Breaking down the barriers to Student Opportunities and Youth Social Action

A report by Universities UK and NUS
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Foreword
Foreword

One of the core aims of UK higher education is to meet the needs of the wider community.

Universities and their students make a positive contribution to society and to their communities in many ways. Universities contribute £73 billion to the UK economy annually; for every 100 jobs at universities an additional 117 are created in the wider economy. But beyond economic contributions, a study by National Union of Students (NUS) into the state of student volunteering in 2013 revealed that over 725,000 students, that is 31% of the higher education student population, volunteer in their local community and put something back to the area where they live and study.¹

Over the last 12 months Universities UK (UUK) and its members have been proactively engaged in a purposeful debate on the value of universities; nowhere is this more important than promoting the work of students and universities which benefit local communities, society and the wider public. Yet this is nothing new. The origins of higher education go back nearly a millennium; many universities were created by citizens, communities and their societies with a view to contributing to social and economic transformation and this civic role remains just as relevant today. As an example, in setting out his vision for Newcastle University for 2021, Professor Chris Brink, Vice-Chancellor of the University and Chair of the UUK’s Student Policy Network says:

We emphasise that the primary feature of a civic university is its sense of purpose – an understanding of not just what it is good at, but what it is good for. We see ourselves as delivering benefits not just to individuals or individual organisations, but to society as a whole, using our academic knowledge, creativity and expertise to come forward with innovations and solutions that will make a difference.

Part of this civic role is achieved by universities helping to create opportunities to support students engaging with their local communities.

This report by NUS and UUK explores how levels of social action and volunteering can be increased. The report addresses how barriers such as time constraints, money, pressures of study, aspiration, family commitments and paid work commitments can be effectively addressed. Given the diversity of our sector it is clear that there is no single or dominant model in addressing these barriers.

To facilitate this work, UUK along with NUS, have pledged support to the #iwill campaign established by Step up to Serve founded by Dame Julia Cleverdon and Amanda Jordan OBE. The Campaign has developed a set of 6 principles which define great social action. The report sets out what these are and how these can be adapted to the higher education context to form a higher education social action framework. We hope that this will support

¹ Ellison F and Kerr H, The Student Volunteering Landscape (2014)
universities and students’ unions in generating enhanced outcomes and impact in relation to the provision of student opportunities and social action.

There is no doubt that student volunteering plays a considerable role in many areas; from creating opportunities for students to develop life skills, enhancing their student experience and employability to engaging with communities to tackle societal concerns and inequalities. I hope that you will find this report useful and join the NUS, UUK, and a number of universities, in taking part in the #iwill Campaign.

Nicola Dandridge
Chief Executive, UUK
I’m so excited to present this joint work between NUS and UUK - Breaking down the barriers to Student Opportunities and Youth Social Action.

Students’ unions and universities all have a shared civic responsibility – to work in the interests of society and to create a better world. We ensure transformative education, we think critically about the world around us and we empower students to be leading citizens. I believe that students’ unions and universities can, by working in partnership, break down barriers to participation and opportunity within our institutions and in local communities.

Since the 19th Century students’ unions have created opportunities for students to engage in social activity. This continues today, only with wider impact and more innovative approaches. But even with this ongoing fantastic work of students’ unions, it remains the case that student activities are often restricted as a result of barriers to participation. These barriers range from a lack of resource, to time pressures and to access to expert support.

NUS represents nearly 600 students’ unions in the UK, all with differing approaches to breaking down their own set of barriers. These vary significantly across the country so we couldn’t hope to design a one-size-fits-all approach, but we can agree on a set of principles and standards. In this way we can enable institutions and students’ unions to improve partnership working, and develop plans to increase participation.

As part of this work, NUS and UUK have developed a tool that will enable universities and students’ unions to identify the issues that are specific to their environment, enable conversation about how to improve current practices and improve how we plan for the future. This will help us to empower the future leaders of our society.

It is also important to establish what makes this work different to previous literature - the barriers to student participation and social action are well-documented.

Evidence suggests that the barriers to participation are not going away and will remain as issues for students perennially, despite much work in this area already. Here we have worked instead to establish a consensus about what the barriers are, how we can take responsibility and what collective action we need to take to break them down. This report will not solve the issues, but a commitment and dedication from universities and students’ unions to address the issues will.

In addition, NUS and UUK have linked this work into Step up to Serve’s #iwill campaign. We recognise the need to develop social action and opportunities that stretch far beyond the walls of our institutions and students’ unions. By working with young people today we can create a better tomorrow. Hopefully NUS can lead the way with students’ unions to increase the number of students involved with youth social action by 2020.

NUS is fully committed to working with students’ unions and universities to improve and implement the action plans which are developed. To demonstrate this commitment, NUS have also commissioned the Whitehall & Industry Group (WIG) to investigate how we can support our members further with the implementation of the toolkit, and identify what further support NUS can be providing at a national level.

Raechel Mattey
Vice President Union Development, NUS
Introduction
Introduction

The history and continued importance of student opportunities and social action is already long established in students’ unions and universities across the UK, with hundreds of thousands of students and institutional staff giving up their time to improve their communities, society and the world around them.

Social action takes a variety of forms, from students helping out in soup kitchens, to sports teams coaching in communities, to supporting residents to campaign against the closure of vital services such as women’s shelters and youth centres to name but a few examples. Beyond these activities, students’ unions also provide various opportunities for students from leading a club or society, becoming a course representative or standing in a students’ union election.

‘No matter what you’re doing in a higher education setting, if you are taking practical action in the service of others, from mentoring in a sports club, campaigning online, fundraising for a cause or taking part in a community project – it is all social action.’ - Charlotte Hill, CEO, Step Up To Serve & the #iwill campaign

Each year we see the value that students bring to local communities and institutions, we also know that more would volunteer if we could expand these opportunities and better understand how students want to get involved, and the type of activities and issues that they care about.²

An investigation into the previous research, and finding ways to overcome barriers to student involvement in social action is important and timely. At the last three NUS National Conferences students passed policy which highlighted the continued existence of barriers and the urgency for practical action to address these.³

The availability of social action opportunities is also important from an institutional perspective. Although the notion of higher education as an investment for the future often frames students’ rationale for entering higher education, universities are increasingly aware that students want more than just a degree. There is now a wealth of evidence showing that students recognise the need to get as much out of the experience as they can, and maximise whatever opportunities higher education institutions provide. In other words, the importance of the quality of teaching is only part of the story; students’ satisfaction - or otherwise - depends on the quality of the whole student experience.

As research by the Higher Education Academy shows, employability has a high profile in students’ views of the benefits of higher education and structured opportunities to enhance employability are clearly welcomed.⁴

Increasing numbers of employers are backing the #iwill campaign highlighting how social action can facilitate the development of skills,

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² 39% of students said they would volunteer again if the barriers were removed, according to NUS, 2014, The Student Volunteering Landscape
³ NUS’ current policies can be found here http://beta.nusconnect.org.uk/shape-our-work/how-we-work/our-policies
⁴ ‘Exploring the impact of policy changes on students’ attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education’, Michael Tomlinson of the University of Southampton on behalf of the Higher Education Academy.
attributes and character that they would wish to see in their employees.\(^5\)

However, student expectation often goes beyond this. They value the wider student experience which includes opportunities to develop personal and social skills; not only do these contribute towards employability, but also serve as a vehicle for personal and social change. Within this context, enabling as many students as possible to undertake social action or volunteering opportunities is a key ingredient to delivering a world class student experience.

Universities play a central role in supporting economic growth, creating jobs, promoting innovation and improving individuals’ life opportunities - important though these are - universities do much more than this through their positive contribution to society as demonstrated in UUK’s Back Universities Campaign.\(^6\)

Universities have been around for nearly a millennium. Many universities were created by communities with a vision to achieve societal transformation. This vision remains live today with universities responding to and supporting people and local communities to tackle the big societal challenges.\(^7\)

Creating a culture, an awareness and opportunities for both students and university staff to engage in social action and volunteering is integral to the civic role of universities.\(^8\)

Universities achieve this in many different ways reflecting the different motivations, beliefs and circumstances of students. For example, social action and volunteering activities can be incorporated into the curriculum; this can be particularly important for students who due to time constraints and other commitments are unable to participate in an activity outside of a course or programme.

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\(^5\) For further information on the wide range of employers and businesses involved please see http://www.iwill.org.uk/iwill-pledges/?filter=business-2

\(^6\) ‘Back Universities’ is a campaign launched by UUK ahead of the 2015 General Election to make the case for why any government should Back Universities with policies to support the future success of our universities.

\(^7\) See The Talloires Declaration on the civic roles and responsibilities of higher education (2005)

\(^8\) This report focuses on student engagement in social action, however, it should be noted that many university employees also engage in social action activities such as fund raising or volunteering to take on a non-executive director role.

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**#iwill campaign**

NUS and UUK have joined organisations and leaders from across UK society to drive the #iwill campaign. The #iwill campaign’s collective goal is to increase the number of 10-20 year olds in the UK participating in meaningful social action from 40% to over 60% by 2020, resulting in an extra 1.5 million young people participating, delivering an extra 90 million hours of work per year and almost £700 million to the economy.\(^9\)

**We will be using ‘social action and student opportunities’ in this report.** The #iwill campaign defines social action as young people taking practical action in the service of others to create positive change. Social action has a double benefit – a benefit to the individuals participating and benefits to the community they are acting on. Examples include caring for someone in the community, providing peer support online, volunteering for a charity, campaigning or fundraising for a specific cause.

Most of the Student Opportunities activities within students’ unions and institutions can be defined as social action. ‘Student Opportunities’ is a term used by

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\(^9\) Ipsos MORI, Youth social action in the UK – 2014: a face-to-face survey of 10-20 year olds in the UK (2014)
Breaking down the barriers to student opportunities and social action

NUS and students’ unions to describe activities such as sports, societies, volunteering, student fundraising (RAG), employability, student enterprise and entrepreneurship, and student media. ‘Student Opportunities’ also refers to widening participation activities, however for this report we will not be using the term in this way.

NUS and UUK both sit on the #iwill campaign’s Education Steering Group to embed youth social action into formal education across the UK. At the launch of #iwill, our organisations made a joint pledge to enhance social action across the higher education sector:

‘Universities UK and the National Union of Students will work together on a project that aims to break down any barriers preventing students from engaging in volunteering and social action.’

Audience for the report
This report has been produced by UUK and NUS to support student unions and institutions in removing barriers to participation in social action and volunteering. This report is designed for:
- Students’ union staff
- Students’ union officers
- Institutional senior leadership
- Institutional staff

Although the #iwill campaign focuses on ‘youth’ social action, given the significant diversity in the range of students that participate in higher education this report focuses on breaking down the barriers to volunteering and social action for all students.

10 We are aware that there are many organisations beyond students’ unions and institutions that support the creation of social action opportunities, however, this report is focused on those working in higher education.

11 The Equality Challenge Unit Equality in higher education: statistics report 2014 states that in 2012/13, 46.3% of all students were aged 22 and over.
Format of the report

Numerous pieces of research exist about the landscape of student volunteering, employability, sports, clubs and societies and other activities, which create opportunities for students to advance their educational experience. Examples of research include:

- Bursting the Bubble (2010)
- The Student Volunteering Landscape (2013)
- Mapping Participation (2013)

These have been important in shaping NUS’ Student Opportunities work and the approach to addressing barriers preventing student engagement. Amongst these reports, recommendations and guidance, there exists a wealth of evidence and information, which maps out the context and background to support the delivery of the pledge by NUS and UUK. In view of this, this report builds on existing research, and is designed to complement previous analysis and recommendations.

The report provides:

- reviews of current approaches to providing student opportunities and social action, and reflects on existing theories about the value and reasons why universities and students’ unions provide opportunities
- an overview of the current barriers to student opportunities and social action
- a commentary that pulls together the key themes from these perspectives and the desk based research
- The Higher Education Student Opportunities and Social Action framework – a tool for universities and students’ unions to consider the six quality principles of social action, and utilise these to improve participation in social action.

Having a better understanding of the ‘pulls’ and ‘pushes’ and an analysis of what does and does not work, will facilitate the development of practical solutions for removing barriers preventing students from participation.

Promoting the value of student opportunities and social action in higher education will also send positive messages back to students and learners outside of it. It is also hoped that the creation of links between students participating in social activity with younger people will inspire them to get involved from an earlier age – creating a habit for life.

The conclusion sets out suggestions for how the findings within this report can be built upon. The framework will support students’ unions, institutions and supporting sector organisations in collaborating to generate better outcomes and impact in relation to the provision of student opportunities and social action.
At the launch of the #iwill campaign, the Young Foundation led a cross-sector collaboration to determine what the principles of great quality social action look like. Increasing numbers of youth social action programme providers and funding bodies are now integrating the quality principles into their work to improve the opportunities for young people to participate.

The six principles of great youth social action

The quality principles have been designed to support participation in youth social action between the ages of 10-20. Chapter 8 outlines how these quality principles can be applied to a higher education context. Building on this, the Higher Education Student Opportunities and Social Action Framework has been developed. This is a practical tool which is aimed at supporting both universities and students’ unions to identify actions required to remove barriers to students participating in social action and to increase the quality of the opportunities provided. Rather than identify solutions to each barrier, this tool will facilitate conversations around the quality of the opportunities for social action. When discussing the quality

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12 The Young Foundation, Scoping a quality framework for youth social action (2013)

13 For a larger version of this diagram, please see Appendix
Methodology

This chapter looks at the methodology adopted to inform this report:

- A literature review of existing research on barriers to student opportunities and recommendations by sector experts.\(^{14}\) This process grounded NUS and UUK with the current landscape, and helped identify how this work potentially can re-frame the barriers based on the current views of students.

- Consultation with NUS and UUK networks about the current situation within universities and students’ unions, including ideas for the future. The questions were released to the #iwill Education Steering Group and student opportunities networks across the UK. NUS produced six questions to generate a snapshot of current opinion and ideas about how we can improve student opportunities in the future, with a view to building in these perspectives alongside policy that was passed at NUS National Conference.

The six questions were:

1. What would you like to see universities doing differently, or more of in terms of support and opportunities for students to engage with social action activities?
2. Are there any existing theories, ideas or recommendations around student volunteering, clubs and societies that you would like to see revisited or repositioned as part of this work?
3. What type of social action activities do you think students could undertake that would add value to society and why?
4. Which organisations should universities and students’ unions be working with to improve student opportunities, community engagement and social action and why?
5. Please describe what you imagine society to be like in 2034, 20 years from now. How do you think students should be contributing in this society that you have imagined and why?
6. Based on the aims of this work as described above, is there anything else that you would like to add?

- Review of existing NUS policy on barriers to student opportunities and social action. As the national voice of seven million students, NUS’ work is directed by democratic process that ultimately results in policy being passed at an annual National Conference. Students from across 600 students’ unions are invited to attend and debate the issues that matter most to students, and this report reflects the beliefs and the desired solutions arising from the debate about student opportunities and participation.

- Application of the Quality Principles for youth social action to a higher education setting.

\(^{14}\) This can be found at the end of this report in the Bibliography.
Who is participating in student opportunities and social action?

In 2013 NUS conducted an important study into the state of student volunteering. The study drew on a 2013 survey of a representative sample of 2000 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 outcomes were reported in The Student Volunteering Landscape and highlights are outlined below:

Over 725,000 students (31% of the HE student population) currently volunteer.

78% of those that volunteer do so to ‘improve things/help people’

On average, students volunteer for 44 hours per year (based on an average 32 week term) Of the 31% who volunteer, 24% said that they would like to do more volunteering, 6% might do more, and 1% would not do more volunteering.

Students are most likely to volunteer to organise activities and events, raise money, take part in sponsored events/activities, or teaching.

66% of student volunteers say that one of their main motivations is to develop skills.

With less than a third of students volunteering there is room for improvement. It is also worth noting that despite significant investment, student involvement in social action over the last century has plateaued at around 30%. This is in comparison to the US where figures estimate that between 45-70% of young people undertake some form of formal volunteering during their time at university. This level of participation also positively correlates with higher proportions of adults who continue to volunteer throughout their lives; demonstrating that participating in social action from a young age creates a habit for life.

Levels of philanthropy in the US showcase what is possible with investment in youth volunteering. This is particularly important among graduates who are likely to sit on the three top income brackets (where the effect of volunteering when young is most significant).

15 NUS, The Student Volunteering Landscape (2014)
17 Graphs showing Household contribution in America by Youth Involvement and Income Categories and levels as a % of GDP taken from the Corporation for National and Community Service.
18 For a larger version of this diagram, please see Appendix.
Setting the scene

Students’ unions were established in the late 19th Century to provide opportunities for social action and to represent the views of students to their institutions. Over 100 years later this purpose has not changed, however, the ways and means by which students’ unions deliver this certainly has. This section of the report considers existing NUS policy, the organisations’ work on engaging society with a ‘big conversation’ about the future of the student movement, and the barriers that restrict or block student participation in social action.

Language and the communication of opportunities is often the starting point for engaging a student in the first place. The term ‘student opportunities’ can mean anything from media to volunteering, clubs and societies, fundraising or social enterprise activity, all of which are activities that students’ unions across the UK deliver with a varying level of resource and success. For example, would a student, university lecturer or students’ union support staff member automatically connect or frame the term ‘social action’ as a student opportunity? Not necessarily, but if we are to understand student opportunities as students participating in an activity that has the potential to influence, create change or improve society then this aligns with the idea that social action is ‘taking practical action in the service of others to create positive change’.

It is increasingly evident that students’ unions are becoming more and more focused on tackling societal issues, which in turn benefit students. Further to this, NUS is currently conducting a wide ranging strategic consultation about the future of the student movement, which naturally captures the work students’ unions do in relation to student opportunities. By using the vehicle of a ‘big conversation’ with its members, the education sector and society, NUS will start to better understand perceptions of the student movement within the education sector and society, and effectively build on recent works that have been produced, such as the Student Volunteering Landscape and Mapping Participation reports.

Whichever way the conversation goes, the fact remains that universities and students’ unions need to break down the barriers to participation in student opportunities and social action. This needs to happen with an improved level of understanding about the role of each organisation, a decision about whether it is in partnership, or done separately, and with clear objectives.
The barriers
The barriers

Drawing on the evidence from the literature review and good practice, this chapter reviews the barriers and challenges students face.

### Language and understanding

Language around student opportunities and social action can be confusing. Development, activities, societies, clubs, volunteering, fundraising, media and sport are all terms which can be understood singularly, but mean different things as a collective group of activities under one banner.

Furthermore, in democratic organisations such as students’ unions it is important that students recognise the link between student opportunities and social action, and democratic participation. At present, if students do not, or cannot participate in students’ union structures then they are less likely to have an impact on opportunities that they like, or want to create. So, communicating how sports funding is affected by the democratic procedures of the students’ union, or how volunteering projects are chosen, for example, is important in helping students to understand this.

Students will have markedly different experiences based on their engagement with students’ union activities. Creating meaningful points of engagement tailored to your students is essential in helping them to get involved with the right opportunities for them. In view of the unique challenges individual students face, having an awareness of the diversity of needs and cultures will be critical if students’ unions and institutions are to support students in gaining a greater understanding of the benefits of engaging in student opportunities and social action.

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19 NUS, Mapping Participation: The Journey of Students’ Union Participation in Higher Education (2013)
Motivations

Understanding the main motivations to involvement in volunteering and social action is essential to both maintaining current levels and attracting new students to participate.

Research by NUS on student volunteering in 2013, revealed that the top 5 motivations to volunteer for current student volunteers were:

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

The research recognised some interesting differences between the motivations of students who currently volunteer and those that did not. Students who volunteer were much more likely to do so as a result of their personal values compared to those who did not volunteer. However, students who did not volunteer reported that if they did do this this would be to gain work experience and/or develop their CV.

Education is often viewed as a ‘type of good’ and this can be illustrated on a spectrum:

- Intrinsic good
- Civic good
- Investment good
- Consumption good, whether that’s emotional, therapeutic or psychological need
- Positional good

Student opportunities and social action should be developed and managed in a way that aligns different motivations and beliefs, and does not place greater importance on one particular ‘good’ over another as this could result in displacement.

An example of how this might be achieved could be through the repurposing of academic societies to ensure that they cater for all five motivations of students:

- Intrinsic - academic group study sessions
- Civic - community action such as knowledge share with schools and after school clubs, running workshops with adult community learning providers or research projects that benefit a local issue relating to the discipline
- Investment - keynote speakers from alumni, track, research and promote earnings
- Consumption – release from stress, pleasure, social contact, the ‘feeling’ of having a good time
- Positional - exclusivity, recognition, competitive sport and media.

Research by Holdsworth and Brewis showed that getting involved in volunteering was not necessarily a strategic decision. Participation could be ‘a spur of the moment decision in response to an external trigger this could be a request from a teacher or a friend or from seeing a response in a student union’. In 2012, Holdsworth and Quinn argued that ‘volunteering should not just be about employability, any personal motivation for volunteering is often balanced by a need to get volunteering ‘right’. This was reinforced by the NUS research reported in The Student Volunteering Landscape which highlighted that ‘improving things and helping people’ is what motivated students most. Further suggestions from students on ways to encourage volunteering are outlined in The Student Volunteering Landscape report and shown in the figure below.

Time

Time is often cited as a barrier to getting involved in social action and volunteering. Time-related barriers vary and include:

- studies and the timetabling of lectures
- paid work
- family commitments
- involvement with other clubs, sports, societies’

Addressing these challenges entails offering volunteering opportunities with different time

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20 The Student Volunteering Landscape (2013)
23 Please see Appendix for a diagram explaining this, taken from The Student Volunteering Landscape
commitments and outside the normal working day where course-related time pressures are a barrier to volunteering. Universities also address this by incorporating opportunities to engage in student opportunities and social action within the curriculum, so the activity forms part of the student’s learning experience. For some students this may be the only realistic way in which they can engage in social action. There are many ways in which universities do this, for example:

- a university may run law clinics staffed by supervised students that are open to the public,
- create projects for marketing students with local businesses
- arrange classroom assistant opportunities for teacher training students.

There are many advantages to embedding opportunities within the curriculum such as ensuring that this activity does not impinge further on students ‘free time’ and allowing social action to be more closely aligned with the core business of the university. This could also guard against a perception that this is an additional demand that could be regarded as a drain on resources.

Evidence from the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement Student Volunteering Initiative found that where time is a barrier there can be other underlying reasons for not volunteering. ‘For example, not knowing where or how to start, not being able to access information about volunteering and not being sure about placements and what they can offer as individuals’. This emphasises the importance of communication and ensuring that students have access to information about where and how to start; this could involve training and chances to meet other volunteers or members.

‘Not enough time’ as a barrier to engaging in student opportunities and social action is more often actually about perception – do your students know how much time different opportunities take up?

Management of volunteering – allowing flexibility and choice

Students’ unions and universities provide structures to stimulate and recognise volunteering and social action, however, many recognise that this should not imply that volunteering is obligatory. Preserving student choice is an essential part of university mandates and as Holdsworth and Bewis (2013) demonstrate, ‘if students have encountered more fixed and structured routes into volunteering these are often resisted. It is far better to ensure students have access to information about the opportunities available to volunteer and the associated benefits so they can make their own choice’.

Holdsworth and Bewis also emphasise that students welcomed academics providing space and time to talk about student opportunities and social action in lecturers or seminars in a non-judgemental way and note that this may be more effective in stimulating students’ interest than emphasising employability.

Personalising the requirement to volunteer by appealing directly to students could be helpful in appealing to students’ capacity to take action themselves, and avoiding appearing to be too instrumental.

Perception and previous negative experience

Sometimes students, and young people in particular are perceived as not wanting to get involved with student opportunities. 76% of press coverage of young people is negative. It is important to highlight this as it can be used as an excuse to dismiss a range of potential barriers that these students may face. If the perception of students is different to reality, it can create a barrier by potentially closing down opportunities in society or within a local community; people may not understand the value and benefits that students can bring.

It is important that negative perceptions are challenged. This can be achieved by universities and students’ unions working with local

24 NCCPE, Research synthesis: student volunteering – background, policy and context.

organisations including councils who are involved in community issues. Volunteering in the local community has a significant impact and can help change perceptions as participants are able to see the impact they are making first hand. For example:

- Students’ unions leading community volunteering work in schools with students becoming role models for younger generations.
- Community sport - student sport clubs linking up with local sports groups to offer opportunities to students, young people and the community. Students offering up their expertise and talent to coach and bring together the local community.
- Knowledge consultancy - where students use the knowledge gained/developing through their academic studies to go out and solve social issues in their community or run sessions with young people in after school clubs.
- Taking part in community campaigns and social action. Conducting research that would be useful to external organisations, or mobilising activists for the campaign.

**Funding**

Many student-volunteer led student activity groups rely on funding and sponsorship from a wide range of organisations and businesses. Such funding and sponsorship deals can be open to abuse by some businesses, leaving student activity groups and their students’ unions in difficult situations. Often, sponsorship deals are negotiated by the student leaders of a club or society and without appropriate training or support, they could be vulnerable. Student-volunteer led activity groups are vital to enhance participation in student opportunities and social action, especially in small and specialist unions. The success of these groups often relies on students’ unions to guide and develop their activity groups as well as supporting their efforts to secure outside funding and sponsorship.

Similarly, university staff highlight difficulties in securing funding. A study on student volunteering based on case studies at six higher education institutions found that, ‘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’. Furthermore, the research found that ‘this high level support does not always translate into funding commitments for volunteering services’. This view was reiterated four years later in the NUS report, *The Student Volunteering Landscape* which found that ‘funding is always an ongoing problem’.

Universities, students’ unions, government and other potential funders recognise the value of social action but unless sustainable funding streams can be found along with consistency in approaches to funding, the impact that students have in society could be threatened. Given the current climate of austerity, getting ‘more’ funding into student opportunities and social action is likely to become increasingly difficult, however, ensuring that youth social action is embedded within the institutional priorities is a key lever in ensuring long term sustainability within higher education.

Developing a compelling evidence base to show the impact of student opportunities and social action on students, communities and institutions will become even more critical for students’ unions and institutions.

Directing funding to programmes that have proven high-impact to cultivate growth will also be vital. Universities and students’ unions may find it helpful to use the six ‘social action quality principles’ set out in chapter 3 as a benchmark for funding criteria; ensuring investment is targeted where it can be most effective.

Additionally, there is the financial burden that participation can put on the individuals themselves such as housing costs, fees to participate, travel to meetings, activities and groups. Upfront payment of expenses and funding to support more extraordinary social

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26 Bursting the Bubble: Students, Volunteering and the Community (2010)
27 The Student Volunteering Landscape (2013)
action can break down barriers to accessing opportunities. Some students’ unions have committed to funding student opportunities and social action, so that individual members do not have to pay a joining or membership fee. Other students’ unions have actively investigated the costs of participation to ensure that there is parity between different opportunities and to identify areas where costs are not justified.

**Space**

Space as a barrier can take a number of forms and some students’ unions still face the challenge of justifying the physical space they occupy. There is also a danger that marketing and the promotion of opportunities predominantly happens within the physical space in which they take place, for example the students’ union building. Therefore students’ unions and universities are at risk of attracting students that only use certain buildings or corridors. This emphasises the importance of utilising social media and the use of online methods to create online communities to promote existing and new opportunities. It is also important that students’ unions consider carefully who they want to reach and how best to communicate with them.

‘Space’ also relates closely to issues around ‘access’, for example, how do students access the physical and virtual spaces that are, or could be, available to them?

Ensuring all students have the space, metaphorically, physically or virtually, to experience, drive or create these conditions is important. The fostering of these conditions will facilitate the development of a culture that is sustainable and one that brings stronger bonds between students and society, demonstrating the impact and value of their social capital. This in turn should lead to new relationships and networks (and new spaces!) that will enable students to have a more fulfilling experience, whilst also connecting communities around shared common causes.

**Environment**

How do we create step change in behaviours, values and attitudes in a market environment where students may be more likely to lean towards activity and opportunities that benefit self-interest, as opposed to activities that benefit the collective common good? Does it matter?

How can the education sector enable students to participate in issues that are of relevance to society and the communities that their institutions serve? Or how can we create the space for students to use their skills, potential and experience in a way that brings value to themselves, their institutions and the world they operate within now, and in the future. There are clearly a range of questions that can be raised in relation to our surroundings, however, a potential barrier to improving student opportunities and social action lies with the environment that has been created by an increased level of accountability of students’ unions, in particular to regulators and their institutions. ‘Freedoms and flexibilities’ is a term often used within the education sector with regards to the governance of institutions and whilst much work has gone into clarifying and understanding the duties of students’ unions, it could be interesting to explore what freedoms and flexibilities might look like in a students’ union context. This point relates to the fact that it is a still a challenge for some students’ unions to go beyond compliance, and become truly effective organisations within society.

Within the volunteering context, there has often been a focus on levels of attainment and contribution of hours. In 2005, the Russell Commission, recommended that volunteers should have access to a recognised form of accreditation which covered a range of learning opportunities and volunteering experiences. This focus is unsurprising given students, institutions and employers are often looking for robust measures that demonstrate improved academic attainment, or employment prospects. However, having a requirement of a

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29 The Russell Commission was set up 2005 to explore issues around youth volunteering in order to achieve a step change in youth volunteering.
certain number of hours can discourage students volunteering.

For example, a part-time student parent that is balancing a job with their education who could offer five hours a week to a volunteering scheme, however their contribution (albeit valuable) will not be recognised because the stipulation for their university volunteering award or accreditation is 10 hours a week. This suggests that if students’ unions and universities are going to truly embrace social action and genuinely break down barriers to participation then there is a need to shift the focus to why we champion the activity in the first place, or at least be honest about why we are championing it.

**Access to expert support and advice**

NUS has established a series of staff networks to encourage peer to peer learning and support amongst practitioners in students’ unions. Current feedback suggests that constraints on capacity and high volumes of work have resulted in reduced time for the networks to grow and develop student opportunities and social activities outside of what is provided on an annual basis. Concerns by staff that they need to be both specialists and generalists have also been raised. In order to address this, NUS offers support for specialist knowledge, however, the issues can run deeper and relate to pressures of the environment locally.

Many student societies effectively operate as small businesses or social enterprises. Yet, the limited staff support they receive means that they are limited in what they are able to achieve. The ‘frontline’ staff supporting student leaders working in student opportunities need to be better equipped for their roles.

**Bureaucracy**

Bureaucracy can also be a factor in preventing participation. In many students’ unions, the processes and paperwork required for participation can be overly bureaucratic. For example, a student may be deterred from participation in a volunteering opportunity advertised on their students’ union website if a multi-stage sign-up process is required. It may be helpful for both students’ unions and institutions to explore how processes, systems or procedures can be made as efficient and user-friendly as possible to ensure students are not deterred.
Moving forward

The Higher Education Social Action and Student Opportunities Framework
Breaking down the barriers to student opportunities and social action

The Higher Education Social Action and Student Opportunities Framework

Through NUS and UUK’s participation with the #iwill campaign we are supporting and helping to embed six quality principles around youth social action. We have aligned the quality principles to this piece of work, and developed descriptors to help shape the approach in universities and students’ unions.

The following quality principles have been developed by a cross-sector collaborative group led by the Cabinet Office, Institute for Volunteering Research, NCVO and The Young Foundation. The quality principles are described as follows;

- **Challenging:** stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling.
- **Youth-led:** led, owned and shaped by young people’s needs, ideas and decision-making.
- **Socially Impactful:** have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem.
- **Progressive:** sustained, and providing links to other activities and opportunities.
- **Embedded:** accessible to all, and well integrated to existing pathways to become a habit for life.
- **Reflective:** recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning.

This section of the report outlines how the quality principles can be translated into a higher education context. Building on this, a practical tool has been developed which is aimed at supporting both universities and students’ unions to determine actions required to remove barriers to student opportunities and social action. Rather than directly provide ‘answers’ to each barrier, this tool will facilitate conversations around the quality of your student opportunities. When discussing the quality principles the intention is that the institution and students’ union will identify areas for improvement.

To develop this new set of descriptors, NUS and UUK have used criteria from NUS’ Quality Students’ Unions and previous work that started to develop a quality tool for student opportunities within students’ unions and adapted the language where necessary.\(^\text{30}\)

To develop the institutional based descriptors, NUS and UUK have adapted the checklist used by Professor Liz Thomas.\(^\text{31}\)

How to use the Framework

For an institution and students’ union working in partnership to remove or reduce the barriers to participation in student opportunities and social action, it is intended that the toolkit should be completed in two stages.

**Stage 1** – Relevant stakeholder groups from within university and staff and officers from the students’ union plug the descriptors into the diagram separately and in isolation from one another. This will provide information on the current approach to developing student opportunities and social action with appropriate university department teams, groups, students’ union staff, student groups or elected officers. It is for the university and students’ union to decide which perspectives they would like to capture and why.

**Stage 2** – University and students’ union stakeholders come together to compare and discuss their scores and the rationale for where the respective parties plotted out the descriptors. This will enable areas of strength and areas requiring improvement to be identified and the development of strategies on how improvements can be made.

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30 For example the principle ‘youth led’ has been amended to ‘student led.
The framework has been designed to enable conversations around partnership and improvement. When plotting the descriptors, stakeholder groups may wish to take notes on why they have scored each area in the way that they have as this will help the conversation and make sense of different interpretations.

The framework can also be used as a developmental tool with your clubs, societies, volunteering projects, fundraising groups, student media, etc. as it has been designed with accessible language.

Below we have outlined two examples demonstrating how you may use the framework; the first demonstrates how to utilise it for institution-wide analysis of student opportunities, and the second is an example of how the Framework can be used to tackle a specific area:

**Example 1 – Students’ union and institution wish to analyse their student opportunities and social action approach so they both conduct the framework exercise separately and then come together to discuss their analysis. They are able to agree on areas for improvement for both the students’ union and the institution.**

**Example 2 – The English Society have noticed a reduction in members from 140 last year, to 40 this year. English Society (with students’ union staff/sabbatical officer support) conduct the framework exercise. Academic and/or support staff from the English faculty (with institutional leadership, if appropriate) also conduct the framework exercise. English Society and English faculty meet and discuss their analysis. The discussion allows them to develop a strategy for increasing membership.**

When utilising this framework, it is worth considering that:

- Some of the descriptors may not be relevant to both the institution and students’ union.
- The numbers (IE. ‘A1’, ‘C3’) are not a score, but are there to make note-taking easier (rather than referencing the full descriptor, the numbers can be used along with any notes)
- Examples to illustrate the descriptors have not been included given quality is likely to look different across the diversity of students’ unions and institutions
- ‘Student groups’ includes clubs, societies, RAGs (raise and give, student fundraising), volunteering teams, student media teams, etc.
- ‘Student leaders’ are those students leading the above student groups. Captains, Secretaries, Presidents, Chairs, etc.
- ‘Members’ are the members or volunteers of the student groups.
Breaking down the barriers to student opportunities and social action

The descriptors

Challenging: Stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling

C1. Staff and officers have a positive attitude towards maximising the success of all students

C2. Staff (and officers) encourage and facilitate student participation in student opportunities and social action at every opportunity

C3. The institution and students’ union actively develops knowledge, confidence and identity of its students through student opportunities and social action

C4. Student leaders attend training events which provide an opportunity to learn how to develop their projects and groups

C5. Students are able to articulate the impact on their personal development. Student leaders give thought to activities that support personal development

C6. The institution/students’ union offers skills development opportunities, delivered through a range of mechanisms from formalised programmes to reflective activities. Students see the value in undertaking activities as evidenced through practical examples to showcase their development

Student-led: Led, owned and shaped by student’s needs, ideas and decision-making

SL1. The institution has considered or explored with students the potential for student opportunities and social action to advance the learning experience

SL2. The institution actively promotes, supports and facilitates student opportunities that represent a diversity of interest amongst the student body

SL3. The institution actively promotes, supports and facilitates student opportunities that are relevant to students’ future goals

SL4. Strong democratic ethos – Students know they can participate in democracy and understand why they should

SL5. Student leaders contribute adequately – they know their role within the students’ union structure

SL6. Up to date marketing material – developing good, effective materials, delivered through different mediums

SL7. Regular opportunity for members/volunteers to feedback ideas, including provision for feedback to be anonymous

SL8. Student groups have strong communication with staff and officers in the students’ union, and where appropriate will meet minimum standards expected from union

SL9. Student groups regularly communicate relevant content, delivered across multiple communication channels, personalised where possible. Ensuring high quality of content, considering language, accessibility and consistence in messaging

SL10. Retention of membership – members are retained due to breadth of activities, which are well-organised and communicated appropriately. There are clear mechanisms to understand why people leave, including opportunities to provide feedback

SL11. Easy for new members/volunteers to join or participate, and new members feel welcomed into an activity

SL12. Student groups have the opportunity to forward-plan for the year ahead

SL13. Student groups have knowledge of students’ union and the institution’s vision, aims, and objectives so that they can design their activities to align with these where appropriate

SL14. Ensure timely AGM and committee elections within student groups

SL15. Opportunities are seen as fun and interesting by students

SL16. Opportunity for members or volunteers to be involved in developing existing or designing new activity
Breaking down the barriers to student opportunities and social action

Socially Impactful: Have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem

SI1. The institution measures the impact of meaningful staff and student interactions and collaboration

SI2. Able to articulate impact – sharing success through use of practical evaluation measures as well as qualitative stories. Understanding that measuring outcomes is important, not just outputs

SI4. Community engagement activity – looking at the communities that they engage with, considering how they can work together, whether that is interacting with other student communities or organisations/groups outside their institution

SI5. Student groups understand their purpose – what makes them unique and why their members/volunteers want to be involved

Progressive: Sustained, and providing links to other activities and opportunities

P1. There are clear links in the relationships between student opportunities and social action with retention and success in the institution’s learning and teaching strategy

P2. The institution and students’ union recognises the value of, facilitates, and promotes opportunities for students to support other students

P3. Promote inclusivity of activity – constantly looking for ways to improve access through development of new activities or adapting current provision

P4. Develop strong partnerships with a range of stakeholders – focusing on institution and students’ union as well as other community stakeholders, considering when to develop deeper relationships and how to end partnerships

P5. Creative in developing new activities – considering how to attract new members/volunteers and provide an innovative offering

P6. Innovative in funding – clear outline of what funding is available and strategies for using grant money, membership fees, sponsorship etc. Processes in place to help groups become self-sustaining

P7. Steps in place to ensure sustainability of activity – making the most of handover opportunities to continue level of activity

Embedded: Accessible to all, and well integrated to existing pathways to become a habit for life

E1. The institution and students’ union can articulate a culture of belonging amongst students in the institution

E2. Senior leaders and managers across the institution and the students’ union believe in and promote an organisation that all students and staff feel like they belong to

E3. There is a co-ordinated approach to removing the barriers to participating in student opportunities and social action through the institution and students’ union strategies

E4. The opportunity to engage in student opportunities and social action are promoted as part of the institution’s induction process

E5. Cost of activity is not prohibitive to membership – how can students who want to engage but are not able to because of financial pressures be supported?

E6. Ensuring accessibility of information – lots of events and communications across the year that enable students to join and participate in a range of activities

E7. There are a wide range of different activities available at different times/days

E8. The students’ union has a process for welcoming new members

E9. Manage health and safety considerations for student opportunities and social action – institution, students’ union, student leaders and members/volunteers take responsibility for ensuring activities are being carried out safely
Reflective: Recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning

R1. Policies and procedures hold staff accountable for removing the barriers to participation in student opportunities

R2. Student engagement and success is threaded through all academic staff development and training

R3. The institution and students’ union identifies and acts upon data sets relating to student participation

R4. Evaluation processes in place for all student opportunities – these should be timely and appropriate, and should involve students

R5. Well supported reward and recognition process – ensuring that as well as skills development, students are rewarded and recognised through a range of measures from peer led recognition to wider students’ union or institution-led support

On the next page you will find a blank framework for you to use.

Scoring Key
Barometer of 1-10:
10 = Excellent and needs developing into a case study
7 = There is quite developed and effective practice in this area
5 = Evidence can be provided to demonstrate practice in this area
3 = There is little evidence of practice in this area
1 = There is no recognised work in this area
Breaking down the barriers to student opportunities and social action

**Challenging:** stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling.

**Socially Impactful:** have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem.

**Student-led:** led, owned and shaped by student’s needs, ideas and decision-making.

**Progressive:** sustained, and providing links to other activities and opportunities.

**Embedded:** accessible to all, and well integrated to existing pathways to become a habit for life.

**Reflective:** recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning.
Conclusion and next steps
Conclusion

NUS and UUK hope that this report will serve as a mechanism to both increase, and enhance, the quality of opportunities for all students to be able to participate in social action. With less than a third of students currently volunteering there is clearly room for improvement.

In terms of next steps:

- UUK and the NUS will work with universities and students’ unions to support the implementation of the toolkit and generate case studies that are based on outcomes and impact.
- NUS will embed this report and the framework into students’ union officer training and development.
- UUK will host a roundtable event for university leaders and sector partners to explore how the sector can increase the number of high quality opportunities for social action.
- The Whitehall & Industry Group, have been commissioned by the NUS, to investigate potential pathways and future opportunities to develop this work further.
- NUS will consider how to take the learning from this report to students to support them in overcoming the barriers themselves. The Framework has been designed with accessible language so that in the future it could be adapted for students to use.
- NUS and UUK have joined forces with a number of stakeholders from the #iwill Education Steering Group to focus on how to make youth social action count from application to graduation in higher education. This work will remain as a ‘live item’ on this agenda, and feed into the #iwill Education Steering Group, gaining input and perspectives from the broader campaign partners to ensure wide dissemination and application.

Call to action

Increasing participation in student opportunities and social action will only happen if there is action in students’ unions and institutions to reduce and remove the barriers. NUS and UUK will be tackling the barriers through their national work, but we need evidence, case studies and new ideas from you to keep the momentum of this work going.

- How are you using this report?
- What are you doing in your institution or students’ union to remove or reduce the barriers?
- Have you approached overcoming the barriers in an innovative way?

Please email any case studies, success stories, ideas, and comments and we will use these to further our work in this area.

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  generationchange.org.uk
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The Seven Vectors of Student Development (Arthur Chickering)
Talloires Declaration on the civic roles and social responsibilities of Higher Education
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Appendix

‘What does great social action look like?’ – The six principles of great youth social action
Household contribution in America by Youth Involvement and Income Categories, taken from the Corporation for National and Community Service, USA.

‘How students’ unions and higher education institutions could encourage volunteering’, The Student Volunteering Landscape, 2013

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