



## ***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 state of student volunteering**

Student volunteering can take many forms. From students helping out in soup kitchens, to sports teams running coaching sessions for local children, to supporting residents to campaign against the closure of vital local services such as women's shelters and youth centres, the diversity of volunteering projects that students undertake reflects the diversity of interests amongst all students. Students' unions are also able to provide opportunities for volunteering, whether through charity fundraising activities or the chance to lead student societies.

Just under 1 in 3 students volunteer while they are at university; recent surveys have given figures of 31% (2014)<sup>1</sup> and 28% (2015)<sup>2</sup>. For many students, therefore, volunteering is a fundamental part of the student experience. Many volunteer incredibly regularly, and have done so for substantial periods of time. Of students who volunteer: 33% volunteer once a week; 32% volunteer more than once a week (of which, 4% volunteer *daily*); and, 38% first began volunteering in primary or secondary school.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Key statistics:**<sup>4</sup>

- 53% volunteer in their term-time local community
- 34% volunteer in their institution
- 25% volunteer for a regional or national charity
- 56% would most like to volunteer for a school
- 25% would most like to volunteer as a befriender or mentor for people

However, while this is encouraging, there are many students who do not – or cannot – take opportunities to volunteer while they are at university. The c. 30% figure for students who volunteer in the UK is dwarfed by the participation rate for students in America, where it is estimated that up to 60% volunteer while they are at university.<sup>5</sup>

### **Why do students want to volunteer?**

Students see many benefits to volunteering – both for themselves as individuals, and for the community around them. These are clear reasons why maximising student participation in volunteering is becoming a vital requirement for the student experience.

- **To make a contribution to the community around them:** more than half of students who volunteer do so in their term-time communities. 78 per cent of students who volunteer told a 2014 survey that 'helping people' was the main reason they volunteered.<sup>6</sup>
- **To develop their personal skills:** Volunteering can give students new experiences and help them learn new skills. For instance, the most common form of voluntary activity amongst students is organising, or helping to organise, an event (51% of students); an activity which requires considerable personal skills from organisation to leadership to creativity. Getting out into the community or working alongside other students as part of a society committee can also develop interpersonal, communication and social skills.
- **To help their employability:** From applying communication skills, intellectual skills and organisational skills in practical environments to simply building confidence, volunteering can add considerable impact to a student's CV. Students are aware of the benefits that volunteering has on employability: the HEA has shown that students seek opportunities to improve their employability in a world where "a degree is not enough", while NUS research has found a fifth of students (21%) who don't volunteer, would volunteer to build their CV.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [The Student Volunteering Landscape](#), Fiona Ellison and Helen Kerr, 2014

<sup>2</sup> [Unite Students Insight Report](#), 2015

<sup>3</sup> [The Student Volunteering Landscape](#), Fiona Ellison and Helen Kerr, 2014

<sup>4</sup> Drawn from [The Student Volunteering Landscape](#) and [Unite Students Insight Report](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Students, Volunteering and Social Action in the UK: History and Policies](#), Student Hubs, 2014

<sup>6</sup> [The Student Volunteering Landscape](#), Fiona Ellison and Helen Kerr, 2014

<sup>7</sup> [Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education](#), Higher Education Academy, 2014; [The Student Volunteering Landscape](#), Fiona Ellison and Helen Kerr, 2014.



## What barriers can prevent students from volunteering?

A joint report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students outlined multiple barriers that exist and prevent students from participating in volunteering opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

- **Time constraints:** Not having enough time is often cited by students as the main reason why they are unable to volunteer.
  - 63% of student respondents to the Student Volunteering Landscape survey claimed that, for a number of reasons, the time pressures on them were too great.
  - 41% of the survey respondents said that they did not volunteer specifically because of their academic commitments.
  - Students can spend close to 30 hours a week studying<sup>9</sup> (which is even higher for some courses and for some institutions). These hours are often variable, as seminar and lecture times may be different in different weeks, which itself makes a regular volunteering commitment difficult.
  - 77% of students now work to help fund their studies.<sup>10</sup>
- **Funding problems:** Many student-volunteer led student activity groups rely on funding and sponsorship from a wide range of organisations and businesses.
  - Often, sponsorship deals are negotiated by the student leaders of a club or society and without appropriate training or support, they could be vulnerable to abuse by businesses and sponsors.
  - Universities are operating on limited funds for volunteering initiatives.<sup>11</sup>
  - Given the current climate of austerity, getting 'more' funding into student opportunities and social action is likely to become increasingly difficult.
- **Availability of support and advice:** Student societies and student-led volunteering groups are great opportunities for students to learn new skills and assume new responsibilities, but student group leaders will often need guidance and support to ensure their groups meet any institutional requirements.
  - There can be a lot of unfamiliar bureaucracy and paperwork to navigate.
  - There can be complications over managing sponsorships and group finances.
  - There can be questions about how to do what they would like and achieve what they want to.
  - Staff who supervise societies, volunteering opportunities and student projects can often face high workloads and have limited capacity. The lack of training and support for these 'frontline' staff can hinder the success of student groups.
- **The types of volunteering opportunities that are available:** Students have diverse interests and needs; they are all individuals. Opportunities on offer for them may not always meet their needs.
  - Some students might not be particularly engaged in their students' union and therefore not aware of volunteering opportunities that are often advertised within the union buildings;
  - Others might require flexible volunteering options, particularly if they are part-time students, distance learners or have a job alongside their studies – all of whom cannot commit to volunteering in 'traditional' ways; or,
  - Some students might need clearer communication about what they can do, join or attend, in language they are familiar with – the language used within institutions and students' unions ('social action', 'student opportunities', 'employability', 'fundraising') can conjure different images in the heads of different students and can ultimately turn them off any idea of getting involved.

Creating meaningful points of engagement tailored to students is essential in helping them to get involved with the right opportunities for them. Respondents to the Student Volunteering Landscape survey were clear that greater diversity and flexibility of volunteering projects would be welcome:

- 40% wanted greater links between volunteering and their prospective careers and courses
- 33% wanted more one-off volunteering opportunities
- 24% wanted more 'taster' sessions to try potential opportunities before fully committing

**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)).**

<sup>8</sup> [Breaking down the barriers to Student Opportunities and Youth Social Action](#), UUK and NUS, 2015

<sup>9</sup> [The academic experience of students at English universities](#), Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), 2012

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.endsleigh.co.uk/press-releases/10-august-2015/>

<sup>11</sup> [Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community](#), Vinspired Students, 2010