



student **hubs**



**Delivering  
High Quality Social  
Action Activities**

# Welcome

We are Student Hubs, a charity who worked in partnership with UK universities to deliver in-curricular and extracurricular activities championing student social action. We were founded in 2007 by students who wanted to provide a space to increase collaboration and conversation around social action at their university and find their place within the community.

Our work has been driven by our mission and vision statement. We strongly believe that when students are supported to tackle social challenges, connect with each other, and learn about issues, communities benefit, students develop skills and insights, and students leave university on the path to becoming active citizens for life.

As an organisation, our speciality was in facilitating youth social action and supporting young people to engage in social issues. We supported university students to engage in the issues most important to them, with a focus on accessibility of opportunities, skill development, and community cohesion.

Facilitating activities which help to develop students' skills for life exposes them to charitable organisations and others working within the voluntary sector. Our activities allowed them to learn about these organisations, the challenges they face, and provide a clear way to meaningfully impact and support these groups. By building students' knowledge and experience, they are more likely to engage with their community in the long-term and become what we would describe as an active citizen.

In the 16 years since, our work has developed and grown significantly.  
We have worked with...



**20,000+** students  
across 10 Hub locations



**100,000+** students  
attending training, events  
and conferences



**1,200** community  
organisations, reaching  
**16,000** community  
members

# Foreword

In the many times I have introduced Student Hubs to universities, students and community organisations over the years, I have first and foremost introduced ourselves as a social action charity. Student Hubs was founded in 2007 by students who felt passionately that more could be done by students in their community to address social and environmental issues, and that mission has guided us throughout many academic years.

Our vision for social action being a part of every students' educational journey, leading them to become active citizens for life, is more needed than ever. There are large and wide-ranging issues facing our local, national and global communities, which students feel acutely concerned by and eager to tackle in whichever way they can. Universities provide a brilliant platform for students to lead the way in making social and environmental change, with the benefits numerous: both for students in gaining the skills, networks and experiences which will support them in their future careers; and for reaching universities' strategic aims, working collaboratively on these issues with communities, young people, academics and university professional staff to drive forward this work.

But beyond these immediate concerns for universities, institutions should be embedding and delivering student social action because it is the right thing to do for our communities, for our students, and for the society we want to create. At Student Hubs we talk about active citizenship meaning being able to imagine a tomorrow which is better than today, and who better to harness that vision with students and communities than universities? We are in a time of change and reform for the higher education sector, a time when a bold, ambitious and long-term vision is needed to emphasise the value of universities in our communities.

Social action is the answer to many of these challenges. Becoming an institution in which meaning is at the core of everything that you do has the opportunity to transform the sector's approach. But we must enable students and communities to do this work in partnership with the higher education sector. We need each other, the social and environmental issues we all face require us to be united to tackle them.

This toolkit is the start of a journey in how to do this work together: we urge you to start now, and become active citizens today.

## **Fiona Walsh McDonnell**

Partnerships and Development Director,  
Student Hubs



# Our Legacy

After delivering student social action with university students and communities across England and Wales for 16 years, the Student Hubs Trustee Board and Management Team took the difficult decision to cease operations of the charity by January 2025. The reasons for the closure are complex and reflective of the current landscape for charities and the challenges facing the higher education sector over recent years.

The decision to close was also made in order to support our people, from our staff to all our wonderful volunteers, and to take a new approach to sharing our magic. By closing down thoughtfully, we can share what has worked for us, and create space for others to further our mission.

The higher education sector has made lots of progress over the past decade towards internalising our mission. Our aim is that our legacy work will continue to add to this, even amidst the challenging times and contexts faced by the sector.

## This Toolkit

This toolkit and report is about delivering high quality social action activities in the context of volunteering and in-curricular activities at universities, working in partnership with students and communities through these opportunities.

This toolkit is informed by our approach to student social action, and due to a lack of up to date research publicly accessible about social action – much of which is concentrated between 2012-2018 – we have chosen to focus on our own experiences rather than externally validated research. When universities are exploring their own role in delivering high quality social action, we would encourage them to consider their capacity to conduct up to date research in the efficacy and evidence-base for social action.



It is aimed at:

- University Sector Leaders**
- Student Union Teams**
- Careers and Employability Teams**
- Sustainability Teams**
- Widening Participation Teams**
- Volunteering Teams**

# On the importance of high quality opportunities

**Social action is vital to the success of our communities, to building a better tomorrow, and enabling change within our local, national and global communities.**

We have seen social action as a powerful mechanism for change, both in the students we work with who develop key skills, experiences and understanding of social issues, and in the communities who work in partnership with these students to tackle local challenges which impact the communities they share.

We have made this toolkit as whilst many institutions are doing exciting and innovative work in social action and civic engagement within their communities, we recognise the challenges that come from this work being led by a small handful of individuals, and how quickly this work can stop when those individuals are no longer there to lead it. We truly believe that social action should be an institution-wide approach, and we want to give university teams at all levels the opportunity to use it as a vehicle to spark change in their students and communities: our aim is for this toolkit to be a starting point for this work.

We believe all students should have access to the transformational opportunities which social action can bring. But for universities to meet this mission, **what is needed is a commitment to the long-term funding, resource and capacity allocation, and iterative process that it takes to deliver high quality opportunities** in a way which allows the opportunities to grow and the staff teams delivering these activities to learn. To meet the fullest potential of student social action, it needs to happen in an environment where failure is possible; where learnings steer the work; and where the work isn't threatened to stall if initial targets are not met.

**In reading this toolkit, we hope that you will commit to this vision, and inspire colleagues and senior leaders across your institution to do the same to ultimately benefit your students, your community, and your strategic and civic goals as a university.**



# Our approach to community partnership and student leadership

Our approach to community partnership has involved Student Hubs' staff building relationships with charities, community groups, and small-to-medium sized businesses in local communities and regions, aligned with the places our university partners were based. Our activities would be developed through a combination of offering programme-based opportunities; developing new activities from staff and student-led incubation; and one-off volunteering delivery. For the majority of our programmes, these partnerships lasted a minimum of a term as part of our long-term volunteering and in-curricular offer.

However, many of these relationships (particularly in relation to our volunteering offer) lasted several years, with sustained partnerships providing new opportunities for students and community members participating in our activities. Partners would be onboarded and off-boarded across academic years, and partnerships developed or concluded based on the strategic and operational needs of the Hub, their local student interest, and funding. Partnership relationships were held by local Hub staff, national Student Hubs staff, and by student coordinators who would work in partnership with local Hub staff teams.

Student-led means to us:

- ✓ Students are decision makers
- ✓ Students have budget control and/or influence
- ✓ Students have compliance responsibilities (e.g. safeguarding, risk)
- ✓ Students have ownership of activities

Unsure if your programme is student-led? Ask yourself:

- Do students own this work? Do students steward this work?
- Who is responsible for this work?
- Who makes key decisions in relation to this work?

**There are degrees of student-ledness, but your approach needs to be communicated both to the students who participate and within your wider teams and partners when planning your activities.**

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# Chapter One

## On the value of student social action

Chapter One will provide an overview of the value of student social action for students, communities and universities.

The #iwill Movement describes youth social action as:

*“Youth-led activities that produce a benefit for communities as a result of the action, and for young people, as a result of taking part in the social action. Youth social action can be flexible in delivery and must involve at least one of three core mechanisms that improve the skills, well-being or increasing knowledge of others and sense of belonging of a young person.”*

We have delivered various social action programmes across the years, but our focus as an organisation has predominantly been in youth social action, engaging both students and young people within communities to tackle local social and environmental issues. We believe social action is a powerful vehicle for change, enabling the individuals and community groups we work with to practice active citizenship, develop their skills and networks, learn about issues, and ultimately create stronger communities together.



## The value for students

Social action opportunities transform students' understanding of the social and environmental issues people in their community face, and develop their capacity and interest in tackling social and environmental issues beyond the scope of their initial activity.

From Student Hubs' Impact Report for 2023-24, we saw students reporting:



of LinkAges volunteers agreed this activity has changed their perception of working with older people



of Schools Plus volunteers agreed they are learning about the challenges facing the young people they have been volunteering with



of Social Innovation Programme volunteers better understand how they can use their skills to support local organisations



of Engage for Change volunteers agreed participating has supported them to better understand, and manage climate anxiety



of students agreed they have gained an increased understanding of social issues

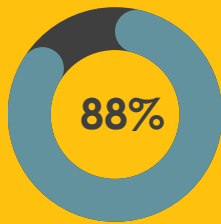


of students were more likely to tackle further social challenges as a result of their engagement

## The value for communities

Our community partners across the years have also recognised the energy, innovation and expertise which students bring to these opportunities, ultimately enhancing their perception of students alongside developing their organisation's capacity and work within the community.

From Student Hubs' Impact Report for 2023-24, we saw partners reporting:



of partners agreed the students added expertise to their activity or organisation



of partners agreed working with the Hub has given them a sense of connection to the student community



of partners agreed students added energy to their activity or organisation



of partners agreed students added capacity to their organisation's existing work



of partners agreed students added a new perspective to their activities

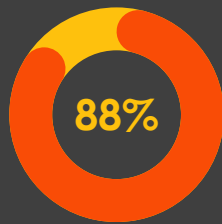


of partners agreed working with the Hub had positively changed their perception of university students

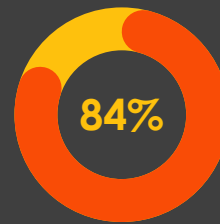
## The value for universities

Through our student outcomes, we know that our social action programmes go far beyond supporting students to understand local social and environmental challenges. Students have told us repeatedly how much these programmes impact their university experience, their wellbeing, their skills and connection to their community, all of which meet vital strategic goals for student experience, student retention and progression, along with graduate outcomes.

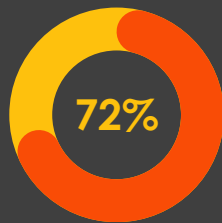
From Student Hubs' Impact Report for 2023-24, we saw students reporting:



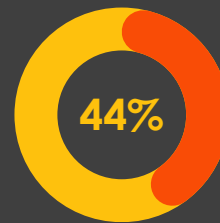
of students agreed that participating in Hub activities enhanced their university experience



of students agreed that participating in Hub activities enhanced their wellbeing



of students agreed that they feel connected to their local community, with 73% agreeing they feel a sense of belonging in the local community



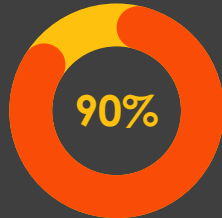
of students agreed that participating in Hub activities increased their engagement with their university course

*"The main thing I got from [participating in Schools Plus] was connecting with people. Especially people in the Bristol community that are different to the people I interact with on a day to day basis. Also working with children is very rewarding, getting to see the progress and see them become more confident in themselves. It was a really rewarding experience and that was the main thing that drove me towards it."*

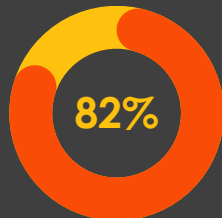
– Sasha, Schools Plus volunteer and University of Bristol student, 2023-24

## The value for universities

On skills:



of students agreed that they improved their ability to work with others to make change, and 91% increased their confidence in approaching challenges



of students agreed that they developed their ability to organise, plan, and prioritise work, with 80% agreeing they developed their ability to make decisions; and 74% agreeing they developed their ability to think outside the box



of students on our skilled placement programmes agreed they developed professional skills from this activity



## A closer look: Libraries Plus

Libraries Plus offered open access homework and tutoring sessions led by student volunteers in local libraries. Our team of staff and coordinators worked with local libraries to find an open and welcoming space for the sessions. Whilst the majority of tutoring support tends to happen within schools, there is a limit in the capacity for the schools facing the most acute impacts of educational inequality – they often don't have the resources and capacity to support an external intervention. By using a neutral, community space to offer this support we ensure the activity is accessible for families that may typically struggle to access extracurricular activities – be that due to lack of opportunity at their school, family working patterns, or ongoing friction in their relationship with the education system. We found that the young people who benefited the most typically lived in a big family unit, have English as an additional language or faced persistent childhood poverty.

We recruited and trained students to feel confident in safeguarding, their tutoring style and behaviour management, preparing them with key skills including adaptability, communication and coaching. Meanwhile, we promoted the opportunity through the library itself, community groups and through local schools in low income areas. Interested families reached out to us – no questions asked – to let us know their young people could benefit from additional academic support.

***“For pupils, parents and volunteers alike, Libraries Plus is an extremely rewarding and enriching project. At the start of term, a volunteer who is an international student was wary about their English speaking skills: by the end of term, they let me know how much their confidence and social skills had bloomed. Throughout the weeks, parents constantly let me know how pleased they were with the project and how valuable the tutoring had been for their children, who just needed that little bit of extra help to unlock their full potential: at the end of term, a parent emailed me stating that Libraries Plus was a ‘great contribution in children’s future by providing them tuition and a habit to visit the library regularly’.”***

*– Sahiba, Libraries Plus coordinator and University of Southampton student, 2023-24*



## What are high quality activities?\*

In 2012, Step Up to Serve and the #iwill campaign undertook research with the support of external bodies (including Student Hubs) to consider what made an activity high quality. The purpose of this research was to support a wider societal push by the coalition government to invest in youth social action, supporting more socially engaged young people. Though this work was aimed at 10-20 year olds, we believe that the principles identified are important to activities, no matter the target demographic.

Six key principles were identified:



### Challenging

Activities should be stretching and ambitious, as well as enjoyable and enabling



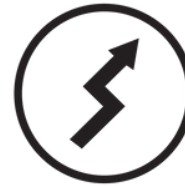
### Youth-led

Activities are led, owned and shaped by young people's needs, ideas, and decision making



### Socially impactful

Activities should have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause, or social problem



### Progressive

Activities should be sustained and provide links to other activities and opportunities



### Embedded

Activities should be accessible to all, and well integrated into existing pathways to becoming habits for life



### Reflective

Activities should have an element to recognise the contributions of volunteers as well as holding space for critical reflection and learning

Underlining all of these principles is the knowledge that good activities will have a double benefit - it should benefit the individual volunteering as well as the community they are volunteering in.

If you are looking into an activity, you can use the following table to help you review how well it meets the six principles:

Principles	Questions to ask	Evidence you will see
<b>Embedded</b>	Is the activity well integrated into the volunteer's journey? Is it integrated into local communities, services, and environments?	The activity will provide clear incentives to service users (the individual's benefiting from the activities) and the volunteers to participate and sustain commitment.
	Is the activity sustained and developed over time to create lasting impact? Is there space to recognise and reward achievements to encourage others?	
<b>Youth-led</b>	Does the activity give volunteers the opportunity to take team roles they have not experienced before to organise, lead, and represent? Is the activity driven by the needs, passions, motivations, ideas, and goals of volunteers?	The activity enables volunteers to direct activities with support appropriate to their competencies.
	Does the opportunity have a suitable starting point for volunteers by offering an appropriate level of challenge? Is the activity ambitious, exciting, innovative, adventurous, and fun?	
<b>Socially Impactful</b>	Are the organisers of the activity convincingly able to describe how activities will lead to intended social benefits? Does the activity enable direct contact with service users?	The activity and volunteers can articulate a theory of change that relates outputs to outcomes, and communicates the outcomes of the project.
	Does the activity build awareness, knowledge and understanding? Does the opportunity ensure that volunteers are able to articulate the outcomes of their social action project?	
<b>Reflective</b>		

*\*This text is taken from our Guide to Volunteering, a guide primarily aimed at students; you may be interested in reading this guide alongside our other resources.*

# Chapter Two

## How to engage with place-based social action opportunities



Chapter Two will explore the steps you need to take to understand the potential of your place in designing social and environmental action opportunities; how you might use existing university strategy to guide this work; and how to engage students and community members within these activities.



# Understanding your place

Before you can launch into designing social action opportunities, we believe you should first aim to understand your local region and place. It's important that work you deliver isn't duplicating existing delivery that might already be taking place either in your local community or through your student union or another central university team.

In our experience, we have seen examples of high quality practice taking place at universities, however often this practice is not widely shared or joined up within the institutions. When conducting this work, aim to work in collaboration with other teams in departments and faculties, and share your work widely to ensure it can be utilised across your institution.

## 1. Map your local area

Look at your university's geographic area or region, and discover:

- Which local areas are accessible from your campus(es)?
- What key statistics can you find about these areas? What's their population, which areas are identified in your university's Access and Participation Plan, what does the Index for Multiple Deprivation (IMD), POLAR (participation of local areas) and TUNDRA data look like for these areas?
- Which areas are students living in, and where are your commuter students travelling from?

***"[Taking part in Inspire, Debate, Change and Schools Plus] made [me] more aware of the educational inequality, especially in a place like Bristol. It has made me more passionate to change that. Going forth as a teacher, it is something that I want to bear in mind and ensure that every child has an equal access to the same education."***

*– Aimee, Inspire, Debate, Change and Schools Plus volunteer  
and University of Bristol student, 2023-24*

## 2. Understand your 5 Ws

You need to understand what place means to you: we suggest using the 5 Ws as a starting point.

<b>Who</b>	Who are the key stakeholders and participants you aim to involve? Will this include students, university academics and/or university staff?
<b>What</b>	What social and environmental issue(s) do you want to tackle? Through what means has this been established: is it a university strategic goal, has this been suggested through community or student consultation?
<b>When</b>	What's the timeline involved for incubating this project? What factors need to be taken into account (e.g. term time, time to secure budget and partners, or recruit student participants)?
<b>Where</b>	Are you aiming to deliver projects that take place within the immediate area of your university campus, or are you looking to cover a wider area or the whole region? Will your activity take place on campus or in the community?
<b>Why</b>	Why are you/your team the best people to do this work? What do you hope to achieve in the short-term and long-term through this activity and what impact will it make on the participants you involve?



### 3. Learn more about who can help within your community

If you already have an idea of which social and environmental issue(s) you are looking to engage with, you may want to search online for examples of organisations who already are working locally in this space who may be able to provide more information or support for your enquiries. Your VCSE (volunteering, community and social enterprise) sector is a great starting point for this, and you may be able to find a list of organisations you can contact through volunteering websites.

You might want to consider other influential individuals, such as members of the council and local and national government; businesses and community members who are featured in local press or who are active in the community; and work already being undertaken at your university or at universities also within your region. We would advise that collaborating and building upon existing work should always be prioritised where possible rather than starting your own projects from scratch: in most areas it is highly unlikely that existing work is not already taking place, and partnerships provide a greater opportunity to ensure the sustainability of the work in the long-term.

### 4. Be guided by the data and seek out information

We would recommend seeking out additional information beyond what is available in your internal university strategies and documents.

This could include:

- Reviewing your local council's strategy or reports about your area/region;
- Seeking out information by your local VCSE sector, including individual organisations and the local volunteering services;
- Speaking to university colleagues who work in widening participation, social mobility, civic and public engagement, volunteering, social enterprise and the student union to learn which sources they might signpost to for more information.

## Using your civic university agreement or civic strategy as a starting point

If your university has a civic university agreement or is currently creating one, this is an excellent starting point to map where social action activities could meet key objectives.

Your civic university agreement will likely have overarching categories, such as the following. You may want to consider what opportunities could align well, for example:

<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	<p>Opportunities which support community residents to engage with sport and physical activity; intergenerational activities which develop community relationships; or activities delivered with health services students within the community could align well with this strategic area.</p>
<b>Social justice, social mobility and equality</b>	<p>Opportunities which work with specific faculties such as law, education, politics or international relations could provide good activities, or activities which support raising attainment for young people across your region.</p>
<b>Climate, sustainability and the environment</b>	<p>Opportunities for students to act as climate consultants for local businesses, or for students to develop and scale new climate action activities on and off campus would support this goal.</p>
<b>Research, innovation, enterprise, business and economic growth</b>	<p>Opportunities which enable students to practice knowledge exchange with local SMEs and the delivery enterprise activities with students and communities would align well.</p>
<b>Improving the quality and cultural life of our city</b>	<p>Opportunities for students and staff to work collaboratively with community groups on cultural projects or urban development through in-curricular activities would support this goal.</p>

Beyond this, look at the civic university agreement's KPIs and investigate:

- Which individuals at your university are responsible for meeting these KPIs?
- What progress have they made so far?
- Where are the gaps between KPIs set and those without an action plan, and what opportunity is there for your social action activity within those?

## How to engage students in social action

Different students will respond to different messaging about social action opportunities. Ultimately you need to consider what matters to students, what challenges they are currently facing, and how your opportunity might solve or mitigate these concerns.

Take our two examples here:

Student consultancy	Volunteering
Issues tackled: <b>environmental action</b>	Issues tackled: <b>social isolation</b>
Ben is concerned about climate change, and feels climate anxiety, but is unsure what else he can do beyond individual actions. He's looking for an opportunity to develop his CV whilst also learning more about sustainability.	Veronica is an international student looking for an opportunity to practice her English language skills and meet new peers outside her course. She misses her elderly relatives who live in her home country, and feels quite isolated at university.
<p><b>Programme advert:</b> Climate Action Bristol provides pro bono student consultancy services to local businesses and organisations.</p> <p>The programme is designed to bring about a dual-positive outcome: to support you with capacity and perspectives along with expertise on sustainability and to create students with greater awareness of sustainability from the practical experience of creating a tangible impact in their community.</p>	<p><b>Programme advert:</b> Bridge the generation gap with LinkAges. LinkAges takes the loneliness out of older age by connecting students with befriending opportunities in the local community. Volunteer an hour a week to offer a hand of friendship.</p> <p>What do students gain?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication skills and leadership</li> <li>• Dementia care and activities coordination expertise</li> <li>• Friendship across the generations</li> </ul>
<p>Both opportunities provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement with local social and environmental challenges</li> <li>• Opportunity to meet new people and develop skills</li> <li>• An opportunity which can be included in a CV and discussed at job interviews</li> <li>• An impact on the community, with the benefits for student participants clearly outlined</li> </ul>	

## Understanding community partner and student needs\*

Before entering into partnerships with community organisations, it can help to understand their needs and interest in the programme or activity you are advertising.

We would recommend having a follow up conversation with a community partner after they have responded to an email or advert for partners, and you may want to ask them:

- About the individual(s) you set up a meeting with. What's their role in the organisation, can they tell you more about the organisation's work, and what do they see their involvement in the activity being (i.e. would they be the main liaison or would they approve involvement but pass liaising onto a colleague?)
- What existing provision do they have access to? What activities would add value for them and their users?
- In their opinion, what would a successful project/end result look like?
- What are their expectations for the activity? What do they expect from the university staff and/or students that they work with?
- What impact would they like the activity to have?
- What logistical information do you need to know? (e.g. key liaisons, deadlines, dates to be aware of such as annual leave periods, secondary contacts and communication expectations, contingency plans and equity, diversity and inclusion politics and practices)

In our experience, a good partner is:

- **Someone who has capacity.** Making sure your community partner(s) have time for the project and understand expectations of the programme is key.
- **Someone who has a clear understanding of the support they are looking for.** The more direction they can give the university staff and/or students they interact with, the better, even if they don't have all the answers.
- **Someone who shares part of your vision.** Partners don't need to share your vision completely, but partnerships that build upon a shared vision or genuine commitment in some capacity, such as you both wanting to deepen opportunities for students in your local area, enable you to start partnerships from a shared understanding.

You may want to put yourself in the mindset of the individuals you're working with throughout the opportunity in promoting it. This includes community partners, students, and any student recruitment channels. Work to understand what these individuals or groups expect from you, and how you can meet their needs.

**An example could look like the following:**

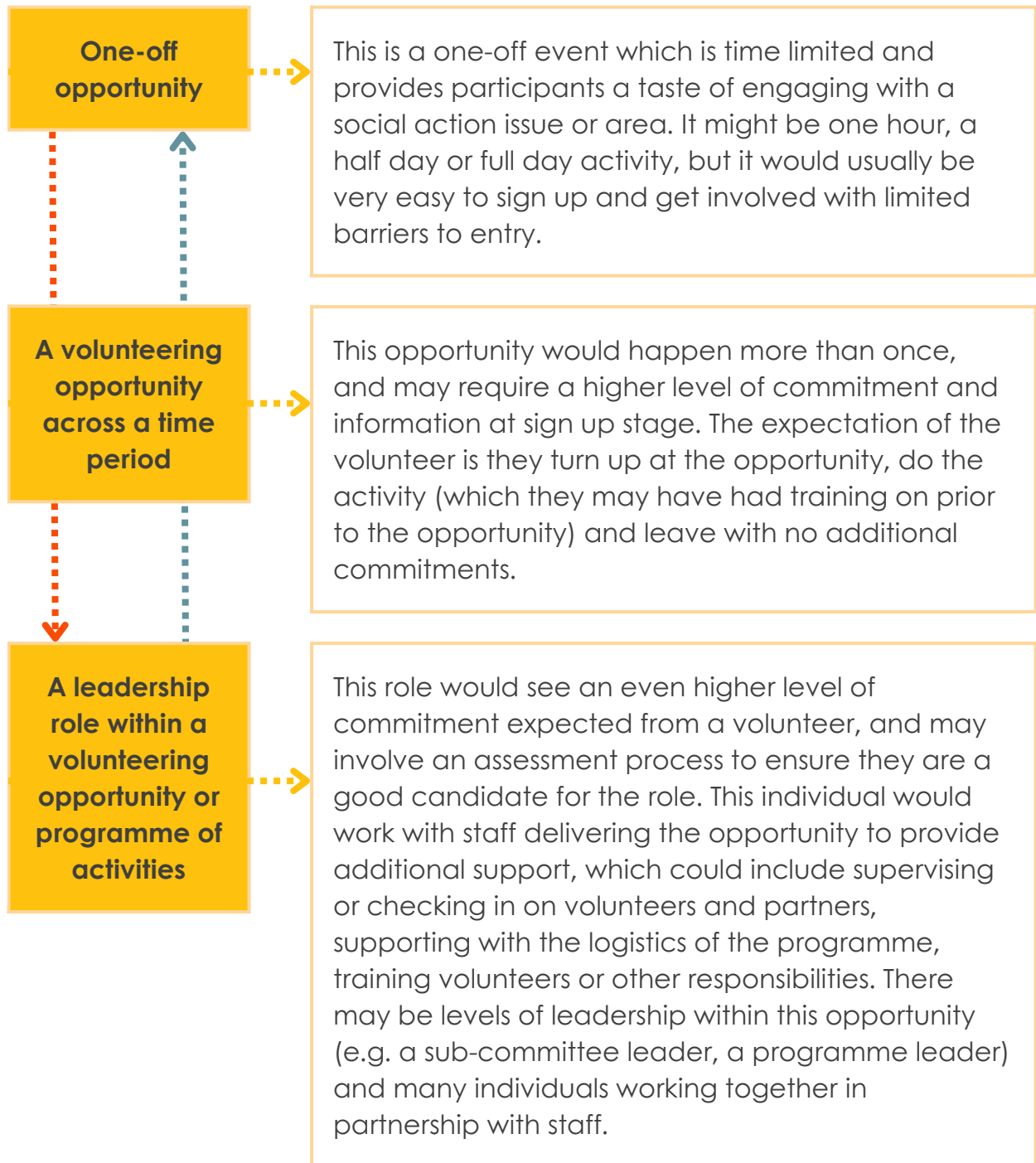
Audience	Expectation
Community partners	To take part in a well-organised opportunity which doesn't encroach on their capacity and is a positive experience for their internal staff and for their external brand within the community. To deepen their relationship with the university.
Students	To take part in a well-organised opportunity which supports their own goals. Good, clear communication from organisers with clear asks and next steps.
Student-adjacent channels (e.g. societies, courses, volunteering mailing lists)	Supporting their members to further their goals (which may align with the channel the students are hearing about the opportunity through). Good, clear communication from organisers with clear asks and next steps.

*\*This copy was taken from our Working with Community Partners toolkit, which you may also want to read as part of your work.*

## Tiered opportunities for social action engagement

Where possible, we would advise considering the social action journey in which you can take your participants on.

This could involve:





## Tiered opportunities for social action engagement

However, remember that individuals should be able to move up and down this model as needed. Individuals may want to return to being a general volunteer after having completed a leadership term, or you might see general volunteers returning to one-off opportunities if they cannot uphold the commitment they originally applied for.

You want to keep individuals engaged within social action opportunities, so having a broad range of options will allow people to move through these opportunities as needed around their other commitments.



# Chapter Three

## How to incubate and deliver social action activities

Whilst Chapter Two explored what social action is and how you might initially engage students and partners with social action opportunities, Chapter Three will explore how to incubate and practically deliver these activities. This chapter uses examples from Student Hubs' own extracurricular volunteering and skilled placement activities, and our in-curricular activities to provide examples of how you might embed this work within your university.

## Structuring your opportunity

At Student Hubs, the approach we have taken to social action has become increasingly more structured in how we organise the opportunities. This is because we hear from students that whilst many are passionate about social issues and wanting to support their communities, they often struggle with the first steps of how to engage.

To demonstrate the levels you might want to consider of how structured or unstructured your opportunity is, follow our guide below:

<b>Programme design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who takes responsibility for designing the programme? Is this being led by one staff member, a team, or a volunteer?</li> <li>• Who has oversight on this programme and what processes are there for checking the quality of the programme?</li> </ul>
<b>Recruitment stage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who leads and is involved in promoting this programme?</li> <li>• How easy or difficult is it for interested individuals to apply to the opportunity? How many levels of assessment are there in confirming an individual's involvement with the opportunity?</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment stage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who reviews and delivers assessment stage(s) if required? Is training for the opportunity delivered?</li> <li>• Are all individuals who applied contacted about whether or not they have been successful in being accepted to this opportunity?</li> </ul>
<b>Delivery stage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who leads on problem-solving and checking in on progress of the opportunity?</li> <li>• What risks need to be mitigated or addressed? What are your processes for dealing with challenges which arise during the delivery period?</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluation stage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is responsible for collecting monitoring and evaluation data (if any is collected)? How successful are you at collecting this data?</li> <li>• Who evaluates it and implements improvements?</li> </ul>

If you have answers for all these questions, we would suggest your programme is highly structured. If you only have answers for half or less of these questions, your programme is less structured. Some opportunities don't need to be highly structured, whereas others may see the quality enhanced the more structured they become. This is for you to decide. However, it's your responsibility to ensure you are meeting core requirements for safe delivery (e.g. risk, compliance, legal, health and safety and safeguarding responsibilities).



## Deciding what type of opportunity it should be

Throughout our history at Student Hubs, we have generally broken down our activities into four main categories of programme. See below for what you might want to take into account when considering how your social action opportunity should be embedded at your institution. All opportunities should come with expenses paid for, but some opportunities may go further and pay a salary as part of the role.

### Volunteering

Volunteering opportunities are extracurricular and can be more flexible and adaptable than the other opportunities listed.

Volunteering is a great option if:

- You want to pilot new delivery;
- You want to address a range of issues or deliver a series of activities under one banner.

### Skilled Placements

Placement opportunities are excellent for providing work-based learning experiences and typically would connect participants with employers or organisations.

Placements are a great option if:

- You want to structure an engagement between participants and a business/organisation;
- You want to attract participants who are explicitly looking for support with skills, employability and graduate outcomes;
- You want to deliver knowledge exchange.

**Internship/  
Graduate role**

We would distinguish internships and graduate roles where they are salaried opportunities with an expectation that participants work on a full-time basis (or part-time with set hours/expectations for engagement) for a fixed period of time. Internships and graduate roles are a great option if:

- You are looking for formalised capacity within an opportunity for a fixed period of time;
- You know that providing no salary other than expenses would be a barrier to entry for your intended participants;
- Your opportunity covers a longer period of time than one academic term.

**In-curricular  
activity**

In-curricular activities are those opportunities which are embedded within the curriculum and teaching and learning process. They may take place in the classroom or the opportunity may be delivered as part of an accredited module. Social action is used as a way to structure the learning opportunity, such as working with clients, using a social issue as a central theme to the module, or as a one-off activity as part of a wider module. In-curricular activities are a great option if:

- You are concerned about access for your participants if this opportunity was extracurricular;
- You want to embed more live and real-life examples of practice within your teaching;
- You want to introduce your cohort to social action and provide signposting for further opportunities which may be extracurricular or paid opportunities after this engagement.

## How to foster incubation

At Student Hubs we have always seen incubation from our internal staff, our students and community partners as integral to our model. It's important that there is a framework for new ideas to be innovated and developed. Some of our most successful programmes have come from being incubated as part of existing programmes, or from community partners sharing their needs and us adapting or developing new programmes to meet that need.



Areas to consider when exploring how well you are able to provide incubation support include:

### **The channels through which people can get in touch**

How easy is it for students, community members or other internal staff to find contact details for you to speak about their ideas? Is this something you are open to? If so, take a look at your public facing channels (e.g. your website, your department/faculty social media, your newsletter, your email communications) and ensure that you are explicit about wanting individuals to reach out, and provide a name and email address. Even if your team uses a generic email address, we recommend giving a name where possible – it makes reaching out feel more accessible and friendly.

### **Holding specific listening activities and workshops with stakeholders**

You can't expect everyone to reach out when they have a problem: you need to go to them. Make the space to hold specific listening activities, whether that's surveys, meetings, forums and focus groups, or workshops and do pay people for their time and engagement where possible. Make sure you have a follow up plan to let those involved with these opportunities know what happened as a result of their input.

### Provide resources for self-guided reflection

You may not have the capacity to coach individuals through the incubation process if they have an idea, or you might want them to do some initial thinking before discussing the idea with them. Having a resource which encourages self-guided reflection on their idea or challenge can be helpful for supporting that individual to take these initial steps, and for ensuring that they have the motivation to continue if they meet challenges. You may want to see our resources for students and community partners as a guide.

### Start with the problems and challenges faced

Rather than being inspired by a specific social issue area, you can work backwards to think about what the specific problems or challenges you want to address are. This might be students not feeling prepared or knowledgeable about climate change and environmental careers; or a community organisation telling you that loneliness is a specific challenge that older residents in your community face. Start here, then begin to plan what solutions might look like to this challenge in practice.

*You may also want to read our [Guide for Incubation](#), a guide which is primarily aimed at students but may also be relevant to your interests.*





## What makes an opportunity high quality?

We would argue an opportunity is high quality when it is: inclusive, accessible, making measurable and meaningful difference to the participants and partners the activity involves, and has a structured iterative process for reviewing monitoring and evaluation and embedding improvements to the activity.

You should be receiving a high level of feedback from participants and partners, looking to narrow the gaps between receiving 100% positive feedback, and doing in-depth case studies, focus groups, and learning with the individuals involved in the activity.

There are many frameworks which can help you to identify how to enhance the quality of your social action activity. Below are some resources we have used to support our design and development of social action opportunities.

Framework	How it can be used
<p><b>#iwill Movement's 6 principles of youth social action</b></p>	<p>The #iwill Movement lists 6 principles of youth social action, and gives examples of what should be seen within your practice to meet these principles. We have previously used this framework to audit our own activities, and consider how we can address gaps in our provision or frameworks.</p>
<p><b>YMCA George Williams College's 'Asking Good Questions' framework</b></p>	<p>The 'Asking Good Questions' framework enables you to work through your opportunity and ask questions about quality and practice, interrogating how you can improve and what works.</p>
<p><b>'Rapid cycle design and testing' from Dartington Service Design Lab</b></p>	<p>This is a framework for a repeated iterative process for designing, delivering and testing your opportunity, with the aim to do multiple cycles which leads to rapid improvements and enhancements of your activity.</p>

## Making the case for social action

When setting up your activities or new programmes, it can be easy to be focused on the benefit for the university and your own goals and strategy.

However, to best enhance the quality within the programme, you may want to work with your colleagues to think about the following factors of community need; student interest; university capacity; and activity cost in how you make the case for your activity.

You may also want to consider resources from [the Civic University Network about specifically creating a business case for your work](#).

Topic	Questions to ask	Actions to take away
<b>Community need</b>	Is there a need in the local community? What work is already going on in this area of need, and how can we make sure that we're adding value?	Work with colleagues to map the local needs – you may want to hold a <a href="#">One Community Forum</a> .
<b>Student need</b>	Is this an area that students would be interested in? Is anyone else at the university and/or student union delivering this type of activity already?	Check in with your contacts and student cohorts to establish interest and engagement, and similar existing activities.
<b>University capacity and activity cost</b>	What capacity is involved for the activity at this scale, and what would be required to grow or increase its impact?  What does this activity cost to run? Where can efficiencies be made, or is more funding needed to scale the work?	Do you need to begin justifying the business case to continue or grow this programme, and what data and case studies do you need to do this work?

## Lead through purpose and meaning

Ultimately what we would encourage you to do in your practice is to lead through purpose and meaning.

What we mean by this is when designing an opportunity – whether the focus is social action or not – ask yourself:

- How will this support participants with their goals, aims, and sense of purpose in life?
- What approach would an active citizen take?
- What is the meaning of this work, both in the short and long-term? What does this look like for participants and partners within this work, as well as the university?
- Does this project enable its participants to imagine a better future and a better tomorrow than what they see now?

In the 2022-23 HESA Graduate Outcomes data release, 84% of graduates agreed that their current activity is meaningful between 2017-18 to 2021-22.

We know that students and graduates are seeking meaningful, impactful careers and want to be part of the purpose economy. When designing student opportunities, the role of purpose and meaning should be at the forefront of our minds, and this is the legacy we want to leave from our years of delivering student social action at Student Hubs.

***“[Participating in Empower] has enriched my university experience and allowed me to participate in something meaningful, which has boosted my sense of self-worth”***

*– Rong Wang, Empower volunteer  
and University of Southampton student, 2023-24*

# Conclusion

As we have demonstrated throughout this toolkit, social action delivery offers a range of benefits, not only for universities to meet their strategic goals in a range of areas, but also for communities to benefit from the capacity provided, and for students to contribute and learn through these activities.

To summarise, we recommend that your actions from this toolkit include:

- Sharing the value of social action with your senior leaders, and building your case for embedding student social action within your activities;
- Auditing your opportunities to embed social issues and social action within your existing activities, or to add new activities to your work;
- Working with your university team(s) to map out the required capacity, support, resources, and relevant outputs, outcomes, and processes needed to incubate, identify and develop student social action activities.

If you are interested in learning more about these topics, we also suggest you look at our reports and toolkits on the following areas:

- Engaging with Student Leaders
- Working with Community Partners
- Our Guide for Students on Volunteering
- Our Guide for Students on Incubation

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**Visit [www.studenthubs.org](http://www.studenthubs.org) to learn more about our legacy work**

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