



Supporting Access to Justice Through Volunteer Training: An Evaluation of an Open Educational Resource

HUGH MCFAUL 

ELIZABETH FITZGERALD 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

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ABSTRACT

Declining levels of state provision of free legal advice and representation have led to increased demand for support from legal charities. This study evaluates a co-designed Open Educational Resource providing education and training for support workers volunteering for the UK legal charity Support Through Court. Addressing issues of domestic abuse and related civil law procedures, the resource was primarily designed to meet the training needs of Support Through Court volunteers, but was also aimed to be of use to those dealing with similar issues in related organisations, as well as interested members of the public.

This study demonstrates the public engagement potential of co-designed education resources as a form of collaborative enquiry, providing a means for co-created knowledge beneficial to both the university and civil society. An analysis of interviews with key stakeholders has shown different impacts at micro, meso and macro levels. It concludes by offering new avenues for further research into pathways for universities to support access to justice.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Hugh McFaul

The Open University, GB

h.j.mcfaul@open.ac.uk

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1. INTRODUCTION

Fair access to justice is an area of increasing policy concern in the UK, especially in the context of declining state support for free legal advice and representation (Sommerlad & Sanderson 2013; Drummond & McKeever 2015; Bach Commission 2017), a process accelerated by the enactment of the Legal Services and Punishment of Offenders Act 2013 which severely restricted funding for legal aid. The retrenchment in public funding for advice, representation and guidance on legal issues has a detrimental impact on the ability of those without the means to pay for legal support to gain fair access to civil law remedies (Low Commission 2014; Bach Commission 2017; Hogan Lovells 2017). The reforms have been shown to be particularly detrimental for disabled people, women and people from ethnic minorities (Anthony & Crilly 2015).

The importance of educational institutions in supporting access to justice by contributing to human rights, rule of law and citizenship education is reflected in several national and international policy instruments. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs (United Nations 2015), commit the UK to promoting the rule of law, access to justice, citizenship and human rights education (SDG 4.7, 16.3). Public legal literacy is recognised by the UK national government and legal profession as an important policy focus (Buckland 2018).

The Open Justice Centre at the Open University (OU) in the UK was established in 2016 with the aim of leveraging the academic expertise within the OU Law School for the public good as well as providing undergraduate law students with the opportunity to apply their legal knowledge in public facing pro bono legal activities. This was to be done by utilising educational technology to develop new pathways to public engagement, through the promotion of the rule of law and legal understanding (Open Justice Centre 2019). The Centre has since developed a range of community legal projects in the UK and internationally, including with legal charity Support Through Court. The collaboration between the Open Justice Centre and Support Through Court developed organically, beginning with OU law students being allocated work placements at the charity as part of their degree studies (Open Justice Centre 2019). In 2019, the Open Justice Centre took part in a collaborative project with Support Through Court to co-produce an Open Educational Resource (OER) on domestic abuse (Open Justice Centre and Support Through Court 2020), which is the subject of this article. The primary aim of this OER was to provide an online education course on domestic abuse issues to support the training of Support Through Court volunteers, who provide practical support to unrepresented litigants in civil proceedings. A secondary aim was to provide a freely accessible public legal information resource for all interested learners, including those working in related fields or who may be facing civil proceedings related to domestic abuse without the benefit of professional representation.

The importance of strengthening the capability of civil society organisations to deliver legal advice has been recognised by contributors to this journal (e.g. Charitonos et al. 2020) in addition to recent work on the social justice potential of Open Educational Resources or OERs (Cox, Masuku & Willmers 2020). This study aims to build on this work by exploring the potential of university law schools in knowledge co-creation practices to support access to justice, particularly in relation to collaborative partnerships for the promotion of legal understanding via the production of open access resources and by facilitating changes in practice in the training and service delivery models within the free legal advice and support sector. Before providing a brief outline of the work of Support Through Court (STC) in section three, section 2 will contextualise the discussion by reviewing relevant literature on university public engagement.

2. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT LITERATURE

The Open University refers to the definition of Public Engagement as that provided by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE):

‘Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit’ (NCCPE 2015).

Public engagement is an aspiration to ensure that the work of universities and researchers connects with wider society. It also means working alongside partners and collaborators to engage with new communities in different sectors of business and society. Central to the renewed interest in the idea of the civic university (Goddard et al. 2016), an engaged university is 'one which provides opportunities for the society of which it forms a part' (Goddard 2009: 5). The OU is one of 80 signatories to the NCCPE's Manifesto for Public Engagement, which invites institutions to make public their commitment to public engagement. Public engagement is at the heart of the OU's mission and values, which aim to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all, through supported open learning. This is underpinned by Open University values of inclusivity, innovation and responsiveness.

NCCPE (2020) defines an 'engaged university' through a diagram of four boxes, labelled 'Public engagement with research', 'Engaged teaching', 'Knowledge exchange' and 'Social responsibility'. Burns and Squires (2011) expand this and refer to a 'spectrum of public engagement' consisting of four columns: academic knowledge production (left-hand column), knowledge transfer (middle-left column), knowledge exchange (middle-right column) and knowledge co-creation (right-hand column). These categories represent a continuum against which a university's public engagement activities can be represented and analysed, with an increasing level of engagement as one moves from the left (better communication with non-specialists) to the right-hand side (co-created research and teaching). From talking with a wide range of stakeholders, Burns and Squires found that there were strong feelings that the activities associated solely with the left-hand column (academic knowledge production) should become less commonplace and that universities should engage more with the other columns and indeed should be increasing the amount of co-production projects carried out with non-university stakeholders, on ideally equal terms. These views are also reflected in work by Grand et al. (2015) and also McNall et al. (2015), who refer to this as 'collaborative inquiry'. There are also strong links to the work by Adams, FitzGerald and Priestnall (2013) in terms of how university staff, particularly those involved in research collaborations, act as 'boundary creatures' and can help organisations to either change or maintain their current practice through the use of appropriate technology. This technology can involve innovative 'catwalk' or 'blue skies' approaches or more mainstream 'ready-to-wear' solutions. How these two elements of practice and technology are mixed can be a useful means of considering the way in which the public engagement is enacted.

Public engagement is central to the mission of the Open Justice Centre, which provides free legal advice, education and guidance to people and groups who may struggle to access appropriate legal support through other means (Open Justice Centre n.d.). The Centre has played a role as a 'boundary creature', supporting organisations to develop new methods to support the promotion of legal understanding and to facilitate access to justice via innovative use of digital technologies. The collaboration with Support Through Court is one such example of this engagement activity which has facilitated a change in practice and with the production of a co-created resource, is an example of the 'collaborative inquiry' argued for in the literature discussed above.

3. SUPPORT THROUGH COURT

Support Through Court is an award-winning UK charity with 36 staff members and over 800 dedicated volunteers, operating from 20 courts and associated offices across England and Wales. They aim to reduce the disadvantage of people facing the civil or family justice system without a lawyer, enabling them to access justice. They believe that no one should face court alone and so work to provide immediate support to everyone who comes to them. They work with a large number of trained volunteers who provide emotional and practical support to clients throughout the court process.

They have an induction programme for new volunteers, containing core parts, in terms of how their service works, what they do (and don't do) and how their systems operate. It also has some basic information that everybody needs to know, such as how the court system functions. In addition, each office will have their individual training for aspects specific to

that particular office. What each volunteer needs will vary considerably depending on their previous experience. Some volunteers are university students (including OU students), often under the age of 30, whilst others may have worked in client-facing, sometimes legal roles for several decades. Some volunteers are lawyers, but equally they may be from a wide range of backgrounds including social workers, police officers, teachers and doctors. Most of them already have skills in terms of speaking to people, dealing with emotional clients or sometimes even dealing with aggressive clients, but they won't necessarily know the specific understanding of doing that in the context of a legal system.

Most of the training provided to volunteers has been through face-to-face sessions, either in groups or one-to-one. A great degree of online training is something that the organisation is keen to explore, both provided internally but also looking at external provision, to meet their needs. No Open Educational Resources are currently used in their training programme.

One of the issues that STC experiences is the inconsistency of training provided to volunteers. An ongoing challenge is how much of an introduction volunteers receive, how much time is made available for this training and how much time can be given by existing STC staff or other volunteers to oversee or enact this training. There is also a need for ongoing training and refresher courses throughout a volunteer's time with STC, for which there is little resource. Our main research question is thus: how can STC provide initial or ongoing training for their volunteers that is scalable and works on a national level, especially when resources are limited?

To start to address these problems, Support Through Court formed a collaboration with the Open Justice Centre. Initial conversations to consider a solution led to the idea of designing and writing a new OER on domestic abuse and civil procedures. Domestic abuse is an issue which is frequently a factor in the civil law cases which STC staff and volunteers encounter and reports of domestic abuse have increased throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Office for National Statistics 2020). An OER format was chosen as a means of utilising an existing 'ready-to-wear' technological solution, through the OU's OpenLearn platform, which would facilitate an investigation into the effect of this resource on practice at Support Through Court. In addition, the OER format had the advantage of providing a resource that would be open to users and organisations beyond STC, thereby making a contribution to legal education beyond a single institution (Orr, Rimini & van Damme 2015).

Substantive legal and procedural expertise was pooled between OU academics and STC staff so this was a genuine co-production combining academic, professional practice, pedagogy and soft skills. This pooling of expertise was assisted by the fact that STC staff contributing to the project included someone who is currently an OU law student and so familiar with the pedagogy involved in open access learning, and OU academic staff included experts in learning design as well as a former family law solicitor with an understanding of the demands of legal practice. STC had previously worked on developing their capacity to deal with domestic abuse issues, through a project funded by the Ministry of Justice that looked at both perpetrators and victims and led to the production of new face-to-face training resources. The desire by STC to investigate online training, with a known partner, can be seen as a legacy from this earlier project.

The OpenLearn course (an OER) that was produced as a result can be found at <https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=4648> and a screenshot is shown below in **Figure 1**. Providing 20 hours of study it offers nine modules: the first three on domestic abuse issues and the following six on procedural and soft skills relevant to the civil justice system. The course includes two opportunities for knowledge assessment and the opportunity to claim a digital badge certifying successful completion.

The course went live in April 2020 and was promoted to STC staff and volunteers and sent to new volunteers as part of a standard email. In addition, as a publicly-available resource, other learners from outside STC also enrolled on it: some were from affiliated organisations, who were told about it by STC colleagues, but other learners found it opportunistically, either whilst browsing the OpenLearn website or through online search engines. Numbers reflecting engagement with the course are shown in **Table 1**, using data from mid-January 2021.

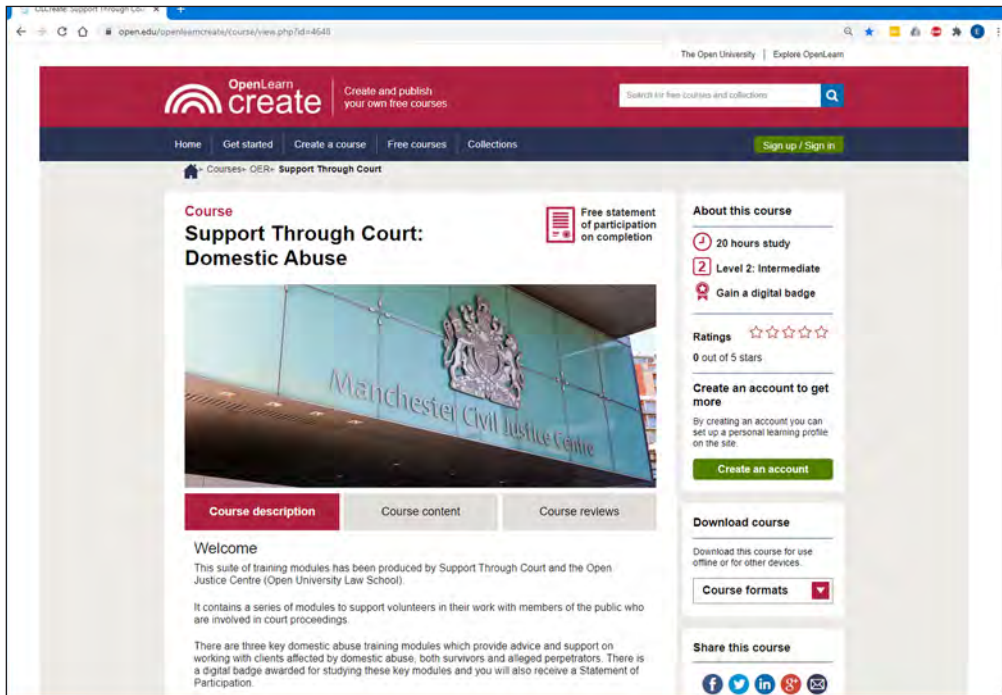


Figure 1 the OpenLearn course “Support Through Court: Domestic Abuse”.

TYPE	NUMBER OF VISITS AT 15 JANUARY 2021
Number of course views since course published (April 2020)	15,053
Enrolled users (visitors who have an OpenLearn account)	2,120
Number of enrolled users that completed the course	390
Number of badges claimed (available to those who complete the course, to display and share their achievement).	176

Table 1 Number of learner interactions.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study aimed to evaluate a co-designed OER providing information and training relevant to supporting self-represented litigants through the civil court process where domestic abuse is an issue in the proceedings. In order to investigate the impact at different levels of the collaboration, we conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from micro, meso and macro levels of the partnership. These were viewed as shown in **Table 2** below.

LEVEL	PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER INTERVIEWED
Micro	Learners on the course, both from Support Through Court and elsewhere	11 (6 STC, 5 non-STC)
Meso	Authors and course producers from Support Through Court and the Open University	3
Macro	Managers from Support Through Court	3

Table 2 Number of participants.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach (Bryman 2012) which identified participants on the basis of the nature of their engagement with the OER. Participants in the macro category were selected on the basis of their involvement in the management of STC and their participation in the strategic decision to develop the OER. The three participants in the meso level were selected due to their leading role in the authoring of the OER whereas the micro level participants were selected on the basis of having completed the course, either as a volunteer for STC, or as an external learner interested in the subject area.

5. ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken. Initially, both authors looked at a sample of the transcripts, working in parallel to create initial coding protocols. These codes were discussed, refined and a final protocol was agreed upon. Each author then subsequently coded each transcript, with the following themes found. Themes have been categorised according to the level at which each interviewee was working.

5.1 MICRO PERSPECTIVE (INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS FROM STC)

5.1.1 The learning experience

Learners who completed the course as part of their training and orientation for working as a volunteer for STC reported that they had hoped the course would increase their “competence and abilities in volunteering in Support Through Court” [L5]. They were positive about the value of the course in terms of content and accessibility; “really useful resource. I’m really glad that I did it. I would definitely recommend it to other people. I think that it’s very simple, easy to follow, and it’s well-designed” [L5] and another reporting it to be “good, insightful and accessible” [L1].

Given their other responsibilities, many highlighted the value they placed on the structure of the course, which allowed for small chunks of study which users could access at convenient times:

“I liked how it wasn’t overloaded with information. The way it was presented and the text and the way it was split up into subtopics was really good. It allowed me to study at my own pace especially throughout lockdown” [L3].

STC learners did not report any problems with navigating the online learning format of the resource, “it’s like anything involving a computer course when you go to the format that that learning institution is using. It takes a few minutes to familiarise yourself. But then after that, once you got the routine going, it wasn’t a problem at all” [L4]. The entirely asynchronous nature of the course was recognised as being a minor drawback in that the course was not able to harness a social dimension, one user reported their experience of other online courses which included synchronous message boards; “I found that really good so maybe if that was implemented for this course, that would be a great benefit. But do I think it’s necessary? Not really” [L3].

Several STC volunteers found that the aesthetic of the resource did not compare well to other e-learning they had undertaken, “I think nowadays the graphical representation is a lot slicker. I think on other e-learning that I’ve done” [L5], although it was recognised that the content and pedagogical design was effective, “in terms of the content, it is on par or better. I think it’s just the way it looks” [L5]. Users also reported that they valued the opportunity for their learning on the course to be certified:

“I think the other good thing that it does give you, it does give you some kind of, not qualification but a recognised certificate of participation that you can then go to another charity and say, this training has been vetted and what have you. And I’ve done this training. I think that is useful” [L5].

5.1.2 Potential for wider use

Users in this category felt that this model of learning would also be useful for other topic areas pertinent to STC volunteers and recognised that the open access nature of the learning had some benefit for members of the public, “I think some litigants in person, bits of this would be really useful for them” [L5]. However there was also a recognition that this form of unsupported learning, although relevant in terms of topic area, may not be an effective means of supporting

all individuals; “clients, they’re the hardest group to reach, because they’ve kind of had enough of the legal system” [L6].

STC volunteers also recognised that there was a potential benefit for further university and civil society collaborations to support the work of smaller charities, especially in relation to their education and training activities:

“I think it is for charities that don’t have their own L&D [Learning & Design] departments. Or, for where they don’t have the infrastructure to get training out to a wide audience ... I think this is a really good solution for getting that training out” [L5].

The collaborative aspect was also recognised as adding value by giving the resource a form of institutional recognition by a recognised higher education provider that would not otherwise be present if it was an entirely in-house production, “the collaboration with an organisation like the Open University makes it a bit more official” [L1]. Participants in this group also argued that the collaboration would also be beneficial for the university as it would provide an opportunity to engage in real life issues, “universities getting involved with everybody else actually broadens their knowledge and understanding of people’s life experiences” [L6].

5.2 MICRO PERSPECTIVE (INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS FROM OUTSIDE STC)

5.2.1 The learning experience

Creating the resource for an open access platform allowed learners from outside the primary audience of STC volunteers to study the course. Participants in this category had a variety of motivations in studying the module and they all had professional or volunteer roles which made the subject matter of the resource relevant to them. Several pointed out that the resource provided good basic information on domestic abuse issues and the legal system and also had value as a refresher for users more familiar with the topic area:

“if I was a volunteer going into work in a courtroom it’s spot on. For someone who already has their qualification and has worked in it, it’s repetitive I suppose. But there was elements of it that I liked and were refreshing as well” [L11].

Users in this category also felt that the content was presented accessibly and was easy to use, especially for those new to the topic, “if anything, it was better than I thought it was going to be. It was more engaging, it was really easy to use, really well laid out and set out. It was a really good course” [L7] and “I think it’s probably the most user-friendly course I’ve ever done.” [L8]. The online asynchronous presentation made studying the course straightforward to fit around their other commitments:

“I did it over a month. It’s about 20 hours, so I just did a bit each week. I tried to do a topic per week because I think there’s nine altogether or something. So, I just tried to do a couple a week or something. It worked pretty well” [L9].

Users also felt that a key strength of the material was that it addressed issues related to both perpetrators and victims of domestic abuse:

“I found useful how to manage these clients, what we can offer them, what we should not offer them, how to manage the victim, how to manage the person who committed the domestic abuse potentially” [L10].

However, some users who were more experienced in the field felt that it could have offered a more in-depth treatment of the issues, “when looking at what they know and the people I’ve met and you think it could be more academic or it could’ve been made a bit more of a challenge” [L11].

5.2.2 Potential for wider use

Non STC users also felt that the course had a potentially wide audience. “I genuinely think it should be taught to 18 year olds or people in high school because that’s when people start to go into their first long term relationships” [L9] and potentially it would be of value to members of the public facing domestic abuse related civil proceedings, “that course would suit any

range of the people I work with. And a lot of people, I find, love to get their own information” [L11]. However, it was recognised that the sensitivity of the subject matter made online access problematic in certain circumstances:

“obviously with domestic abuse, if your abuser believes you’re trying to find help in some way then you can potentially get the person who is being abused into further trouble there” [L9].

Users in this category also recognised the potential of universities supporting smaller charities in their education and training activities:

“Honestly, when they brought it out I was like, this is amazing. Because a lot of people can’t physically go to training days ... So, I definitely think the Open University can partner with other organisations because I think that organisations have a lot to share” [L9].

One respondent highlighted that this type of resource, and others like it, have the potential to fill existing gaps in provision as they had experienced difficulty in accessing sector relevant training and education, “I haven’t found anything I can access” [L11]. Others pointed to the fact that charities have limited resources to promote training and are less likely to promote training that is not bespoke to their own organisation, therefore there is value in a university having a direct link with a charity in order to ensure that the training materials reach the intended audience; “if they’re supporting something or if they’re part of it they’ll very much plug it but when they’re not involved in it you don’t get very much response back as to its value. So, you do need a connection, I suppose, with them to encourage people to do it” [L11].

5.3 MESO PERSPECTIVE (AUTHORS/COURSE DESIGNERS)

5.3.1 Aims/audience

The Course Design (CD) team report that their primary aim was to build on the work that STC had undertaken with the support of a Ministry of Justice grant to develop knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse. This aimed to create a set of face-to-face training and education materials for their volunteers to support clients affected by domestic abuse on their journey through the civil court system. The aim of this collaboration was to create a lasting legacy of this project by producing an accessible online training resource; “We wanted to be able to pass that training on to subsequent generations of volunteers” [CD2].

The primary audience for the training materials was therefore STC volunteers, but it was recognised that the material would be of use to a wider section of the public, such as those working in related organisations or potentially individuals directly involved in civil litigation where domestic abuse was at issue, “there’s no reason why anybody, members of the public or people that are going through court or about to go through court with their domestic abuse agenda, shouldn’t access it and use the material usefully” [CD1]. Interestingly, the team felt that the resources would be useful for court administrative staff and provide useful insight into the issues faced by users of the court services:

“One of the things we did make sure of was talk to the Civil and Family teams in the various courts. We wanted them to be able to access the materials because often with such an administrative job, they may be not as aware of some of the issues that our staff are, because they’re not seeing the clients they’re just seeing the clients on paper” [CD1].

The CD team wanted the content to address both domestic abuse issues and also procedural issues pertinent to the civil law process and administrative agencies. The designers were also conscious that the course needed to go beyond a discussion of the impact of domestic abuse on victims to consider also how relevant issues related to alleged perpetrators; “volunteers need to understand what domestic abuse is but what they wanted was a much more practical thing about how do you support a client who has been a victim of domestic abuse? Or how do you support somebody who is an alleged perpetrator? ... STC’s role is quite unusual in that obviously they’re supporting victims of domestic abuse but also possible perpetrators which is probably quite distinctive in that respect” [CD3].

5.3.2 Design process

This project engaged stakeholders from across STC:

“We worked together across the whole of the charity to make sure everybody was on board with everything that we were doing and the material that was being created was relevant and applicable and would be used going forward” [CD2].

From this foundation, the STC designers provided the OU team with “very brief skeletons of lesson plans of the sorts of things we would want to be incorporated into a training module” [CD2]. Insights from the course design team demonstrate that the production process ran to a very tight timescale and they took a conscious decision to expedite it by taking responsibility for key decisions amongst themselves “we were really up against it with time, we need to work in a small team ...we felt that it would be too cumbersome to take every detail back to the team and get an approval for that in order to get feedback on it” [CD2], and “We didn’t have enough time for people to um and ah, and, oh, can I have the weekend to look at it, I’m going on holiday in three weeks’ time, do you know what I mean? We need to be quick” [CD1].

A key challenge was to ensure that STC’s vision for the resource could be translated into a pedagogically sound course by the OU. The production process was iterative, and several versions were reviewed before the OU designer was able to articulate STC’s vision. An STC CD team member acknowledged that “this was all very new to us really in terms of translating face-to-face or group training into an e-learning package” [CD2] which meant that the OU team member had to work hard to articulate this; “I knew it wasn’t what they wanted but it was very hard to pin down what they wanted until they saw it and went, oh no. This is it” [CD3].

The CD team recognised that their individual backgrounds helped bridge the gaps in understanding. Each of the three members of the design team had professional experience of domestic abuse issues in social work, policing and in local authority work and the team benefited from the fact that one of the STC design team was also an OU student so he “had a really good understanding of how online learning worked and could see himself how it was going to work” [CD3].

5.3.3 Outcome

The CD team were of the view that the course was a success and had achieved its aims; “it worked very well ... we set out to achieve these eight modules, and we did it, within the timeframe” [CD1]. The OU member of the CD team felt that the university had delivered what STC had required; “I think that’s what we provided them with and I think that’s the feedback I got from them, was that that was what they wanted and it met their expectations” [CD2] and all the authors reported that it had an impact beyond the primary target audience of STC volunteers. The CD reported that external users of the resource had commented that they had found the approach to domestic abuse made an important addition to the available training material on the topic “because of the way we were looking at the subject, it was quite insightful for them to gain some extra knowledge, particularly around that area of working with alleged perpetrators” [CD2].

5.3.4 Strengths and weaknesses of co-production

Insights from the CD team are revealing of several challenges and opportunities relevant to this type of collaborative partnership. The three members of the team all reported that they worked very efficiently together and quickly developed a positive and effective working relationship. However, notwithstanding the positivity and professionalism of this team, it was recognised that there are distinct obstacles that need to be negotiated in this type of partnership. Key amongst them was communication, this could include process issues such as agreeing who could, and up to what point, request changes to the course; “when you’re doing these collaborations with other partners it’s really important to have a really clear understanding as to up to the point at which changes” [CD 3].

Ensuring the two organisations shared the same understanding of what it is possible to achieve was identified as being a key issue to address, “people from STC really couldn’t understand, couldn’t visualise in those meetings what it was going to look like” [CD3]. Also, ensuring that both partners understood how much work was involved, especially in relation to the writing

and editing process, an area less familiar to the non-university partner; “if you were working with a partner organisation that hadn’t appreciated the time commitment that was required, it could’ve really stopped things” [CD 3]. The team recognised that the level of personal and professional investment each of the CD team made in the project was a significant factor in its success; “it was a real collaboration rather than it being him just looking at it and going, yes,” [CD3] and “our relationship ... was incredibly good and that’s really what made the project turnaround so quickly and so successfully ...It was a very close relationship” [CD1].

The team recognised the advantages of this type of collaboration. For the university it provided an opportunity to have a positive impact on the community, “this kind of work absolutely fits within that social justice agenda” [CD3]. For the partner organisation, the collaboration not only gave access to higher education online teaching expertise, but also the credibility of being associated with a high profile university was seen as a significant advantage in encouraging engagement; “the credibility of The Open University, with such a wealth of experience and knowledge, we’ve developed this with The Open University, you should take a look” [CD 1].

5.4 MACRO PERSPECTIVE (MANAGERS FROM STC)

5.4.1 Potential for wider use

All three managers were keen that this project displayed a big potential for wider use, looking at areas such as mental health, diversity, or issues surrounding children or housing. Managers were also eager to stress how they saw this course as becoming mandatory for all new staff as part of their induction:

“I think it’s going to become a bedrock of people’s training. So, when they arrive with us, before we sign them off to be a fully functioning volunteer, one of the things that we will do is make it that they have to have done this training. We’re just going through that process at the moment” [M2].

“these OU modules will be compulsory for all new volunteers, and possibly some of the modules might need to be repeated every 12 months” [M2].

All interviewees for this level also enthusiastically recognised the value of the collaboration, highlighting positives for both Support Through Court and the Open University, as well as other stakeholders.

“...their expertise [the OU] was key in helping us to develop because all of the material that we had really was set up for face-to-face training and it was way, way, way too much. You couldn’t possibly have put it all online. So, it was about distilling the key elements of it and making it palatable for that sort of use, which was what your team was brilliant at” [M3].

Interviewees also spoke of a planned move to include more online learning for their volunteers, which was an important part of their motivation for engaging in this project:

“Most of our training, up until this point, has been face-to-face sessions, either group sessions or one-to-one sessions. More online training is certainly something that we were looking at, even pre-pandemic, but it’s something we’ll have to look at even more in the current circumstances, where getting a big group of people together in a room is obviously much more difficult than it used to be” [M1].

There were also reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on usage of the materials. Because of the pandemic, recent face-to-face meetings were not possible between STC staff and those seeking help, and so the managers felt that having online resources were useful as they could signpost them to those needing help. Whilst the OER was made available in April 2020, during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, and was used successfully by a number of STC volunteers, managers stated that not all new volunteers had been able to work through the course yet, due to the disruption caused by the pandemic. Much of this was around volunteer availability – sometimes it was uncertain what volunteers were available, or sometimes there were many new volunteers to manage. However, STC managers said that they expected that to change in the near future, and said how well the course fitted into their induction period.

5.4.2 Quality of the OER

The STC managers were also very happy with the quality of the end product and had received positive feedback from those who engaged with it, and also from a colleague from a related organisation who had seen it:

“It starts in a very basic way, and just builds up that knowledge in a very easy-to-understand, basic way for volunteers” [M2].

“There was some feedback ... from an external source who wasn't somebody from our organisation. Who'd accessed the course... who said that it had given her a level of understanding that she hadn't previously had” [M3].

What proved fascinating was the insights that the project provided for Support Through Court managers. Firstly, it made them realise that those who come to seek help for domestic abuse don't always consider themselves as victims:

“what the project helped us to see was that many of the clients that we see don't actually understand that they are victims of abuse. And they don't understand the extent to which they are being abused” [M3].

Secondly, they spoke of the need to ensure that this kind of training material provided multiple perspectives and didn't just focus on the alleged victim:

“We will knowingly be trying to help people who are alleged or even convicted of domestic violence. So, that's a very different approach that a volunteer needs, to a lot of the agencies that we normally work with when we're looking at domestic abuse. Because they have a very single lens that they look through” [M2].

A number of other challenges were mentioned by interviewees. They spoke of the difficulty in resourcing this kind of project, that it required additional funding for it to happen. The use of online learning also wasn't suited to everyone:

“a lot of our volunteers will say, I learn best when I'm doing it, or listening to people, and I can talk and interact with the person. So, it doesn't suit everybody all the time, but I think it's definitely a good building block ” [M2].

They also spoke of the need to be able to maintain and update online resources such as these – the need to keep them current. One interviewee also mentioned the need for sensitivity when presenting online training in this kind of area, giving the example of potential homicide, and saying that these sorts of issues needed careful introductions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the interviews suggests that the OER was successful as measured against the COUP framework of cost, outcomes, use and perceptions (Bliss et al. 2013). Although the data is drawn from a limited sample of users, the data does provide a useful pilot study to suggest that the OER was successful in the core aim of providing an accessible and affordable education and training resource for STC volunteers. Insights from all categories of participants in the study point to the quality and accessibility of the resource which is further evidenced by the organisational decision to make the course mandatory for all volunteers and the decision to make it part of the induction training for new starters. The participants interviewed were selected from those who had already completed the course, so the insights are limited to those who have the capacity and opportunity to access online materials. For this group, providing the training in an asynchronous online platform did not provide a barrier to learning. In fact, given that the launch of the course coincided with the first 2020 UK COVID-19 lockdown, online training provided an opportunity for volunteers to access training. However, insights from the STC management show that digital access to training isn't the preferred approach for all volunteers and insights from individual learners show that although the material may be helpful to their clients, they may face additional barriers to access, including controlling behaviour by their abuser or a lack of capacity to engage resulting from feeling alienated by the legal process.

The data also provides insights into the potential for the wider use of the course, beyond the core STC audience. Individual learners from outside STC point to the value of the material to audiences beyond STC, arguing that there are gaps in current provision and, in particular, insights around equipping volunteers to support service users who are alleged perpetrators of abuse, provides a perspective not readily available from other training sources. Insights from members of STC show that there is potential value in developing other online training to cover other topics relevant to supporting litigants including housing, mental health or diversity issues.

A number of challenges to replicating this type of collaboration are also evident in the data. The course authors indicate the need for clear lines of communication and responsibility to allow the project to run in a sufficiently agile and efficient manner. Our data shows that the success of the project was due to the ability of the course design team to work effectively together, made easier by their professionalism and relevant career and study experience, factors which aren't easy to replicate. Other barriers identified include finding sufficient funding for the project and disseminating the material beyond the primary organisation. One participant highlighted the issue that whilst smaller charities may benefit from the material, many may not have the capacity to promote engagement with it if they don't see the resource as a priority: "if they're supporting something or if they're part of it they'll very much plug it but when they're not involved in it you don't get very much response back as to its value" [L11].

Despite the challenges, the interview data shows that charities lacking large training and development budgets will benefit from university resources and expertise, and producing open access material ensures wider public benefit. Also, the participants point to the public engagement value of universities supporting this type of activity, potentially providing new avenues for research and knowledge exchange, but also an opportunity for higher education institutions to achieve their civic mission.

7. WIDER IMPLICATIONS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE WORK

This study has demonstrated that the co-production of OERs can be a two-way process generating the 'mutual benefit' at the heart of the NCCPE definition (NCCPE 2015). In this instance the OU benefited from an opportunity to co-create knowledge that had a direct impact on the free advice eco-system and relates directly back to the framework provided by Burns and Squires (2011). In this way it is an example of the 'collaborative inquiry' called for by Grand et al. (2015) and McNall et al. (2015). It also exemplifies how existing 'ready-to-wear' technology (Adams, FitzGerald & Priestnall 2013) can be used effectively within the legal charitable sector as an important and inexpensive tool with which to change practice. This relates back to our initial research question, which we can now reflect back on and show that the experience of developing and delivering this open course can indeed be used as an exemplar for providing scalable and inexpensive online training. The success of this work has now led to proposals for STC to collaborate further with the Open Justice Centre to move all volunteer training to a hybrid model of core activities provided online, supplemented by face-to-face training where appropriate. The pandemic has increased pressure for changes in practice and this, along with the success of the initial move to online training, has led to further proposals to develop a hybrid model of service delivery where STC clients will be supported using a mixture of online and face-to-face contact. Whilst the use of online training for the charitable sector is not new, within the *legal* charitable sector this is an important innovation and a valuable example to other legal charities, and to other university law schools who have the capacity to support them in making these changes.

The success of the collaboration raises a number of issues, three of which will be outlined here. Firstly, what is the extent of the obligation of universities to direct their public engagement efforts to support organisations in addressing unmet legal needs? The decline in state funded support for legal advice and representation has resulted in a large number of citizens facing the civil justice system without professional representation. Charitable legal advice and support agencies, such as Support Through Court, face unprecedented levels of demand for their services and have only limited capacity to educate and train their volunteers. Universities have expertise and, at least in comparison to the free legal advice sector, are comparatively well funded. Amartya Sen raises the issue of the imperfect obligations of institutions to address

remediable injustice (Sen 2009) and, further work is required to explore how university law schools, with their particular set of capacities, should discharge this obligation.

Secondly, how can we ensure that individual instances of bespoke collaboration between universities and charities reach an audience beyond the core institution? The data in our study demonstrates that there is a level of unmet need in terms of education and training for volunteers within the free legal advice and guidance sector. What steps could be taken to co-ordinate the outputs from these collaborations to maximise the benefit for individual and organisational learners and also to avoid unnecessary duplication of resources?

Finally, what potential is there for information and guidance to be provided directly to those in need of legal support and guidance? This project is an example of how volunteers already engaged in the sector can benefit from bespoke education and training to support service users, in this case litigants in person. What methods could be used to try to engage with these service users directly and what potential benefits would this type of engagement offer?

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Anonymised data gathered for this study is being prepared for submission to an open access data repository: ORDO <https://ordo.open.ac.uk/>. DOI will be added on completion on this process and prior to publication.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Co-authored by Hugh McFaul and Dr Elizabeth FitzGerald. Hugh McFaul is the corresponding author.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Hugh McFaul  orcid.org/0000-0001-6378-180X

The Open University, GB

Elizabeth FitzGerald  orcid.org/0000-0002-8404-4531

The Open University, GB

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