSSN growing to maturity); Margaret Harris (the world before VSSN); Gareth Morgan (the formalisation of VSSN); Cathy Pharoah (giving and philanthropy); Colin Rochester (the early days of VSSN); Marilyn Taylor (community action); and Meta Zimmeck (volunteering).

A video of the event is available on the VSSN website (at <https://www.vssn.org.uk/vssn-25th-anniversary-event>) so this paper does not aspire to provide a comprehensive account of all that was presented and discussed. Rather, it looks *across* the short presentations to draw out some of the themes that emerged about the past and future of VSSN and, more broadly, about the voluntary sector studies field. The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide a brief record of the VSSN's 25th birthday event and to indicate participants' views about where we have come from as a professional association and as a field, and where we might go in the future.¹

Emergence of the field

Until the 1980s, there was only a handful of researchers in the UK interested in the 'third' (neither business, nor government) sector. Those who *were* interested, had no sense of common cause; they were scattered in various locations and based within

a variety of established academic disciplines, including history, law, sociology and political science (Harris, 2016).

This began to change from the early 1970s. The Volunteer Centre was established in 1973 following a recommendation of the Aves Committee (Aves, 1969) that there should be a resource centre to collect information and commission research about volunteering. In drawing together available data, publishing working papers and organising occasional meetings, the centre proved to be the catalyst for the emergence of what can now be seen as the field of voluntary sector studies. By 1978, there were sufficient people in the UK interested in researching community and voluntary action (not just volunteering) to justify setting up the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector (ARVAC), still in existence today, focusing mainly on community research.

The emergence of a discernible 'field' in the 1970s and 1980s can be attributed to a few far-sighted and entrepreneurial practitioners and academics as well as to factors in the policy, political and intellectual environment of the time. One such factor was the growing interest in alternatives and supplements to the welfare state and a concomitant growth in the number and type of third sector organisations. Research for the Wolfenden Committee on the Future of Voluntary Organisations (Wolfenden, 1978) proposed the concept of 'welfare pluralism' – the idea that welfare services could be provided by non-governmental agencies *alongside* governmental agencies. A second factor was the growing awareness by public sector social workers of the contribution to social welfare and health care made by volunteers, voluntary organisations and informal carers. Third, financial support for research in the field was available from charitable foundations and governmental sources; both the Volunteer Centre and ARVAC received funding in their early stages from the Home Office.

In 1990, the Centre for Voluntary Organisation (CVO) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) hosted the annual meeting of the (US) Association for Research in Nonprofits and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), formerly the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS). UK voluntary and community sector scholars came together at the LSE conference, many meeting each other in person for the first time and realising that they had interests in common.

The emerging sense of collegiality that was evident at the London ARNOVA meeting led a couple of years later to a successful application to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) by Harris and Rochester to run a series of seminars for academics and doctoral students who were broadly interested in the role of voluntary organisations in social policy. This enabled between 20 and 30 people who had only briefly met before or knew each other only as authors, to come together every few months to listen to, and discuss, presentations on their current research. At the seventh and final seminar, the people who had participated in the ESRC series agreed unanimously that they wished to continue meeting to discuss and support each other's research. But this was not a leap to becoming a formal voluntary organisation. Rather, as Rochester pointed out, the group chose 'mutual aid and mutual support' as their organisational model. The agreed name of the group was to be the 'Voluntary Sector Studies Network', reflecting what participants felt they had in common, as well as their wish to be a loose and informal association of researchers at that stage.

Network participants agreed to host a seminar each in turn, thereby sharing the organisational effort. Halfpenny and his colleague, Duncan Scott,² set the professional

and friendly tone in March 1996 by hosting the first meeting of VSSN at the University of Manchester. At this point, people were “getting a feeling that there was a genuine field out there in which we all took part; and also getting the feeling that there was a group of colleagues we were pleased to see on each [subsequent] occasion” (Rochester). The group included not only doctoral students but also those working in research in the infrastructure organisations of the sector.

Cameron, who was an experienced voluntary sector practitioner and also a doctoral student in the 1990s, similarly recalled the growing sense of collegiality: “I discovered in VSSN a group of people who wanted to generate critical and self-critical academic research. It was a relief as well as a joy to travel with them.” Another practitioner–doctoral student of the early days of VSSN, Aiken, acknowledged the prominent mutual support element of VSSN and said: “I came to my first meeting in 1998 when I was starting a PhD at the Open University ... and I’ve been to 90% of the meetings since then.” Pharoah, who was working in the late 1990s with the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), said: “Working in a practitioner organisation, it was an absolute joy to me to make contact with the VSSN group and become part of its growth.”

Formalisation and development of VSSN

By the late 1990s, VSSN was well established, holding twice-yearly ‘day conferences’ at different venues all over the UK. Jill Mordaunt of the Open University set up an email list and Nick Plant of the University of the West of England later created a VSSN website. VSSN cooperated with the National Council for Voluntary Organisation’s (NCVO’s) annual ‘Researching the Voluntary Sector’ conferences, thereby raising the profile of VSSN itself as well as the research conducted by its members.

Despite growing institutionalisation, VSSN was starting to experience some of the problems that are well known to scholars of the third sector; challenges rooted in the informal nature of its organisational structure such as accountability for money collected, funding new initiatives and public representation of the group. Morgan, who was a member of the VSSN Steering Group at the time, recalled:

‘[S]o I made the case that VSSN should become a formally constituted organisation ... There was a bit of a debate between the informalists and the structuralists ... but VSSN adopted a constitution in 2003 and that enabled us to open a bank account and handle our own finances. At that stage we didn’t have any status beyond being a constituted group.’

A subscription membership structure was established and VSSN was recognised as a charity by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) for gift-aid purposes. Then, in 2006, VSSN was formally registered as a charity under Morgan’s guidance.

A key point in the development of VSSN as an association was the launch of this journal, *Voluntary Sector Review* (see Milofsky et al, 2020, for a history). The drive to launch a specialist journal came in part from the rapid growth of VSSN and people interested in contributing to the voluntary sector studies field. Whereas in the early days it was usual for just two papers to be presented at each VSSN meeting, the number presented at each meeting steadily increased, as did the number of papers presented at conferences and seminars elsewhere by members of VSSN. Halfpenny recalled:

‘Some of these works were being published but they were dispersed all over the place in the grey literature, social policy, anthropology, sociology, geography, politics, economics, management and other journals. As a result, the material was failing to accumulate. It wasn’t building on what had come before or what was going on in parallel in different disciplines. ... [The aim of the new journal was to provide] ... a single permanent and searchable outlet for all the best work being undertaken on the sector.’

Alcock, Halfpenny and Pharoah collaborated with Policy Press on plans for a voluntary sector-focused journal and the first issue of *Voluntary Sector Review* appeared in March 2010. It was agreed that the journal would not only publish research papers but also aim to bridge policy, practice and research by having special sections for policy- and practice-related matters. The Editorial Board was constituted as a subcommittee of VSSN and included representatives of the membership from the start, ensuring a link between the association and the journal.

By 2010, then, voluntary sector studies in the UK had a well-established scholarly association with its own specialist journal. The very existence of VSSN and *Voluntary Sector Review* encouraged interest in the field and also reflected it; a benign self-reinforcing cycle. Increasingly, doctoral students and new researchers were attracted to VSSN and the field, and added excitement and varied perspectives to the discussions at VSSN meetings.

As the field grew in numbers and interests, specialisms within the field were discernible. And once voluntary sector scholars were more secure in their intellectual identity, they could turn their attention to contributing to subfields. In the next section, the development of some of these subfields is noted, as discussed by event presenters.³

Research subfields

Voluntary organisations

As Alcock pointed out, voluntary organisations have “always been at the centre of sector studies”, but over the past 25 years, as evidenced in the pages of *Voluntary Sector Review*, “we’ve learnt so much more about the organisations in the sector, what they are, how they are organised, how they develop and how they change”. Much of the quantitative data about voluntary organisations have been developed and analysed in collaboration with NCVO, itself drawing on Charity Commission data. Qualitative research has helped “to understand the big picture and the small picture and in particular to understand change in what has been for those organisations an incredibly challenging time, with an economic recession and now of course with a pandemic” (Alcock).

Governance

‘Much of the early research on the governance of voluntary and non-profit organisations concentrated on the governing body or board, the top of the organisation, and looked at issues like board roles and responsibilities, board composition, relationships between [the] board and chief executive, board effectiveness and the relationship with organisational effectiveness.’ (Cornforth)

Also, much of that early work was conducted in North America and used quantitative approaches. Since then, there has been a broadening of the concept; a recognition that governance is a function that involves a range of actors, as well as board members; and a recognition of the contextual organisational factors that influence governance structures and processes.

Volunteering

Research on volunteering was a key driver of the development of sector studies from the early 1970s. As a result, it is now perhaps the most well developed of the subfields, with research encompassing individual and group efforts, informal and formally organised volunteering, government-sponsored volunteering, leisure activities and religious-based volunteering. All the same, there are large areas of volunteering activity that are still little studied or are assumed to be less important. Zimmeck argued that current research on volunteering is “narrow rather than broad and top-down rather than bottom-up”.

Giving and philanthropy

According to Pharoah’s presentation: “In the early days, much of the focus of the very limited UK research on giving was on the annual surveys of public participation and the amount they gave. These were carried out by CAF and NCVO [but since then] ... a breadth of giving-related topics has been covered by VSSN in its conferences and in the journal.” This encompasses a variety of topics, from the motivational factors that drive personal giving, the socioeconomic predictors of giving, the impact of tax reliefs, overseas donating, donor preferences, the role of public trust and the strategic shift of private giving as donation, to giving as a social investment. Fundraising has also developed as a strong separate subfield, largely published in its own journals. Yet, “unlike in Europe and to some extent the US, philanthropy is not a major disciplinary focus in voluntary sector studies” (Pharoah).

Activism

Introducing himself as both a researcher and an activist, Aiken argued that “activism can complement voluntary action” and also contest it. Yet activism and voluntary sector work can sometimes be indistinguishable, for example when looking at neighbourhood groups or poor communities. Aiken suggested some reasons why voluntary sector scholars can be reluctant to recognise activism as a focus for their research: for example, it can be seen as ‘political’ or associated with social movements; it can be short-lived because it is less ‘institutionalised’; and it can question common assumptions. All the same, he said, activism is often the ‘nudge’ from which more recognised ‘voluntary action’ may develop.

Community action

Taylor began her presentation on the community action subfield with some historical context: “VSSN came into being just before New Labour swept into power with a series of ambitious community programmes. Crucially, government put significant

resources into evaluation of these programmes and this triggered an upsurge in research in this field. But it was often scatter-gun” and there was little dialogue between community and voluntary sector research. She pointed out how “VSSN and *Voluntary Sector Review* created spaces where this dialogue could begin to take place” and research findings could be shared.

The research agenda for the next 25 years

This final section of the paper looks at suggestions from participants about gaps in knowledge and methodological approaches.

As they reflected on the past 25 years of VSSN and the development of the voluntary sector studies field, event participants also reflected on research directions for the future. Specific new areas for research were identified. One mentioned was the subject of ‘virtual organisations’; another was about how the concepts of ‘activism’ and ‘voluntary organisations’ are in practice related to one another.

Even in areas on which there has been a substantial accumulation of understanding over recent years, many topics were identified where more work is still needed, for example on:

- small community organisations;
- informal and community-level volunteering;
- volunteering in the governmental or business sectors;
- multi-level governance structures such as voluntary sector federations;
- the co-production of governance;
- giving behaviour;
- the extent of the influence exerted on charities by their donors.

Several participants were keen that existing fragmented research within subfields should now be drawn together, for example in the subfields of giving and philanthropy (Pharoah) and community action (Taylor).

Reflecting more broadly on the development of the voluntary sector studies field, a number of thoughts and questions were raised. Cameron, for example, wondered about how far those who fund the voluntary sector should be allowed to drive the research agenda. She was also concerned that voluntary sector researchers can sometimes be reluctant to be critical of the sector or to look at its dark side, especially when the sector is under attack. Turning to methodological approaches, Cornforth questioned the dominance of quantitative approaches to research in the field and argued for more qualitative and comparative studies as well as studies taking an action research methodology. Pharoah urged more discussion about the place of private philanthropy in the funding and provision of “key social goods”. And Taylor thought that the voluntary sector studies field should be more open to refreshing itself by learning from other fields and several academic disciplines.

The birthday celebration ended with the usual refrain that concludes so many studies: ‘More research is still needed.’ Then glasses were raised to toast VSSN as a strong membership association that now has more than one hundred members in the UK and beyond.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is necessarily a personal overview of a very rich collection of presentations. I have not attempted to attribute every idea to a particular individual, although where I have quoted directly from the recording of the 25th birthday event, I have cited the author. I have tried to be accurate and impartial but of course I take responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations that I have made inadvertently in analysing, summarising and editing what speakers said.
- ² Duncan Scott died in 2020. He is much missed and his passing was recognised by colleagues at the start of the 25th birthday event. See also [Alcock et al \(2020\)](#).
- ³ These are subfields specified by Angela Ellis-Paine in the invitation to meeting participant-presenters.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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