Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community Research Summary

Georgina Brewis, Jennifer Russell and Clare Holdsworth
November 2010
This report presents findings of a study on student volunteering that is based on case studies of six Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The research was commissioned by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) as part of its v inspired students project. It was undertaken by a research team from the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) led by Georgina Brewis, in partnership with Clare Holdsworth at Keele University.

The v inspired students project has been funded by v, the National Young Volunteers Service, to provide evidence of the benefits of volunteering and to encourage universities to recognise the value of student volunteering as part of their core activity.

In 2009, the NCCPE published Student Volunteering – Background, policy and context, which provided a benchmark of current activity, mapped the policy landscape around student volunteering, and identified themes in how universities are managing volunteering.

Bursting the Bubble was commissioned to explore further the motivations for, routes into and perceived impacts of volunteering on students, universities and the wider community. Volunteering by university students remains an under-researched topic, with little reliable national data on the number of students involved or their experiences, and this study attempts to address some of these gaps in our knowledge.

The full report can be downloaded from the NCCPE’s website at www.publicengagement.ac.uk

What did we do?
The research design combined quantitative and qualitative methods. These included online surveys of students (over 3,000 valid responses) and graduates (over 5,000 valid responses), as well as semi-structured interviews, biographical interviews and focus groups with student volunteers, non-volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, and other stakeholders.

The research adopted a peer-led participatory methodology, which enhanced the relevance of the research and involved students in a meaningful way throughout the process. The research team worked with teams of student peer-researchers in the six case study HEIs to deliver this work: University of East London, Keele University, University of Gloucestershire, University of Leeds, University of Oxford and University of the West of England. These HEIs were selected to represent the diversity of the higher education sector in England, adding weight to the findings and allowing us to generalise from the case study findings to the higher education sector as whole.

Full details of the methodology can be found in the full report.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank the student peer researchers across the six case studies.

University of East London
Dayo Abinusawa, Aleksandra Mojak, Kemi Tijan, Clara Chinemye Ugbor

University of Gloucestershire
Sophie Gilbert, Ben Moreland, Hannah Spencer

Keele University
Nicola Brocklehurst, Simon Mung, Adam Sidaway, Courtney Wakes

University of Leeds
Nick Virr, Joanna Klopotec Glowczewska, Naberay Paul-Wright

University of Oxford
Veronica Chan, Hannah MacDiarmid, Alice Thornton

University of the West of England
Laksham Ganatra, Chris Mintoff, Simon Oxenham, Alison Trueman, Chantal Wall
Students are far more generous with their time and energy in the interest of the community than is generally recognised. This important national study comes out in the aftermath of Lord Browne’s review of higher education. There has never been such a high premium placed on the student experience.

The research finds that students contribute significantly to university life and the wider community through the hours they give to groups and organisations, as well as the informal volunteering they offer. Volunteering plays a vital role in developing students’ community awareness, allowing them to break out of what many respondents describe as the ‘student bubble’.

I was fortunate as a student at Liverpool University to be involved in a number of active organisations that ranged from raising awareness of poverty in Africa, to working for a community group based in the Toxteth area that provided regular visits by students to isolated elderly people.

Organisations that involve volunteers in their work place high value on university students and see universities as valuable sources of time, talent and enthusiasm. I concur with the report’s finding that students experience positive impacts on their own personal development, skills and employability. Frankly there is also the huge satisfaction that flows from volunteering - something this report emphasises. But all this does require support from universities and colleges themselves and students’ unions to make the most of the potential benefits.

Higher education has always been about much more than simply getting a degree. Universities have a vital role to play in supporting social, intellectual and cultural life in the UK through their engagement with the public. This report makes a persuasive case for the significant contribution that volunteering can make to the core purposes of higher education. In a time of sweeping cuts to education budgets, it also provides a powerful argument for continued institutional investment in volunteering.

Student activism has been the life blood of organic change in our society. Many of the lessons picked up during student life continue to surface in later life. As the government of the day talks of the ‘Big Society’, such a movement will be considerably prejudiced if the gene pool of university volunteers is reduced by economic pressures. Student volunteers are the potential NGO and charitable movers and shakers of tomorrow.
Key Findings

Student volunteers make a significant contribution
- 63 per cent of students have taken part in formal volunteering since starting university
- Volunteer-involving organisations place great value on higher education students

A desire to make a difference
- 95 per cent of students who volunteer are motivated by a desire to improve things or help people

A plurality of routes
- 38 per cent of student volunteers are introduced to volunteering through their university or students’ union
- 48 per cent of volunteers give their time to formal volunteering activities that benefit the wider community but without receiving any support from their university

Challenges in volunteer management
- Students who receive support for their volunteering from their university are more satisfied with the experience of volunteering and derive greater personal development benefits
- Senior university staff express a strong commitment to volunteering, but volunteering services are hampered by a lack of secure funding and a relatively low profile

High expectations, high rewards
- Student volunteers report many positive impacts on their own personal development, skills and employability
- 51 per cent of recent graduates under 30 years old who are in paid work say that volunteering helped them to secure employment
- Students identified the opportunity to burst out of the student ‘bubble’ as one of the most valued aspects of volunteering

Barriers to participation
- The major barrier to volunteering reported by students is lack of time owing to study pressures
- Linking volunteering to academic subjects or careers might encourage more students to volunteer
Student volunteers make a significant contribution

How many students volunteer?

Students contribute significantly to university life and the wider community through the hours they volunteer with groups and organisations as well as the informal help they offer.

**Formal volunteering**, defined as giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment: 63 per cent of respondents to our Student Activities Survey took part in formal volunteering since starting university, with 49 per cent taking part in the academic year 2009/2010.

**Informal volunteering**, defined as giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives: 63 per cent of students report acting as informal volunteers since starting university. Forty-two per cent of students have taken part in both formal and informal volunteering.

These rates of volunteering are broadly in line with national data taken from the Citizenship Survey1.

What do students do?

Students give unpaid help to a wide range of organisations and groups, as well as setting up their own community projects. Three-quarters of volunteers (76 per cent) indicate that they have taken part in volunteering that benefits people in communities outside the university. These activities are diverse and include volunteering with children and young people, often those with disabilities or other special needs; environmental and conservation work; face-to-face or e-mentoring; charity shops; website design, IT and administrative roles for charities; museum interpretation; campaigns and appeals; help for churches and religious groups; sports coaching and organising events.

The remaining quarter (24 per cent) of volunteers indicate that they have only been involved in volunteering that primarily benefits other students. This might include activities such as Nightline, mentoring other students, running clubs and societies, or being on a students’ union committee. Many volunteers (31 per cent) are of course involved in both types of activity.

Over half of students who volunteer do so both during term-time and in vacations (57 per cent) and a third (32 per cent) volunteer at least once a week.

Who volunteers?

The students who are most likely to volunteer are those who are actively engaged in other extra-curricular activities either on or off campus, or those who work during term-time.

Students in their second year of studies or later are more likely to volunteer than first years. Women are slightly more likely to volunteer than men. Students with a disability and those with dependents are more likely to volunteer than those without.

The value of student volunteers

Student volunteers make an important contribution to the work of voluntary organisations ranging from small community groups to national charities, as well as to public sector bodies such as schools, prisons and hospitals. Volunteer-involving organisations place great value on higher education students and see universities as valuable sources of talent, time and enthusiasm. Students are highly valued as volunteers by organisations and are sought out for specific skills, knowledge and expertise as well as being valued for their youth and enthusiasm. Involving students can broaden both the diversity and size of an organisation’s volunteer pool. Volunteer-involving organisations greatly value the relationships with universities that they have built up over a number of years.

---

London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
A desire to make a difference

The survey found that altruistic motivations are most commonly cited as reasons to volunteer: 95 per cent of students who volunteer are motivated by a desire to improve things or help people. Developing skills (88 per cent) and gaining work experience (83 per cent) are also important motivating factors, while nearly half (49 per cent) are also looking to enhance learning from their university course through volunteering.

Figure 1: Students’ motivations for volunteering

The survey found that altruistic motivations are most commonly cited as reasons to volunteer: 95 per cent of students who volunteer are motivated by a desire to improve things or help people. Developing skills (88 per cent) and gaining work experience (83 per cent) are also important motivating factors, while nearly half (49 per cent) are also looking to enhance learning from their university course through volunteering.

A lot of students are stuck in this student bubble and they don’t break free of it, and volunteering is a way of getting out and getting into the community. I remember in my first year just thinking that you hardly ever see, like, a real person.

Student volunteer

95% of students who volunteer are motivated by a desire to improve things or help people

‘You’ve got to have motivation to do [volunteering], because you’ve got to do it properly as well, there’s no point in just going for the sake of going… you’re not helping them and you’re not helping yourself.’

Student, non-volunteer

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, students from post-1992 HEIs, students with dependents, and those who did not move away to university are more motivated to volunteer by reasons connected to their personal values, such as religious beliefs and wanting to improve things or help people. Women, younger students and students from less advantaged backgrounds are more motivated to volunteer to enhance their employability.

Students were clear that they wanted their volunteering to make a difference and some preferred to select activities that allowed them to see more immediate impacts. Volunteer-involving organisations feel the most committed student volunteers are motivated by personal values or altruism, and the fact that students have freely chosen to volunteer is very important to them.
Students’ routes into volunteering are diverse. Most first find out about volunteering through friends and family or through their school or college before starting university. Yet, over one-third (38 per cent) of students’ first experience of volunteering is mediated by their university or students’ union.

Figure 2: Method of finding out about volunteering

Overall, 38 per cent of formal volunteers report receiving some form of support for their volunteering from their university or students’ union. The support provided might typically include assistance in finding opportunities, training, payment of expenses, processing of criminal records checks, and opportunities for students to reflect on their experience. Across the six case study universities, there are a number of different models for organisation of student volunteering, including brokerage services, support from academic departments, and student-led groups and societies.

Forty-eight per cent of volunteers give their time to formal volunteering activities that benefit the wider community but without receiving any support from their university. These students are more likely to be those who have not moved away from home to go to university. This suggests that there are likely to be many students involved in community volunteering that their universities may not know about.
'It’s a massive problem, trying to reach out to students, who should you get in contact with? The lecturers are absolutely flooded with information going into their e-mail accounts, and we’re just another e-mail that they haven’t got time to deal with.’

Volunteer coordinator, community organisation

Accessing volunteers

The plurality of ways to recruit students as volunteers is confusing for volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs). Despite the many avenues available to them to recruit students, many of the coordinators based in VIOs we interviewed had difficulty recruiting enough volunteers. Indeed, volunteer coordinators are often frustrated at the lack of ‘access’ they feel they have to academic staff or academic departments, whom they view as gatekeepers to student volunteers. They also express frustration at inconsistencies of approach between different departments or individual lecturers. This suggests there may be a greater role for professional volunteering services in universities to promote good practice across their institutions.
Challenges in volunteer management

Students are proud of the difference they are able to make to individuals and organisations and this contributes to their motivation to carry on volunteering. However, we have found that student volunteers experience some frustration in the way that their volunteering is managed.

Comparing students’ views on management and support with volunteers in the general population in Helping Out, the national survey of volunteering and charitable giving, students feel less able to influence the direction of the organisation they help and are more likely to think things are badly organised. A number of other studies have considered the specific support and management needs of young volunteers, emphasising young people’s desire for flexibility, variety and ease of access to volunteering. These studies also find that young people have some clear ideas about how they would like their volunteering to be organised, for example seeking involvement in planning and decision making.

The findings also show that students who receive support for their volunteering from their universities are more satisfied with the experience of volunteering and report greater personal development benefits than volunteers who do not receive university support. Those who volunteer once a week or more also report having better experiences. Interestingly, students who had reported volunteering as part of their degree course were likely to be less satisfied with their experience of volunteering than other volunteers.

Senior university staff members who were interviewed as part of the research expressed a strong commitment to supporting volunteering as a core part of the student experience. They recognise a range of benefits including enhancing employability, skills development, and creating positive relations between universities and their local communities. However, a number of other university stakeholders feel that this high level support does not always translate into funding commitments for volunteering services, and volunteer co-ordinators frequently feel that their services are hampered by a lack of secure funding and a relatively low profile within their institution.

---


High expectations, high rewards

Personal development and soft skills

Student volunteers report many positive impacts on their own personal development, skills and employability and derive high levels of satisfaction from taking part, as shown in figure 4. Students and graduates alike place greatest value on the personal growth and improvements in confidence and self-esteem they experience through volunteering. Students at post-1992 universities are more likely than students from older universities to recognise the benefits of volunteering on their self-discipline, confidence, knowledge and their willingness to try new things. Students from BME backgrounds and non-UK students report greater impacts on personal development than other students.

Figure 4: Impacts of volunteering on students

Employability

Students acknowledge the positive benefits of volunteering for enhancing their employability, though they feel that volunteering increases their employment skills in general (83 per cent), rather than providing more direct career-related benefits such as making contacts (51 per cent), or clarity about future career options (48 per cent). Moreover the study confirms that volunteering provides experience that graduates can utilise when looking for work: 82 per cent of recent graduates under 30 years old mentioned volunteering on a CV and 78 per cent talked about it in interview. Half (51 per cent) of recent graduates under 30 who are in paid work say that volunteering helped them to secure employment.
Experience of university

The impacts of volunteering on students’ experience of university and their academic studies are less clear cut. Overall, 61 per cent agree that volunteering has changed their experience of being a student for the better. Just over half of student volunteers (55 per cent) indicate that they felt more part of their university as a result of volunteering; these are more likely to be ‘traditional’ students (younger, male students, those studying at pre-1992 HEIs, students who move away to study, and those who have at least one parent who has gone to university). Just under half of all volunteers (46 per cent) identify positive impacts from volunteering on their knowledge of their degree subject.

Community awareness

Student volunteering can play an important role in developing students’ community awareness and integration into communities outside the university. Students identified the opportunity to burst out of the student ‘bubble’ as one of the most valued aspects of volunteering. For many students, volunteering is the only chance they have to meet people from backgrounds that are different to their own. It can also be the only way of meeting people locally other than students or university staff. Just over three-quarters of student volunteers (77 per cent) indicate that their understanding of other people had increased as a result of volunteering and 74 per cent experience a wider range of friendships.

Students report that volunteering had increased their awareness of issues such as unemployment, homelessness and disability, and helped break down stereotypes they may hold about other people.

Wider impacts on communities

Volunteering by students can also be a small, but positive, contribution to dispelling wider concerns about large concentrations of students in particular neighbourhoods. Volunteering by students is routinely invoked at liaison sessions with local residents as a possible solution to some of the tensions between locals and students. Moreover volunteering can encourage other forms of participation in local communities, such as membership of community organisations, as well as informal helping.

Importantly, volunteering at university enhances students’ likelihood of volunteering in the future. A majority (67 per cent) of students think volunteering whilst at university has increased their willingness to volunteer in the future. This is confirmed by findings from the alumni survey: 52 per cent of graduates who volunteered at university are currently volunteering, compared to 32 per cent of those who did not volunteer at university.

‘You meet all different people from different ages and backgrounds and stuff. It’s changed my opinion about people who haven’t been able to get jobs and stuff, or who have disabilities and so can’t get jobs. It’s been really good socialising with people who I wouldn’t have otherwise met.’

Student volunteer

‘I think it does have an effect because, especially sort of around the university areas, there’s a lot of bad feeling towards students because people see them as coming in and sort of wrecking their home and stuff like that. So when they see they’re actually getting involved in doing stuff, then they get to see the right, the nice side of what students can bring to the community.’

Volunteer coordinator, community organisation
Barriers to participation

Time

The major barrier to volunteering reported by students is lack of time owing to study pressures (79 per cent of all non-volunteers). Further analysis shows that students who cite lack of time as a reason for not volunteering are more likely to face other work commitments and family responsibilities, and are also more likely to have parents with no experience of higher education. Hence it may be that those with no family background of higher education are more likely to focus on their studies than take part in other activities.

The reasons students give for not volunteering at university are highlighted in figure 5 below. The study suggests that many students are put off by not understanding what volunteering entails, or not knowing how to get involved in volunteering while at university.

Figure 5: Reasons for not volunteering (all non-volunteers)

‘Volunteering is usually promoted as something outside of the student bubble...Volunteering could be put forward as a key part of student life, it’s the idea of volunteering in students’ minds that counts. More people would do it if they felt it was an essential part of student life.’

Student volunteer

The major barrier to volunteering reported by students is lack of time owing to study pressures
Making the first step

Students suggested that they find it difficult to make the first step into volunteering while at university because they are afraid of not knowing anyone, of having to travel to new parts of a city they may not know very well, and of having to take public transport. Students are also put off by the perceived bureaucracy that surrounds formal volunteering including Criminal Records Bureau checks, application forms and interviews. Students identified that starting to volunteer can often appear to be too much like applying for a job, and this can lead to fears about the levels of time and commitment needed.

Nearly two-fifths of non-volunteers (39 per cent) suggest that linking volunteering to students’ academic subject or career might encourage them to volunteer. There is also demand for one-off opportunities, taster sessions, training and awards, although many of these are already offered by students’ union or university-based volunteering programmes. However, it is important to note that there remains a group of students who are simply not interested in volunteering.

Reasons for stopping volunteering

A large number of non-volunteers (49 per cent) had volunteered prior to coming to university. Many of these students state that they had dropped out of volunteering at university because they did not feel part of the community, or their friends and family were not involved.

Some students, particularly those who had not moved away to attend university, are in fact already actively involved in their local communities, but they do not always recognise this as ‘volunteering’, seeing it as helping out family members/friends or offering help to their church, mosque or children’s school.

Around a quarter (23 per cent) of students who had volunteered since coming to university were no longer volunteering. The main reasons for stopping volunteering are time-related and very few students cite negative past experiences of volunteering or poor organisation as reasons for stopping volunteering.
This research confirms that students contribute significantly to university life and to the wider community through both formal and informal volunteering. These contributions should be celebrated and built upon. Indeed, the study suggests that there are many more students involved in volunteering than their universities are aware of, and that these students might benefit from additional support. Moreover, students who volunteer are more likely to join other community organisations and to volunteer in the future.

Senior members of university staff that we interviewed spoke eloquently in favour of supporting opportunities for students to volunteer, citing a wide range of reasons, including increasing employability, skills development, creating positive community-university relations, as well as providing opportunities for students to give something back. However, further development (or even continuity) is hampered by a lack of secure funding, a perceived lack of academic support, and the relatively low profile of volunteering services within universities and students’ unions.

The research highlights a clear need for professional volunteer management in universities, with more consistent approaches to promoting and supporting volunteering. An important group of students are introduced to their first experience of volunteering through their university or students’ union. However, nearly half of those who don’t volunteer whilst at university have been involved in volunteering previously, suggesting that being at university can also act as a barrier to some students. Volunteer-involving organisations report challenges in working with universities, whose organisational structures they frequently find opaque and confusing.

Volunteering can play an important role in developing students’ community awareness and integration into communities outside the university. Yet it is evident that without adequate support, management and opportunities for reflection and placing volunteering in wider social context, student volunteering can fail to realise many of the potential benefits frequently attributed to it. Universities are going some way to help these benefits be realised, but much more could be done through increased investment and strategic support.

This study identified high levels of volunteering among students, yet there remains scope for expansion. Volunteering is something students are able to dip in and out of and this flexibility is valued. However, those who volunteered at least once a week see greater benefits from involvement and report better experiences. Likewise, volunteer-involving organisations prefer regular, ongoing volunteering from students. There is a strong demand from students for universities to help find volunteering opportunities connected with their academic course or future career.

The study confirms that enhancing employability is a major motivational factor for volunteering, but it is not the only one, and students seem to be tiring of an emphasis on volunteering solely for career development. Students feel that volunteering for the ‘right reasons’ is important, and do not like to be told that they must volunteer.

This research paints a picture of students who are keen to burst out of the student ‘bubble’ to make meaningful contributions to organisations and communities through volunteering. Volunteering whilst at university provides unique opportunities for students to develop social awareness and can instil a lifelong commitment to voluntary action. With support that is well developed, professional, and tailored to the needs of students and communities, volunteering can result in profound benefits for students themselves and for the wider communities in which they live and study.
National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement’s vision is of a higher education sector making a vital, strategic and valued contribution to 21st-century society through its public engagement activity. We are working to help support universities to improve, value and increase the quantity and quality of their public engagement and embed it into their core practice.

The NCCPE is part of the national Beacons for Public Engagement initiative, funded by the UK Higher Education Funding Councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust.

The six Beacons are university-based collaborative centres that help support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement work, based in Newcastle and Durham; Manchester; CUE East UEA; UCL; Wales; and Edinburgh.

For more information see www.publicengagement.ac.uk

vinspired students

The NCCPE has been funded by v, the National Young Volunteers Service, to run the vinspired students project. This has been set up to provide compelling evidence of the impact of volunteering on students, universities and communities, and to demonstrate the unique contribution that universities can make through the strategic management of volunteering.

The three principle aims of the project are:

• To inspire a shift in culture: encouraging universities to recognise the value of student volunteering as part of their core strategy.

• To increase capacity: pooling the expertise of the student volunteering community, and working together to galvanise a step change in the quality, quantity and diversity of student volunteering.

• Deliver high quality engagement activity: enriching universities, their communities and the lives of students involved.

If you would like more information about this project, please write to nccpe.studentvol@uwe.ac.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research

The Institute for Volunteering Research is a specialist research consultancy on volunteering. Founded in 1997, it is an initiative of Volunteering England in research partnership with Birkbeck, University of London.

For more information see www.ivr.org.uk