



***The Big (Student) Society: student opportunities, social action and barriers to volunteering at university***

Tuesday 23 February; 10:30am-11:30am; Committee Room 21, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

The APPG convened a roundtable on barriers to volunteering for students to mark Student Volunteering Week 2016. The meeting was attended by parliamentarians, students' union officers, charity representatives, and organisations in the higher education and further education sectors.

Georgia Price, a student volunteer at University of Bristol, opened the event by discussing her role in leading Schools Plus (a tutoring project in local Bristol schools) and the mutual benefits of student volunteering – to the community and to the student.

Richard Brooks, Vice President at the National Union of Students, outlined barriers to volunteering for students. These included being time-poor, lacking funding for projects or personal expenses, lack of expert support available in universities to set up volunteering projects, and lack of flexible volunteering opportunities. He noted that this makes students an untapped resource for civil society.

Kerri Hall, Education Manager at Step Up to Serve, discussed the national picture. She identified universities that incorporate volunteering into their curriculums and universities that have made social action a strategic priority and given volunteering big investment. She expressed barriers to student volunteering as barriers to social mobility; less affluent students who have to work part-time or balance other family commitments with their studies do not get the benefits of volunteering that richer peers do.

One particular theme in following comments was how to best encourage and excite students to participate in volunteering:

- Attendees shared examples of universities that offer accredited volunteering modules, which can incentivise students to volunteer as part of their courses – but problems with the value and perception of these modules by both students *and* employers were noted.
- Attendees discussed how students can be encouraged to volunteer together, with friends, to make otherwise unattractive opportunities fun and exciting.
- Attendees noted that some universities provide platforms at graduation ceremonies where a student's extracurricular activities are praised.

Another theme in comments was in noting how important it is that volunteering opportunities are available to all students from all backgrounds:

- Particularly pertinent examples were shared by students' union representatives in the room, including a note from University of West London SU who noted 84% of their students work to fund their studies and Sheffield College SU who noted that their students often struggle to afford to get to college, let alone to an additional volunteering commitment.
- Findings from [Ipsos MORI surveys](#) were shared that demonstrated the stark differences in volunteering between young people from more affluent and less affluent families.
- Attendees commented that, when there are so many benefits to personal skills and career prospects, unless volunteering was accessible to poorer students then these benefits will only exacerbate the disadvantages these students have in a competitive graduate jobs market.

A final theme to arise in comments was the limited data available. This presents difficulties in knowing exactly how many students volunteer; drawing comparisons with the wider population; and, targeting initiatives to encourage participation.

Despite the challenges, all attendees were unanimous in recognising the benefits that volunteering brings to students and their local communities. Attendees were clear that volunteering is not a nice to have or an 'add-on' for a degree, but an integral part of the student experience. Comments noted, volunteering can help students feel like residents in a community, not just transient outsiders passing through while they complete their studies.

***For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Public Affairs Officer, National Union of Students ([alexander.lee@nus.org.uk](mailto:alexander.lee@nus.org.uk)).***