

# Promoting students' psychological well-being through volunteering: What works and why?

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## Introduction

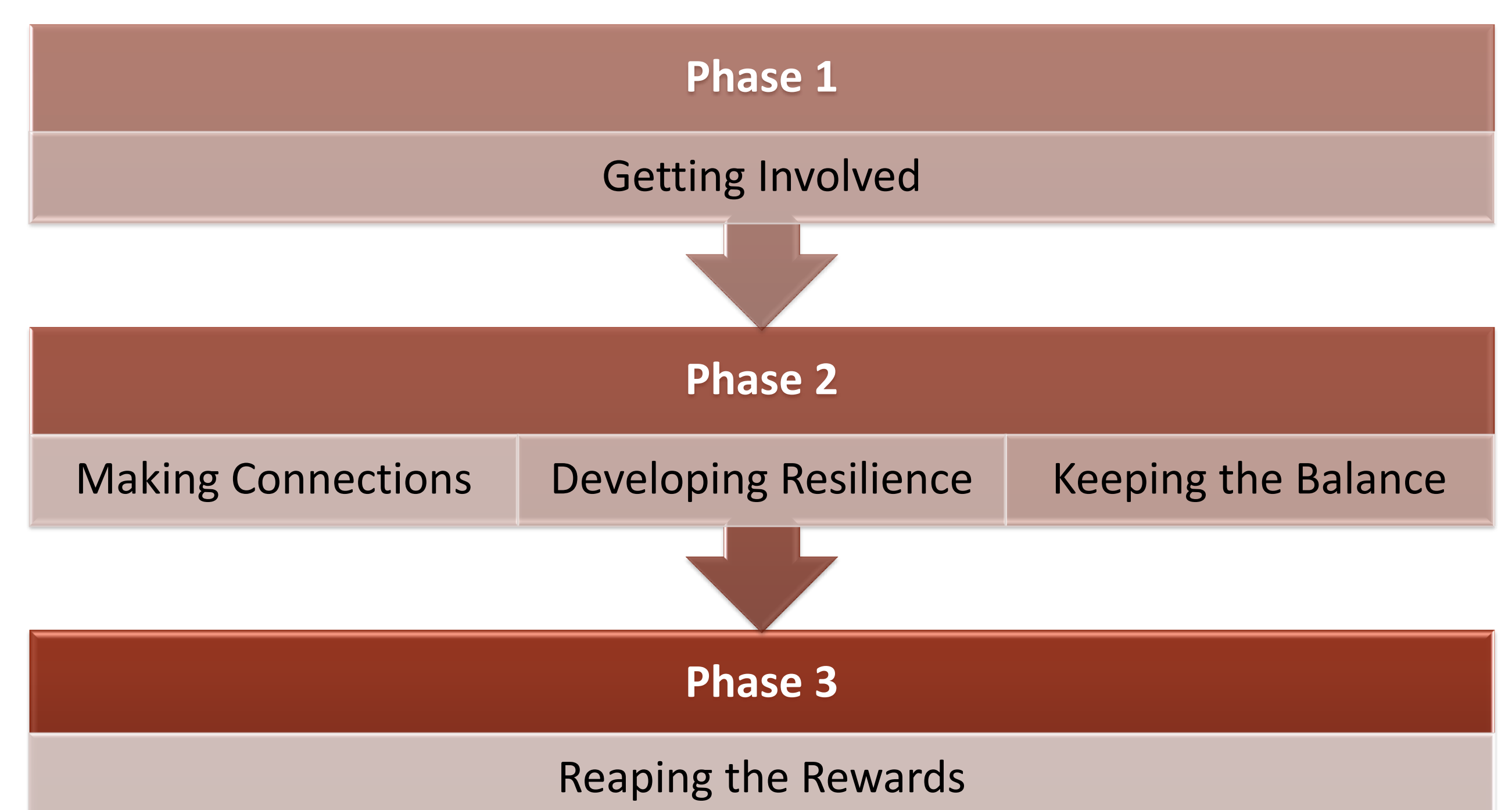
- Young adult volunteers are vital to the current and future operations of non-profit organizations, and yet students are a particularly under-utilized and under-researched segment of potential volunteers within this age-group (Francis, 2011).
- Data from the UK's National Union of Students (Ellison and Kerr, 2014) estimated that 725,000 British students (nearly a third of the student population) engage in some volunteering annually with an average of 44 hours participation per year. Of that sample, 78% said that they give their time because of a desire to improve things or help people and 66% aim to develop skills for work. Many reported that feeling part of a community was highly important to them.
- Volunteering has been shown to have positive effects on both the health and well-being of volunteers, with some research demonstrating that people who volunteer at least 100 hours annually report the greatest benefits (Luoh et al., 2002; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003), and appear to 'flourish' both within and beyond the volunteering role (cf. Seligman, 2011).
- Employing qualitative methods to explore this under-researched field will enhance and deepen our current knowledge (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010) and suggest applications of volunteer training and support within Universities and other organisations who are seeking to improve and promote positive student and staff experiences.

## Method

- **Participants:** Forty-five student volunteers were recruited for this study. They were either undergraduate or postgraduate students studying at one of six British universities.
- **Interviews:** The semi-structured interview schedule consisted of 21 open-ended questions.
- **Analytic Strategy:** Transcripts were analysed by all members of the team using grounded theory.
- **Ethical considerations:** Full ethical approval was granted from De Montfort University and the principles of the British Psychological Society code of human research ethics (2010, 2014) were followed in full throughout the study.

## Results & Discussion

- Five of the most prevalent themes are presented diagrammatically below— their temporal nature informed the development of a normative model which we argue captures key elements and processes in sustaining student volunteering.
- In the first phase '*getting involved*' we explore the motives given by the participants for undertaking volunteering and the catalysts that led them towards certain sorts of volunteering.
- In the second phase '*maintaining commitment*' we offer three themes which represent some of the 'active ingredients' in sustained volunteering participation. These include *making connections*, *developing resilience* and *keeping the balance*.
- In the final phase '*reaping the rewards*' we focus on two themes – the ways in which participants report a holistic sense of enhanced well-being and self-transformation and the ways in which they felt that volunteering added to their employability.



**Figure 1: Model of the development and maintenance of the successful student volunteer**

## Recommendations

- Volunteering appears to facilitate development of all five key elements described by the PERMA "model" (Seligman, 2011), which are essential to promoting a sense of well-being, and allowing individuals to flourish. These are: *positive emotion*, *engagement*, *relationships*, *meaning* and *accomplishments*.
- Universities that utilise and instil the importance of volunteering and community engagement will be investing in the well-being of students and our future workforce.
- Volunteer managers should look to develop effective systems, with particular emphasis on training, mentoring and supervision, to ensure the on-going support of student volunteers

## Key References

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