

Student engagement in volunteering: building links between the institution, its students and the wider community

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Abstract

This article is based on my presentation at the 2019 Change Agent Network Conference at the Open University. Drawing on successful projects at the University of Winchester, my initiatives as Volunteering and Community Officer at Winchester Student Union and external research, I explore factors which can help increase student engagement in volunteering within higher education institutions (HEIs). My aim is to reinforce the notion that participating in these activities constitutes an important part of the overall student experience, alongside academic learning and teaching.

Introduction

Student volunteering can be found in many places and forms. Within teaching and learning, it can sometimes be seen within the inclusion of service learning and/or volunteering modules where students gain accreditation within their degree for the work they do in a voluntary role. However, in many other cases, student volunteering extends beyond the classroom. Since the Oxford Dictionary defines a 'volunteer' as a person who takes on a role 'of his own free will', many different extra-curricular roles within the grasp of a student fit into this category. Being elected as a society chair, for example, is often commended for its emphasis on leadership, but, since society chairs are not financially reimbursed for their service, it technically counts as a volunteering role. Even where the volunteering takes place outside formal learning, it can encompass a variety of skills, either passed on by the volunteer or developed by the volunteer in the process of her/his service.

Since universities are often judged by the contributions they make to society as a whole, there can be little doubt of the potential benefits of student engagement in volunteering – benefits to the institution, its surrounding community and its staff and students; indeed, to the whole gamut of stakeholders. In Winchester, the volunteering undertaken through the annual 'Big Tidy Up' event (organised by the Student Union) is a good example, for students were encouraged to pick up litter in the local area as part of a wider environmental campaign. This activity simultaneously raised student awareness of key issues and improved the physical community space for those who use it. The Big Tidy Up also enhanced the image of the institution and its students in the eyes of those in the wider local community, especially since members of the general public were also invited to take part.

The data provided to project leaders by students also gives us an insight into why students believe that volunteering is worth their time. In September 2019, I was responsible for reviewing applications for student members of the 2020 Volunteering and Community Champions Awards committee (all the students applying were volunteers themselves). When asked why they wanted to take on the role, they offered various explanations: one highlighted a personal desire to be part of something that recognised the work of others, indicating that altruism might well be influential in the decision to volunteer for this role; another discussed how the role would develop personal event management skills, illustrating

a perceived correlation between extra-curricular opportunities through student volunteering and the opportunities it can provide to reinforce and extend skills acquired through formal teaching and learning. Since motivations for signing up are clearly diverse, one might deduce that volunteering students will be advantaged in a variety of ways.

The project

On account, therefore, of my heightened awareness of the potential merits of student volunteering, I decided to trace the development of academic research into student engagement with it, to see how higher education institutions (HEIs) had directly encouraged and promoted such activities. The amount of published work in this area is unfortunately limited, indicating that the popularity of volunteering within higher education (HE) may have been variable over the years.

The earliest research I found suggests that 'student community action' became a buzzphrase for the first time after the late 1960s and early 1970s (Goodlad, 1975). Interest in the pedagogy of community action revived again in the 2000s as globalisation and the rise of interconnectivity began to take hold, leading to a recognition that students needed to develop skills beyond intellectual knowledge from their disciplines (Hustinx *et al.*, 2005). However, this may not have been translated into extra investment in student volunteering, which Holdsworth (2010) believes is still not considered as 'fully integral' to the mission of HE. If she is correct, this is despite a growing presence of organisations external to universities, but often working directly with students on their campuses to encourage them to take part in volunteering. The fact that these organisations exist and continue to grow is evidence that, despite Holdsworth's findings, student engagement in volunteering is still seen as an important area of development, albeit one whose profile could be raised.

One such organisation is Student Hubs¹. This is a charity, founded in 2007 by a group of students in Oxford who wanted to come together and tackle social problems. In the eleven years since, the charity has expanded; it now operates in seven different university campuses: Oxford, Oxford Brookes, Cambridge, Bristol, Kingston, Southampton and Winchester. Each branch runs a variety of student volunteering programmes that encourage engagement beyond the campus and are based upon experiential learning and building links with the wider community. The 'LinkAges' programme, for example, tackles elderly isolation, as student volunteers befriend elderly people in care homes and other locations within the city of Winchester. Similar 'LinkAges' programmes are also running in other branches of the Student Hubs network.

The NUS runs a campaign every year called 'Student Switch Off'², which relies entirely on volunteers in order to succeed. This initiative has been running since 2006 and involves student volunteers in encouraging competitions within university halls of residence to promote a reduction in the use of energy on campus. As part of the role, a 'campus blackout' is organised, when the volunteers switch off as many lights on campus as possible during a set period of time, usually during the evening. This ensures that the volunteers within the campaign have a visible impact whilst also gaining knowledge, with benefit to both the volunteers and their peers.

¹ www.studenthubs.org

² www.nus.org.uk/en/take-action/environmental/student-switch-off/

Additionally, the Student Volunteering Network³ acts as a peer-support group for anyone employed by a higher or further educational institution to support student volunteering activity. In addition to hosting regional groups across the country to support professionals in this area of student engagement, the organisation also runs the national 'Student Volunteering Week' campaign in February each year.

Considering the above, it can be argued that volunteering is something students consider to be relevant and want to engage in. However, there is also plenty of scope for more students to get involved, especially with more direct investment by universities and student unions alongside the actions of external organisations. On the basis of some of the student volunteering initiatives that took place in Winchester during the 2018-2019 academic year, I'd like to propose three areas which can benefit from increased student engagement in volunteering opportunities.

Learning and skill development

External research points to an increasing number of universities which have embedded 'service-learning' initiatives within curricula, where students can apply certain concepts learnt on their course whilst exploring the links between course material and the experience of community service (Stoecker, Beckman and Min, 2010). The University of Winchester is one of those institutions and gives students in certain courses the opportunity to take a volunteering module. This allows students to replace one of their modules with a placement in the local community. However, students are still monitored from within the University and assessed through a formal reflective piece, encouraging the student volunteers to think about how they contributed to the external organisation and what transferable skills they gained which will boost their curricula vitae. By incorporating this volunteering opportunity within the space of a module, the University of Winchester is enabling students to gain real-world experience within their degree in such a way that their learning within the lecture room will be more relevant to their experience of the outside world.

In 2010, a survey by the National Centre for Public Engagement found that 38.7% of those who had not volunteered at university thought that linking volunteering to academic subjects was a good way to encourage more students to volunteer (Brewis, Russell and Holdsworth, 2010). Such a finding suggests that tying initiatives to relevant areas of academic courses may sometimes have a bigger reach than organising social action projects as standalone initiatives. During my term as Volunteering and Community Officer at Winchester Student Union, I trialled an initiative based broadly upon this principle, called the 'Faculty Community Ambassadors' scheme. In September 2018, I recruited a cohort of around thirty student volunteers, who were divided into four sub-teams based on the faculties within which their courses sat. The aim of each team was to plan an event which would raise money for a charity of their choice. The teams met regularly throughout the academic year to plan their events, which were put on during the second semester. This initiative allowed the ambassadors an opportunity to support causes close to their hearts (and in some cases close to their academic subjects), while gaining transferable skills in event management, organisation and logistical planning. Some of the results from this initiative were impressive and rewarding, both for those students who volunteered as ambassadors and for members of the community who attended the events. The Business Law and Sport team, for example,

³ www.studentvolunteeringnetwork.com

organised a quiz and a hamper for Cancer Research, raising over £150. Meanwhile, the Humanities team raised over £400 for Anthony Nolan by organising a theme night. Unfortunately, the biggest drawback of the scheme was that I coordinated it entirely at grassroots level, as my role at the Student Union was voluntary in itself and did not come with a budget. This meant that funding for each team event had to be sought individually and was not always guaranteed. Had the University been able to organise the scheme centrally, I believe the positive impact of the team events could have been greater and the emphasis – on some of the issues that are tackled within the degrees undertaken by the volunteers – stronger.

Student-staff partnership

Just as student-staff partnership has been used to develop other areas of student engagement, there is no reason why this cannot also apply to student engagement with volunteering. Bringle and Hatcher (2010) argue that the civic engagement of students is shaped to a large degree by the academic mission of the institution. This implies that, while the provision of student volunteering can be provided by a variety of organisations outside the institution, the institution should play a continuing and direct role by embodying, within its overall aims, values related to community action.

The University of Winchester prides itself on being a values-driven institution dedicated to the promotion of compassion, sustainability and social justice. Accordingly, it seeks to support students and staff – by empowering them to make a difference – as well as to embrace equality, diversity and inclusivity. The pilot Volunteering and Community Champions Awards in February 2019 reinforced these values while also raising awareness of the incredible contributions of students and staff who volunteer in the wider community. The pilot event was steered by means of collaboration between the University's staff volunteering team, the Student Union Volunteering and Community Advisory Group, Winchester Hub and the further support of staff in the University Community Impact Team and the University Centre for Student Engagement. Together, this cross-departmental team of students and staff received £2,000 funding from the University Student Academic Council. The event was a huge success – over sixty-eight individuals or groups were nominated for their volunteering efforts across the year, with nominations being received from students, staff and members of the wider Winchester community. The University's willingness to support the event shows that student engagement in volunteering is something it values and wants to invest in. A second event⁴ was subsequently organised in the 2019-2020 academic year, with an increased number of nominations from the general public.

Students' sense of belonging

Student engagement in volunteering can also increase students' sense of belonging, not just to the institution in which they study, but also to the wider environment that surrounds the institution. This is particularly evident within volunteering opportunities that are either inter-generational or that bring different sections of the local community together.

Every year, in February, students at the University of Winchester take part in the national 'Student Volunteering Week' campaign. One of the regular highlights is 'Community Action Day', when students go to an area off campus and work with local residents and the city

⁴ winchchampions.wixsite.com/awards

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council to improve that area. The event is organised jointly by the University, Winchester Hub, Winchester Student Union and Winchester City Council (which provides safety equipment). In February 2018, the volunteers planted a row of hedges in an area of a park that had been previously occupied by drug users. In February 2019, a litter pick was organised by some volunteers, while others helped to maintain a footpath in the surrounding area outside a local community centre. All of these activities enabled students to make an immediately visible and noticeable difference to the wider community, with coverage in the local newspaper. This helped to bolster the image of students in the community as well as allowing them to take pride in the area where they lived – all as a result of this volunteering opportunity.

Conclusion: student engagement in volunteering matters

On the basis of the extent of participation and interest I have witnessed first-hand, I believe that activities involving student engagement in volunteering are just as important to the overall student experience as engagement in academic learning and teaching, especially as graduates in HE are now expected to show how university has developed them as people, not just as researchers. It is therefore vital that universities and other HEIs make a direct contribution to the removal of barriers that might prevent student engagement in these areas. I believe that this is most effective if more student volunteering opportunities are integrated into course curricula; if they are, the additional student workload is easier to manage alongside the modular demands of a degree and such other commitments outside it as employment or family matters. From speaking to the many students I had the privilege of meeting in my Student Union role during the 2018-19 academic year, I believe that students' satisfaction is heightened by the overall experience of their life in the community surrounding the institution – not just what happens in a lecture room or in a hall of residence. As well as making students more employable, student volunteering activities fit within principle 10 of the RAISE (2019) network's ten principles⁵ for engaging students – they enable students to 'become active citizens and develop their social and cultural capital'.

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⁵ <http://www.raise-network.com/about/principles/>

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