

The Student Volunteering Landscape

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Introduction

Student volunteering has a long and illustrious history, with students contributing incredible amounts in volunteering activity to their local communities. However, for too long the higher education sector has not had up-to-date figures that allow us to quantify the full value of students' contributions to their communities.

Within higher education, volunteering is often rolled out as the solution to 'town/gown' relationship problems and many universities consider volunteering integral to their community outreach programme. While student volunteering may be a key element for many universities, a considerable number of student volunteering teams lack the necessary investment to realise the full potential of student volunteering.

To make the case for investment in student volunteering, we first need to understand the current state of the sector. This report presents research findings from a study into the state of student volunteering. It draws from a 2013 survey of a representative sample of students from across the UK higher education system, as well as in-depth work with representatives from student volunteering teams based in students' unions and universities. The research was led by Helen Kerr, supported by Lizzie Bone and Fiona Ellison, from NUS and with additional fieldwork carried out by DJS Research.



Research objectives

The research sought to address two key themes:

- Understanding student volunteering – finding out who, what, why, when and how students volunteer, enabling us to build a picture of student volunteering.
- Quantifying student volunteering – measuring the number of student volunteers and their economic contribution.

The research methodology has been designed in such a way that it can be rolled out year-on-year to assess changes in the student volunteering landscape.

The research consisted of three phases of activity carried out from July to December 2013. These phases were:

- An online survey with students to understand more about student volunteering from their perspective, with a sample size of almost 2,000 valid responses from a representative sample of students in UK higher education.
- An online questionnaire answered by volunteering staff to attempt to quantify volunteering.
- Twenty semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews with key student volunteer staff/contacts to understand more about student volunteering challenges and trends.

Students create bat and bird boxes for local wildlife during Student Volunteering Week, 2013

Photo: Jemma Houghton, Kingston University students' union

Key findings

Contribution of student volunteers

- Over 725,000 students currently volunteer – that is 31 per cent of the higher education student population.
- Students volunteer on average for 44 hours a year, based on an average 32 week term.
- Student volunteering contributes £175million per year to the UK economy

Motivations

- Some 78 per cent of students who volunteer indicated that they do so to improve things/help people.
- Developing skills was highlighted by 66 per cent of student volunteers as one of their main motivations for volunteering.

Barriers

- The majority (69 per cent) of students who do not currently volunteer said that the major barrier for them was not having enough time – either due to the pressures of study, paid work, family commitments or involvement in other activities.
- Some 18 per cent of all students said they did not think they could afford to do more volunteering than their current levels.

Activity

- Students get involved in a wide range of opportunities. Student volunteers are most likely to have taken part in organising activities/events, raising money or taking part in sponsored events or teaching.
- More than half of students (56 per cent) would prefer to volunteer for a school/education organisation or a local charity.

Moving forward

- Forty per cent of students said that education institutions linking volunteering opportunities to their course or academic qualification would encourage them to do more volunteering.
- A third of students said they would like to see more one-off opportunities to encourage them to volunteer.

Profile of student volunteers

Using a representative sample of students studying across the UK, we found that 31 per cent of students within higher education currently volunteer.

Of the 31 per cent of students identified as current volunteers:

- only 1 per cent would not volunteer more
- some 6 per cent might consider volunteering more
- nearly a quarter (24 per cent) said they would volunteer more

Of the 69 per cent of students who said they do not currently volunteer, more than two-thirds said they would be interested in volunteering in the future. Creating opportunities that appeal

to these students and having the capacity to support them will be key in realising the full potential of student volunteering.

Understanding the routes that students take into volunteering will help to create a better picture of student engagement in volunteering. Our research shows that 38 per cent of students first get involved in volunteering during their time at primary or secondary school (see figure 1).

In finding out about volunteering opportunities, almost half of all students (48 per cent) say they found out about volunteering opportunities through their friends and family, with their place of study the second most common source of finding out about volunteering opportunities (see figure 2).

Figure 1: When students became involved in volunteering

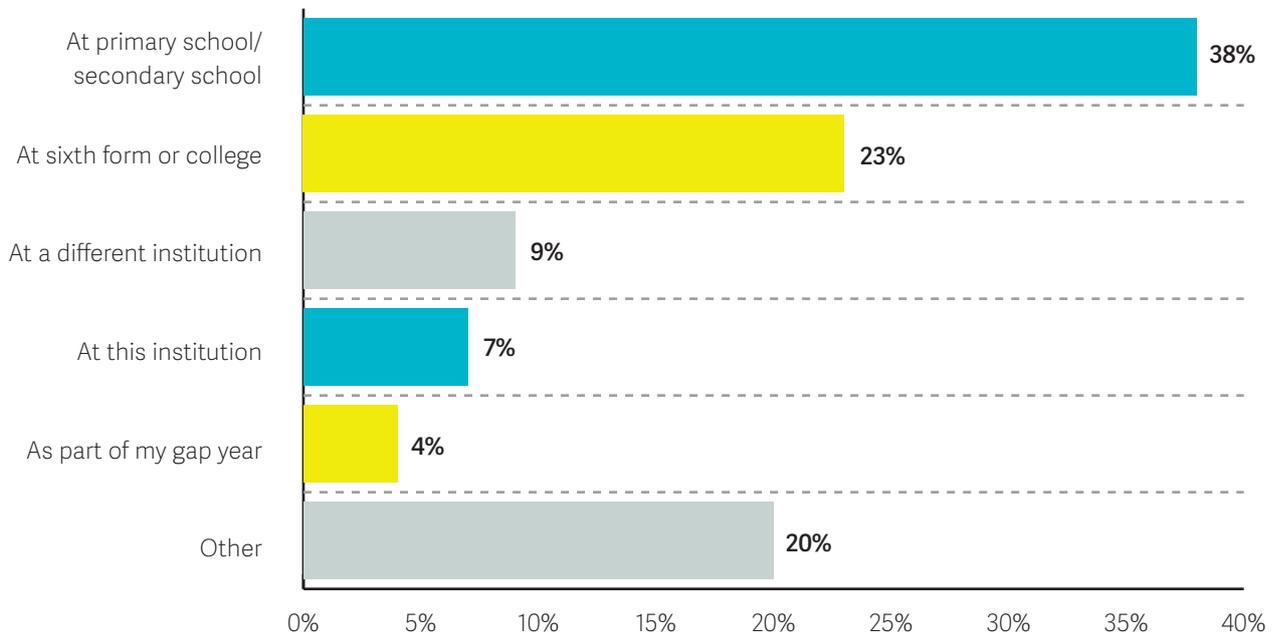
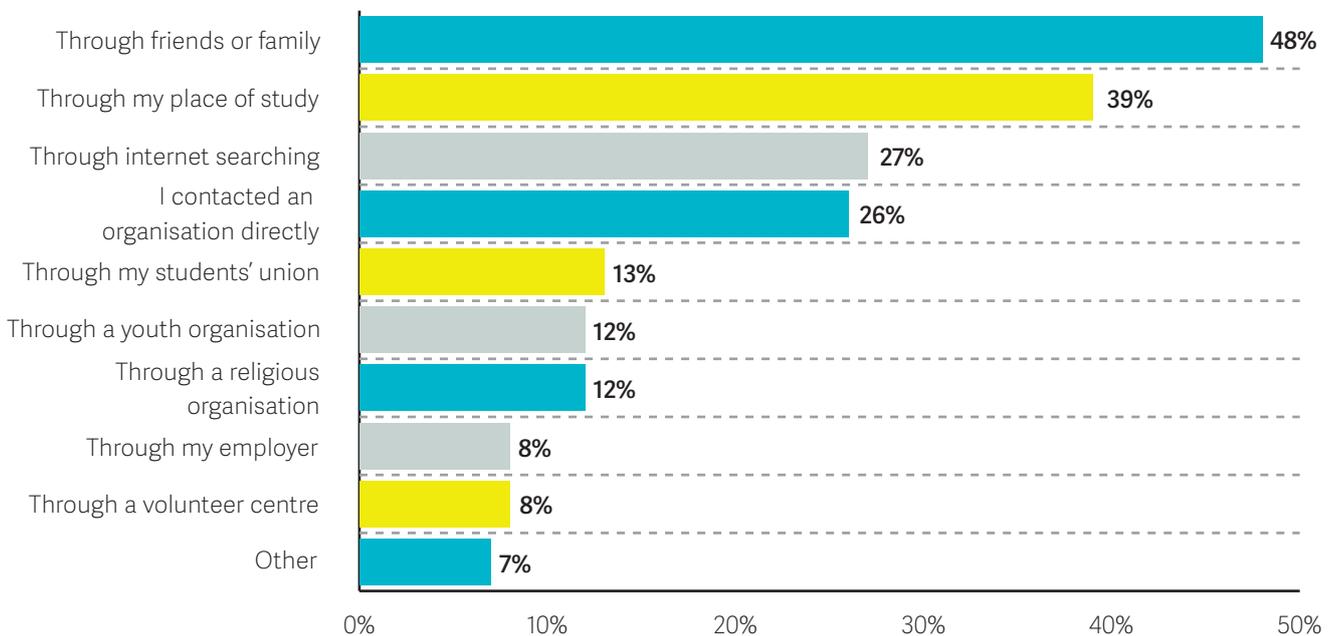


Figure 2: How students find out about volunteering



Activity

Students get involved in a wide range of volunteering opportunities, reflecting the diversity and varying interests of students in the UK. Our research shows that student volunteers are most likely to have taken part in organising activities/events, raising money, sponsored events or teaching (see figure 3).

Creating volunteering opportunities that appeal to students is imperative to attract student volunteers, especially given that our research has already shown how time-poor students are.

When asked what volunteering activities appealed to them, the top three preferences listed by all student respondents were:

- teaching, tutoring or helping with reading or other skills (in 37 per cent of students' top three choices)
- organising or helping to run an activity or event (33 per cent)
- raising money or taking part in sponsored events, including RAG (29 per cent)
- visiting people, or providing care or support (28 per cent)
- giving advice, information or counselling (25 per cent)
- befriending or mentoring people (25 per cent)
- providing other practical help (25 per cent)

The organisation that students volunteer for also seems to influence the appeal of voluntary activity. Students highlighted the following organisations as those they would prefer to volunteer for:

- school or education organisation (in 56 per cent of students' top three choices)
- local charity (56 per cent)
- local branch of a national charity (40 per cent)
- national charity (39 per cent)
- students' union (33 per cent)

The research shows us that students are dedicated to their volunteering, with students who volunteer indicating that they do so on average once a week or more. Some 65 per cent of students state that on average they volunteer at least once a week and over 90 per cent volunteer at least once a month (see figure 4).

The research shows us that students volunteer on average for 44 hours a year whilst at university, based on a normal 32 week term. If this volunteering activity was paid, using the current minimum wage of £5.03 an hour, student volunteering contributes the equivalent of £175million per year to the UK economy.

Figure 3: Types of volunteering that students take part in

Nb. Students were asked "Which of the below volunteering activities have you ever participated in?"

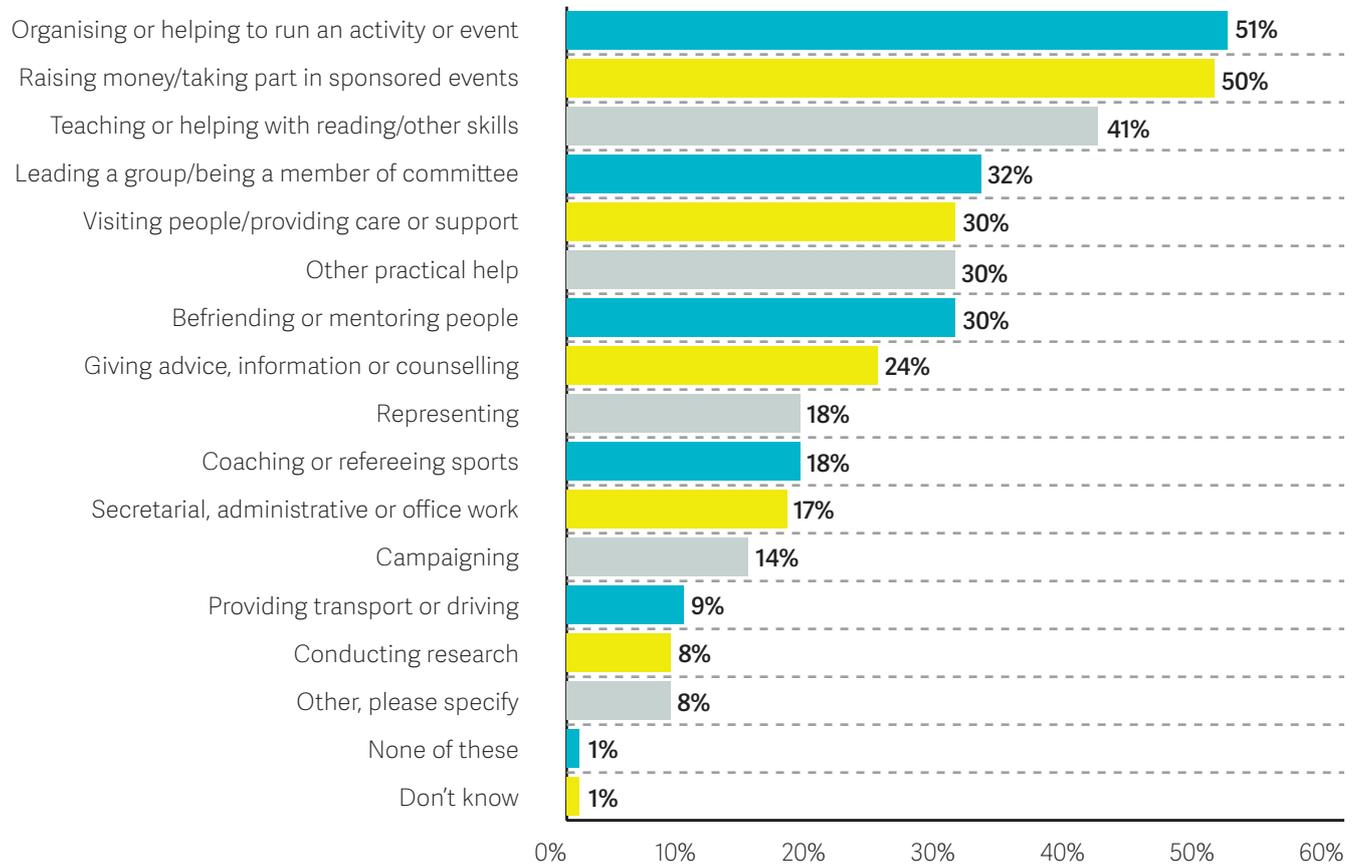
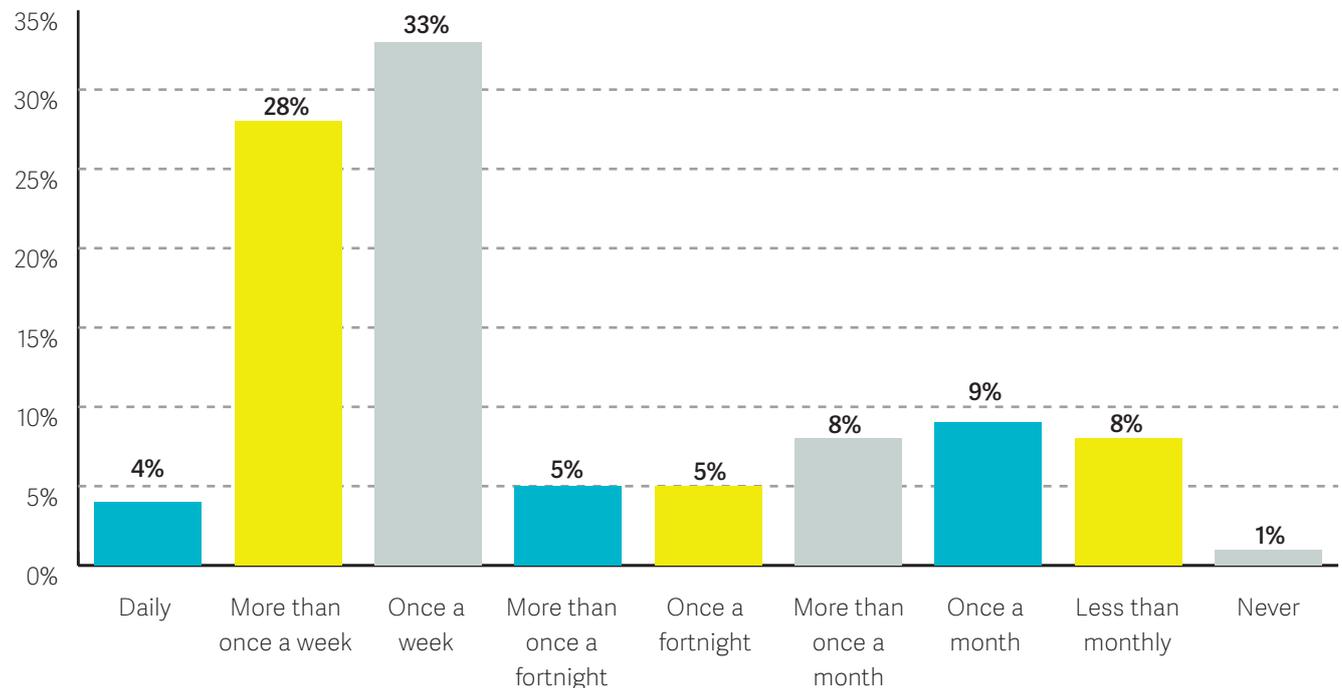


Figure 4: How often students volunteer



Motivations and Barriers

Understanding the main motivations and barriers to volunteering for students will help a range of stakeholders to maintain current levels of student volunteering and attract new students to volunteering.

When asked to describe what volunteering means to them, students overwhelmingly picked up a theme of helping others or the community (see figure 5).

When asked to choose words to describe volunteers, students indicated that volunteers are reliable, open, driven and easy-going. They did not consider volunteers to be reserved, daring or perfectionist.

The top five motivations to volunteer for current student volunteers are:

- improving things/helping people
- gaining work experience/developing their CV
- personal values
- developing skills/meeting new people/making friends

There are some interesting differences between the motivations of students who currently volunteer and those who do not. Students who volunteer are much more likely to do so as a result of their personal values compared to students who do not currently volunteer. However, students who do not currently volunteer are more likely to be attracted to volunteering to gain work experience and/or develop their CV (see figure 6).

The top five barriers to volunteering identified by students who currently volunteer are:

- pressures of study
- paid work commitments
- family commitments
- other club, sport, society commitments etc
- I do not think I can afford to volunteer

These barriers are very similar to those identified by students who do not currently volunteer (see figure 7).

Having free time to volunteer is a considerable issue for students. Among those who currently volunteer, 37 per cent said they would like to get involved in more volunteering if they had time. Of those who do not currently volunteer, almost a quarter (24 per cent) said they would consider volunteering if they had more time. In addition, students who do not currently volunteer said they would volunteer more if:

- it was for something they believed in (19 per cent)
- they knew they would see results/receive recognition (15 per cent)
- it was part of their course (14 per cent)

When asked "is there anything your place of study or students' union could do that might encourage you to volunteer?", students, whether they currently volunteer or not, made a number of suggestions (see figure 8).

Figure 5: Word cloud showing what volunteering means to students



Figure 6: Main motivation of volunteering for students

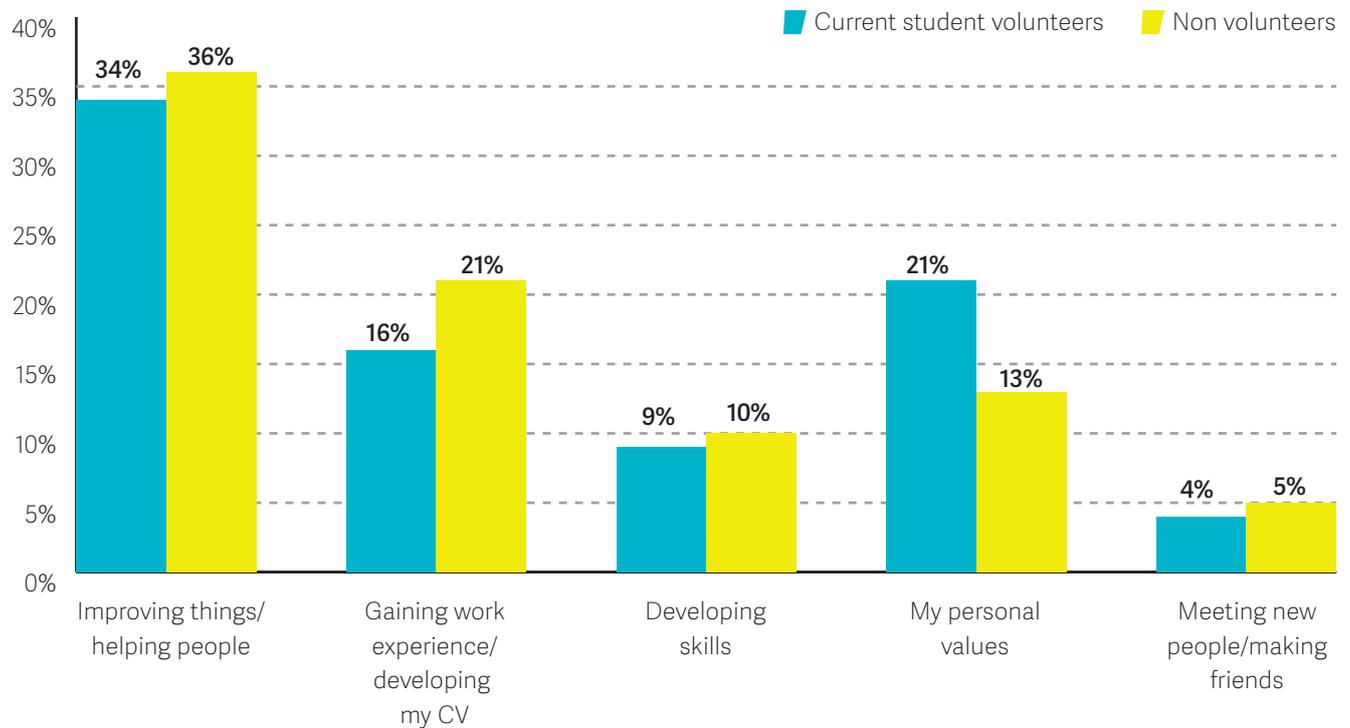


Figure 7: Students' perceived barriers to volunteering

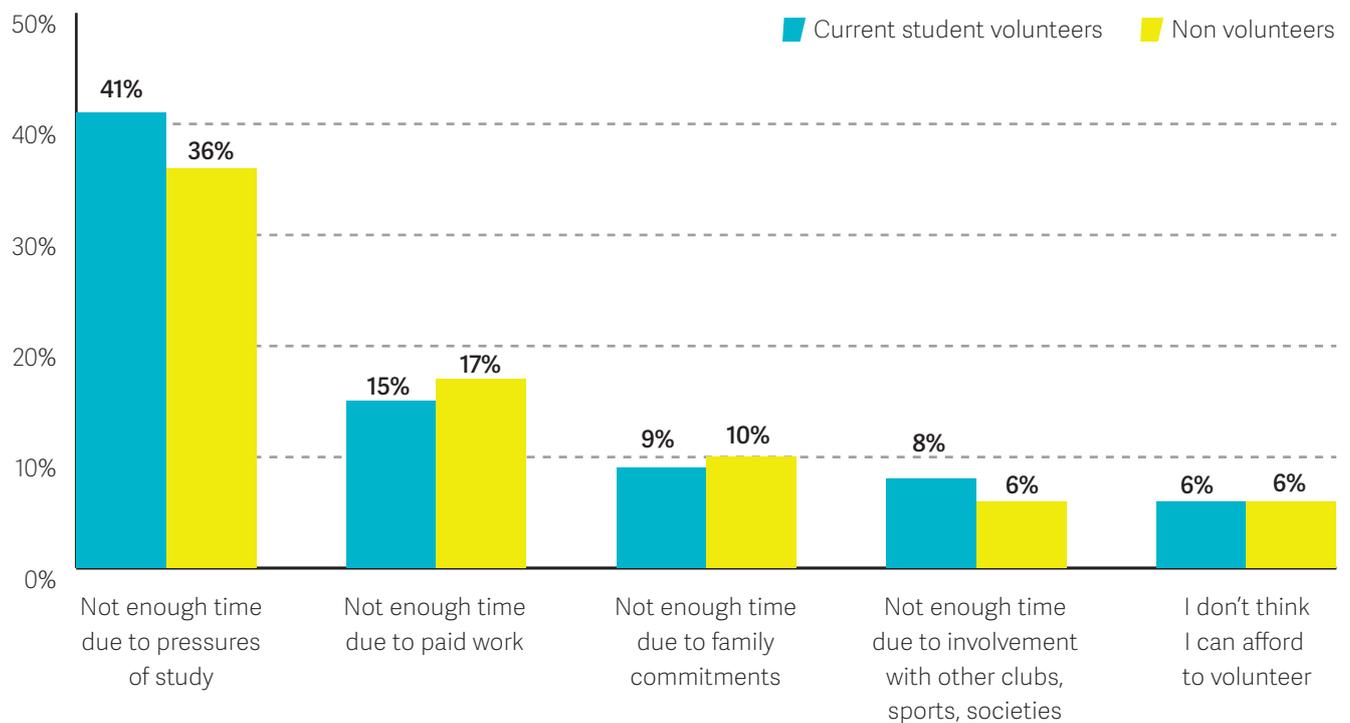
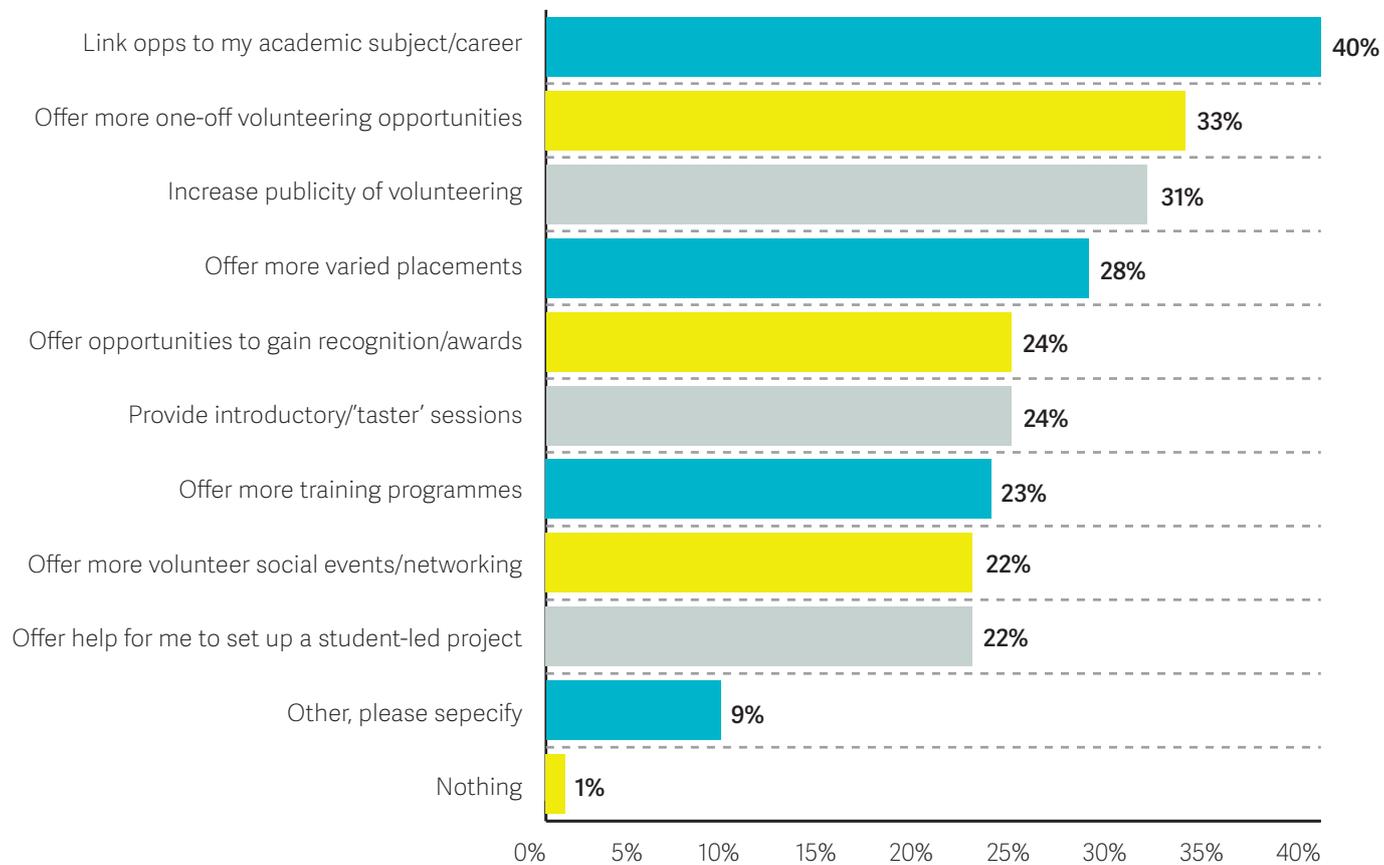


Figure 8: How students' unions and higher education institutions could encourage volunteering



Segmenting student volunteering

The research allows us to develop six key characteristics of students and their attitudes towards volunteering. The following segmentation categorises students by their behaviour and attitude towards volunteering.

Negative non-volunteers (3 per cent)	Never volunteered before or might have volunteered in the past but are unlikely to volunteer in the future, even if barriers were removed
Ambivalent non-volunteers (19 per cent)	Volunteered in the past but do not currently; or have never volunteered and would be unlikely to, or are unsure if they would, volunteer more if barriers were removed
Inexperienced potential volunteers (8 per cent)	Have never volunteered but would volunteer if barriers were removed
Experienced potential volunteers (39 per cent)	Have volunteered in the past and would volunteer again if barriers were removed
Static volunteers (7 per cent)	Volunteer now but would not volunteer more/are unsure whether they would volunteer more if barriers were removed
Eager volunteers (24 per cent)	Volunteer now and would volunteer more if barriers were removed

Eager volunteers

Members of this segment volunteer now and would volunteer more if barriers were removed. They are less likely to be first-year students than other segments, and describe themselves as reliable, easy-going, driven and open. They describe volunteering as helping others and helping the community. They are likely to have been involved in volunteering for some time, with 34 per cent of eager volunteers stating that they first volunteered in primary or secondary school. Friends and family are a big influence on this group of students, with 46 per cent of them identifying friends and family as the main way that they found out about volunteering. Eager volunteers would like to volunteer more but 65 per cent of them identified pressure due to study as a factor that puts them off volunteering even more.

Static volunteers

These are students who volunteer now but would not volunteer more, or are unsure if they would volunteer more, if barriers were removed. There are considerably more male students in this category – 59 per cent – compared to an average of 48 per cent of current student volunteers who identify as male. As with eager volunteers, static volunteers describe volunteering as helping others, helping the community and as unpaid. Some 43 per cent of static volunteers find out about volunteering activities through their educational institution. They also cite pressures of study as a key barrier to volunteering more, however more static volunteers than members of other segments highlighted involvement in other clubs and societies as a barrier. A large minority (39 per cent) of static volunteers stated that their place of study or students' union could do nothing to encourage them to volunteer – considerably higher than in other segments.

Experienced potential volunteers

These are student volunteers who have volunteered in the past and would volunteer again if barriers were removed. Experienced potential volunteers have a broad spread of demographic characteristics. They are more likely to describe themselves as being fun loving than other segments, as well as seeing themselves as reliable and easy-going. Over 40 per cent of this segment has been involved in volunteering since primary or secondary school. They are much more likely to participate in other activities (sports clubs, course-related societies and fun-based societies) rather than volunteering, with just 5 per cent of students in this segment stating that volunteering is the activity they take part in most often. Experienced potential volunteers would be more likely to volunteer if they were offered more one-off volunteering opportunities and if opportunities were linked to their course or qualification.

Inexperienced potential volunteers

Students in this segment have never volunteered but would volunteer if barriers were removed. These are likely to be students who are 18 or under, and who see volunteering as significantly less fun than other students. They are much more likely to participate in other activities (sports clubs, course-related societies and fun-based societies) than volunteering, with just 2 per cent of students stating that volunteering is the activity they take part in most often. This group of students is much more likely to be motivated to volunteer by gaining work experience and developing their CV – 72 per cent compared to a base of 60 per cent across all student respondents. In terms of barriers, only 22 per cent of inexperienced potential volunteers say that pressures due to

study is their primary barrier to volunteering. However, 20 per cent of this segment stated that pressures due paid work is their main barrier to volunteering – more than any other group of students.

Ambivalent non-volunteers

Students in this segment have either volunteered in the past but do not do so currently, or have never volunteered and would be unlikely to volunteer more, or are unsure if they would, if barriers were removed. They are more likely to be male and less likely to describe themselves as reliable and driven compared to the broader student population. When asked to describe what volunteering is, ambivalent non-volunteers are more likely to describe volunteering as unpaid activity than other groups. The primary motivation for this group of students to volunteer would be gaining skills and developing their CV, with almost 60 per cent of this group identifying this as one of their potential motivations. Compared with students as a whole, members of this segment are more likely to get involved in volunteering that involves fundraising or taking part in sponsored events.

Negative non-volunteers

This group of students have either never volunteered, or might have volunteered in the past but are unlikely to volunteer in the future even if barriers were removed. These students are much more likely to be male, and less likely to be international students. Over 30 per cent of the students in this segment said they are involved in activities other than those typically offered by the students' union. If they were to be involved in volunteering they would be motivated by gaining work experience and developing their CV, or if it was part of their course and they believed they would gain skills from the activity. However, 51 per cent of these students state that they are not interested in volunteering any more, and would therefore be unlikely to volunteer even if barriers were removed.

The staff perspective

In addition to understanding the perspective of student volunteers, we wanted to build a picture of student volunteering from the perspective of staff who support student volunteering in universities and students' unions.

To do this, we conducted 20 semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews with key student volunteer staff/contacts, identified from respondents to a short survey on levels of student volunteering. Interviewees represented a range of student volunteering teams, from both students' unions and higher education institutions. Interviews took place throughout August 2013 and lasted 20–30 minutes.

The research materials were designed by NUS Services and approved by DJS. Topics covered included:

- challenges and opportunities for volunteering within the higher education sector
- key successes student volunteering teams have had with student volunteering activity
- the perceptions of students who volunteer
- how student volunteering teams believe their perceptions of students who volunteer at their institution compares to the national average
- the bodies interviewees work with and their strengths and weaknesses in terms of student volunteering
- the perceived value of student volunteering to their higher education institution or students' union

What does volunteering look like?

Staff see student volunteering as:

- Growing – 14 out of 20 interviewees said that volunteering is more popular than in previous years.
- Very much driven by improving students' employability and building transferable skills for their CV and eventual job hunt.
- Changing slightly – they are seeing more student-led projects and/or leadership roles for students.
- Varied – opportunities are available in the local community, as work placements, in their organisation, etc.

"There are more students than ever before wanting to volunteer...They want a wider range of opportunities..."

When asked what had prompted this growth in student volunteering, staff identified three key factors: an increased interest from external parties such as the university and the Government; more activity from staff in developing volunteering opportunities; and a decrease in charity funding resulting in the need for more voluntary roles.

Staff viewed three key areas as their biggest successes:

- One-off events – *"[A] one off opportunity is most successful as there is always a set time..."*
- Opportunities within the public sector – *"Probably prison, youth offending and forensic science opportunities."*
- Increasing the recruitment of student volunteers – *"Getting more students involved in volunteering with individual projects has been very successful."*

However, when asked about the biggest challenges they face in terms of student volunteering, staff identified the following overarching themes:

- Resources (staff, software and finance) – *"The main challenge for student volunteering is our own staffing resources."*
- Students' lack of time – *"A lot of students have other responsibilities and commitments..."*
- Lack of student enthusiasm – *"To keep the students enthused and excited about volunteering."*

Looking to the future

What student volunteering teams see as their current successes and challenges also reflects their thoughts about the future of student volunteering.

We asked about the main opportunities for student volunteering teams in the next academic year. Answers included:

- Better links to courses – *"We are trying to create a programme for each faculty in our university."*
- Better relationships with the community – *"Trying to integrate the community and look at community needs."*
- One-off events – *"Increasing the number of one-off projects as they appeal more to our students."*

We also asked student volunteering teams to predict their main challenges for the next academic year. Answers included:

- Funding or resources – *"Funding is always an ongoing problem..."*
- Keeping up with demand – *"There are not enough hours in the week to deal with all the opportunities we have."*
- Getting the opportunities right – *"To continue to respond to the needs of the students, to find enough opportunities for the students and to stop turning people away, and to keep finding quality volunteering opportunities."*

Value of student volunteering

Understanding why students' unions and higher education institutions invest in student volunteering provides insights into why they value student volunteering, both for student development and for their organisation.

The main themes highlighted in responses about the organisational benefits of student volunteering were:

- Improvements in the university's relationship with the community – *"It was really good to have links, rather than the university working on its own."*
- Potential for student volunteering to attract grants to the students' union – *"They bring in funds...getting grants from the university."*
- Enhancing the university's reputation and positive media attention – *"It allows us to shout about student volunteering, local media like to give [students] stick..."*

While student volunteering teams may anecdotally know the value of their student volunteering provision, 50 per cent of respondents did not know the financial value of their volunteering programme. Supporting student volunteering teams to do this is essential to support the sector's ability to articulate its value to funders.

As well as organisational value, we asked staff how they thought volunteering benefits students. Their responses can be grouped into three themes:

- Employability – *"...Their own well-being and enhancing their CV and experiences." "We contribute to student experience and employability."*
- Confidence – *"The student (volunteers) themselves seemed to grow confidence..."*
- Life skills – *"Students get to go out and gain emotional skills." "It improves their communication with the community and provides life skills."*

Conclusions

Student volunteering continues to play a considerable role in the lives of students at higher education institutions in the UK. Enabling as many students as possible to undertake volunteering opportunities should be a key ambition for students' unions, universities, the Government and funders.

With less than a third (31 per cent) of students currently volunteering, there is obviously room for improvement. However, many student volunteering teams have highlighted their capacity to cope with the growing demands of student volunteers as a key challenge for the future. Ensuring the ongoing sustainability of student volunteering through the creation of a well-resourced infrastructure supporting students to volunteer will help to increase student engagement in volunteering.

The commitment that student volunteers show in donating a considerable number of hours to volunteering activities is a real testament to their role in shaping the communities of the future. Ensuring that this is recognised through the local, regional and national media to turn the tide of negative press attention about students is likely to have a positive impact in increasing the number of student volunteers in the future.

Student volunteering teams and organisations that benefit from student volunteers should address some of the key challenges that identified by student participants in this research. This includes offering volunteering opportunities with different time commitments and outside the normal working day for those who highlighted course-related time pressures as a barrier to volunteering.

Linking volunteering to students' courses or academic qualifications has been a growing trend over recent years. Whether this becomes an opportunity for students to test their skills development or to use academic staff as volunteering ambassadors, there are ways of doing this while still retaining the voluntary element of volunteering, rather than mandating it as part of course credits.

There is no doubt that student volunteering plays a considerable role in many areas. From creating opportunities for students to develop skills; enabling community activity to happen through the provision of volunteers, and improving the reputation of Universities. Ensuring that students have access to high quality volunteering opportunities and support will create the conditions for student volunteering to grow in the future.

Acknowledgements

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