



student **hubs**

Engaging Student Leaders



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

Foreward

For sixteen years Student Hubs has been delivering social action activities which puts student leadership at the core of its work. Our journey in delivering student leadership has changed significantly over the years. From 2007 to the early 2010s, Student Hubs' staff team were focused on their role in fostering student-led activities, where students were independently incubating and delivering activities for students, with staff focused on growing students' awareness about our activities, providing training and skill development, and the frameworks for legal responsibilities, safeguarding, and sourcing community partners.

As our relationships with universities deepened and our theory of change was developed in 2015, our model transitioned from prioritising quantity of student opportunities to enhanced quality. Our staff-led opportunities grew as our focus moved to providing structured, scaffolded student leadership opportunities, and where staff were more heavily involved in the personal and professional development of the students they engaged with through their funded university partners.

This toolkit is the culmination of the many adaptations to our approach over the years, cementing the value of these opportunities; providing advice and guidance for how to practically adapt and deliver student leadership at your institution; and providing the tools and frameworks to ensure that quality is at the heart of your approach to embedding and growing student leadership.

Student leadership created Student Hubs, and there is a reason why our organisational tagline for many years was 'connecting students with causes': we believe that our role was to be the bridge between what students had the power and potential to achieve, and what local communities needed to tackle social and environmental issues.

We hope you will join us on this journey in wrapping up Student Hubs' work, as we pass on the mantle of student leadership to you at universities to support the next generation of student leaders, graduates and active citizens.

Fiona Walsh McDonnell

Partnerships and Development Director,
Student Hubs



Our legacy

After delivering student social action with university students and communities across England 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's 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

The toolkit will discuss the value of student leadership for universities, students and communities; provide frameworks for practically embedding student leadership within existing activities or new activities; and strengthen internal processes for recruiting and supporting student leaders during their roles.



It is aimed at:

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



Our approach to student leadership

At Student Hubs, our role as staff has been as stewards for students' enthusiasm and passion on social issues, providing clear frameworks for them to incubate and develop programmes; lead these activities in as high a capacity as they are able to; and retain the legacy of their work and hand this over to new student leaders as they join our local Hubs year-on-year.

Throughout this toolkit, our approach to student leadership is through staff-led and student supported activity. In our journey as an organisation we used to be highly student-led; moving towards staff-led student supported activity provided:

- More security and safety for our student leaders and overall helped them to thrive;
- Enabled students to test their abilities, develop their skills, and fail positively within a framework which ensured staff could continue to support their motivation and development as social action leaders.

This also had an impact in not causing harm to our community participants and partners: we worked hard to establish programmes where students could make an impact, but also balance this with staff holding the legacy and responsibility of these initiatives so both community partners and participants understand that the students' involvement would be time-limited.

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 engaging student leaders

A photograph of three young people, two women and one man, standing behind a stall at an outdoor event. The stall has a grey board with various posters and QR codes. One poster says 'bristol hub' and another says 'Intersectional Feminist Society (iFemsoc)'. The man on the left is wearing an orange shirt and has curly hair. The woman in the middle is wearing an orange t-shirt and glasses. The woman on the right is wearing an orange hoodie. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The stall number '263' is visible on the board.

Student Hubs was born in 2007 from an understanding by students that whilst they had the power and potential to do great and impactful things within their community, what was lacking from their university was the infrastructure, scaffolding and support to put student leadership at the heart of their community-facing activities and bringing all offers together in one place, as well as having the knowledge to signpost to other internal and external local opportunities in a non-competitive way.

As a charity, we have spent the past 16 years witnessing the strength which peer-to-peer interventions have, both in terms of student leaders supporting each other to thrive in their roles and in students being able to connect with peers within their local community.

It is our belief now that whilst universities do have the infrastructure and resources needed to make this approach a reality, the power and potential of student leadership is still being vastly under-utilised across the country. This toolkit aims to provide your staff teams with the ability to do this work.

However, before we explore the logistics of engaging student leaders, we want to address the value of this approach to universities, students and communities.

How student leadership and social action address the problems of tomorrow

We believe student leaders should be at the forefront of change in our communities, reaching young people and local residents to support their engagement with opportunities provided by their local university, alongside working with local organisations to provide innovation and development support as student consultants.

Research from the sector shows:

1 in 4



Learners from a free school meal background participating in higher education

A NEON report titled '[Universities not for everyone: levelling up and who is missing out on higher education in England](#)' conducted research which saw that 'for learners from a [free school meal] background the chances of participating in higher education are low. For most areas outside London it is lower than one in 4'.

19%



of people currently working in high skill level jobs have substantial deficiencies in the essential employment skills required to fulfil their job requirements*

These essential employment skills for 2035 include 'collaboration', 'communication', 'creative thinking', 'information literacy', 'organising, planning and prioritising work' and 'problem-solving and decision making', many of which are outcomes as part of our social action activities for students.

*From a [2024 report from NFER \(National Foundation for Educational Research\)](#).

Our 2023-24 Impact Report showed:



98%

of students agreed they developed professional skills as a result of participating in our skilled placement programmes, with collaboration/teamwork, planning, organisation and time management being top skills noted as being developed.



91%

of students reporting increased confidence as a result of our activities.



44%

of students agreed that they increased engagement with their university course as a result of participating in our Hub activities.

Students from **state schools, students from minority ethnic backgrounds, and international students** were statistically more likely to agree that participating in Hub activities increased engagement with their university course.



Student leadership: Enhancing student outcomes

In this section, we wanted to represent students' voices in sharing what they found particularly valuable about our programmes. These key points were collated from feedback from a roundtable event, hosted with a small group of highly engaged student leaders from our 2023-24 activities, alongside feedback and impact data we have collected anecdotally across our programme delivery over the years.



Over 2022-23 and 2023-24, our student leaders as part of our local Hub committees reported:



93%

agreed being a part of their Hub committee improved their ability to work with others to make change.



87%

agreed being a part of their Hub committee increased their confidence in approaching challenges.



93%

were more likely to tackle further social issues as a result of their engagement with this activity.

Responsibility and leadership make Student Hubs' activities stand out. We know this is a key active ingredient in how change happens within our opportunities, and is the reason we wanted this toolkit to specifically focus on student leadership as a vital element of our work which institutions could learn from.

Making tangible change is a powerful experience for students in how it affects their outcomes. We want to see activities for students moving away from a reliance on hypothetical scenarios and to real life social issues and challenges. Doing this work in partnership with local community, or real organisations and businesses not only enhances the civic attributes of the work, but is a defining part of the experience for students.

Building connections with others is a highlight of Student Hubs' activities. Be that young people, peers, committee members, staff members or community members and organisations, students more than ever need structured, supported social activities which enable them to develop peer relationships and help them share connections with other students and with their community, in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts.

"It seems that the way Student Hubs is run, the amount of responsibility given to students, is the best way to create meaningful opportunities. I know from Branch Up we have 4-5 committee members who organise everything and do the things we do, students can do it all with a tiny bit of guidance you just have to trust them." - Student roundtable participant, July 2024

"Seeing progression throughout the whole year programme, [there was a] massive difference between how people come at the start both volunteers and young people, seeing how people get to work together and how they've grown, all confident, that's really a highlight." - Student roundtable participant, July 2024

"It's been a really great opportunity for me to be part of this because I've learnt - not just improving the programming skills I already had, but also improving in terms of communication and meeting new people, and I'm constantly building new skills ... this [programme] has really, really helped me and that's why I feel so happy to have taken part." - Anderson, Code Plus participant and Kingston University student, 2022-23

Student leadership and Civic Engagement

With many universities signing to Civic University Agreements, including 'Place' as a function of their executive teams, and committing to do more in their local region, the importance of civic engagement as an opportunity for student leadership cannot be understated.

There are a variety of benefits which enhancing youth social action has to the community, as demonstrated in the [iwill Movement's Learning Hub's May 2023 report](#), which saw:

- Social cohesion improving as a result of youth social action opportunities, with young people noting 'their increased sense of community';
- Development in young people's 'change agency', which saw 'young people's belief that change is possible' increasing as a result of interventions;
- There were also increases in 'civic participation'.

With a [Bridge Group report in 2021](#) showing that 51% of graduates in the UK remain local to their university after graduation, universities have a role in supporting the integration of students and graduates into these communities, to encourage them to stay in these areas and support the local labour market, and to foster positive behaviours like civic participation which will enable students and graduates to feel confident being part of any community they choose to be a part of.

"Universities should encourage their students to be vocal and centrefold in leading change and standing up for what they believe in in an effective way, which also produces so many skills and links for their students." – Student participant, Campaigning & Advocacy Training Series, 2023-24



Student leadership and Civic Engagement

Alongside these potential benefits to students as a result of youth social action, our communities also need this support. Students offer an incredible resource to university regions, and the benefits to fostering stronger community relationships have been evident in our work.

Our 2023-24 Impact Report showed:



56%

of community partners reporting that their participation in our activities had positively impacted their view of students.



88%

of partners agreed the students added expertise to their work, with big possibilities for universities in launching knowledge exchange activities involving student leadership.



88%

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

Chapter Two

How to engage student leaders

Auditing your activities

We believe that there are far more opportunities for student leadership in existing activities which universities are delivering with students, or through their strategic goals, than are currently being delivered.

This section of the toolkit aims to provide your team with the frameworks to audit your existing activities to ensure that opportunities to embed student leadership are not being missed and can be introduced, depending on what your resources, budget, and capacity allows.

Auditing your activities

1. Map out your programme timeline from start to finish.

Look at the whole programme, including the pre-delivery activities (i.e. planning the programme and finding partners, planning and launching recruitment, designing and delivering training) and the post-delivery activities (i.e. reviewing and evaluating the feedback, creating case studies and reports).

Identify key activities and ask your team:

- What role could student(s) play in delivering this aspect of the activity?
- What skills, competencies, training and support would they need to deliver this in partnership with staff (or independently)?
- What will students explicitly gain from this opportunity, and how will they gain it? (e.g. access to a reference, an accreditation or volunteering award, skill development in a specific area).
- What capacity would be needed from staff to support students to thrive in this role?

Top Tip

In planning this, imagine a student who needs the most amount of development support to thrive. By fully mapping this against staff capacity it can be helpful to imagine the most of what might be required so a decision can be made about whether this student leadership opportunity is possible, and/or whether you need to implement a screening process (e.g. an application, an interview, or some form of group selection workshop) to ensure candidates have sufficient skills and enthusiasm depending on the level of experience needed.

Auditing your activities

2. Work backwards to understand your recruitment timelines for student leaders

Once you have completed your audit and understand what opportunities you might be able to offer within your activities, you need to work backwards against this timeline to think about your student recruitment processes.

You may need to build your student leadership recruitment across two delivery cycles, for example approaching your upcoming delivery with a mindset that recruitment is embedded within this cycle. This could include:

- Watching student involvement within the activity cycle with a mindset to individually approach students who may make good candidates to be leaders for the next delivery cycle;
- Opening an application form during the ongoing programme, so students currently involved as well as students looking for opportunities for the following term/year can apply;
- Having an application and interview/assessment process taking place during or beyond your delivery cycle, so student leaders are appointed and have completed any necessary training prior to the start of your next delivery cycle.

Be mindful of the time you need to allow for these recruitment processes to happen.



Auditing your activities

3. Build in these opportunities and assess what works, what has been challenging, and what can be improved for next time

Once you have introduced these opportunities, ensure that you have considered how you plan to monitor and evaluate how these student leadership opportunities have gone, not only for students but also for the wider staff team who might be coordinating these activities. This could involve:

- Mid and end of programme feedback forms for students and community partners, to assess any challenges which come up mid-way through the programme, or evaluate how it has gone at the end;
- Benchmarking forms completed at the start and end of the programme, particularly for student leaders' outcomes;
- Outputs for student leaders which you may want to track – for example you might want to see an attendance sheet, a timesheet, or a record of meetings held to understand what students have done during their role and what capacity it has added to the staff team.

Tip

You may want to consult and adapt [TASO's post-entry Mapping Outcomes and Activities Tool \(MOAT\)](#), which has been specifically designed for the higher education sector and mapping outcomes related to student success activities.

Make sure time has been built into the delivery cycles to ensure this information is assessed, evaluated, and discussed. We would encourage you to do case studies and focus groups with students (it would be good practice to pay students to participate in these activities), and do an in-depth analysis as a staff team on what you have heard from students, partners, and from your own team's experience. Any learnings and improvements which come from these processes should be embedded in the following programme delivery cycle.

Example: Auditing the Social Innovation Programme for student leadership opportunities

Steps involved in delivering the programme	Ways in which student leaders could be involved	Action Plan
<p style="text-align: center;">Sourcing community partners for the upcoming 8 week programme</p>	<p>Student leaders could send template emails to potential partners; could be involved in discussing the opportunity with partners with staff; or could support the administration of sourcing and confirming partners.</p>	<p>Towards the end of the current delivery cycle, send an email to team leaders to ask if any student leaders want to support with the programme preparation process as a learning opportunity.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Launching the student recruitment process</p>	<p>Student leaders could do lecture shout outs; hold a stall on campus to promote the recruitment; lead a social media or poster campaign to promote the programme; and co-deliver or lead selection and training workshops.</p>	<p>Towards the end of the current delivery cycle, email and speak to students about student leader opportunities for the upcoming cycle to be involved in the recruitment process. Plan for a screening process which may include a 1:1 interview to assess what support students who apply can provide.</p>

Example: Auditing the Social Innovation Programme for student leadership opportunities

Steps involved in delivering the programme	Ways in which student leaders could be involved	Action Plan
<p style="text-align: center;">Becoming team leaders for the programme</p>	<p>Student leaders can be appointed as team leaders for their student consultancy group, to ensure that their group is on track and well coordinated, and can report back to staff on the group's progress and relationship with the community partner.</p>	<p>At the start of the upcoming delivery cycle, during the application process for the programme ask for volunteers for the team leader role. Have a separate assessment process for these applicants (e.g. an additional 1:1 or a leader specific selection workshop); decide your team leaders; and provide a training session specifically for team leaders in addition to general training.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Collecting case studies and impact data</p>	<p>Student leaders could support in coordinating case studies with students; support in delivering a focus group with staff; push the collection of impact data in chasing students to provide this information; or work with a staff member in a session to map improvements in the programme following feedback being received (with feedback anonymised for this purpose).</p>	<p>Towards the middle or end of the delivery cycle, ask for volunteers to support the end of programme impact and improvement processes, with a range of time commitments and level of involvement. Any students who come forward can be supported to help in whichever way they choose, and may be signposted to other leadership opportunities for the next cycle.</p>

Tips for High Quality Student Leader Recruitment

See our 'Delivering High Quality Social Action Activities' toolkit (due to be launched in January 2025) for more general information about recruiting students to your programme. This section below specifically explores recruiting student leaders, where the recruitment process is aimed at programmes where students are going to have higher levels of responsibility, autonomy, or leading on supervisory responsibilities for other students.

1. Understand the competencies of the students you are looking for, or what competencies need to be developed

Before you go out to recruit for the student roles, your team should consider what it is your programme, staff team, student participants, and the student leaders themselves need to thrive within this opportunity.

For us, our general student leader competencies involve the following attributes, and at student leader level (where students are taking on a higher level of responsibility or involvement in the delivery of the activity), we would expect students to demonstrate a higher level of these attributes (or aptitude and interest to develop them) than other students.

Leadership: a commitment to being a social action leader			
<p>Collaboration: how effectively students can work with others to tackle social issues.</p>	<p>Communication: how effectively students can communicate (both verbal and written) with others to tackle social issues.</p>	<p>Self awareness: how effectively students can understand their strengths, weaknesses, limitations and how others might support them to develop.</p>	<p>Problem solving: how effectively can students tackle challenging problems involved in the programme and approaching social issues.</p>
<p>Curiosity: an interest in the world around you, others, and learning about social issues.</p>			

Tips for High Quality Student Leader Recruitment

Other competencies might be more specific to the role the student leader is undertaking which you may need to consider. You may also want to consider embedding the 'Essential Skills for 2035': 'Collaboration'; 'Communication'; 'Creative thinking'; 'Information literacy (skills related to gathering, processing, and using information)'; 'Organising, planning and prioritising work'; and 'Problem-solving and decision making'.

<p>Activity-specific knowledge</p>	<p>If you were delivering an activity which is specifically about sustainability or climate action, you may want to ask students about their knowledge or enthusiasm for this topic.</p>
<p>Planning and organising</p>	<p>If a student leader would be taking on responsibilities for delivering activities or coordinating logistics, you may want to assess their experience and skills in planning and organising activities.</p>
<p>Resilience and ability to adapt</p>	<p>You may want to seek to understand how student leader candidates deal with setbacks or challenging situations, or have adapted to issues in the past.</p>
<p>Initiative and innovation</p>	<p>If your student leader is involved in activities where they are having to practice idea generation or exploring new ideas, or taking the lead where situations are changing rapidly, you may want to ask about their experience in taking initiative or innovation.</p>

“It has created great value for me. It built confidence in being more proactive in all areas of my life. It provided skills that are transferable and very necessary for leadership, project management, resilience and analytical thinking. These are skills that are not taught in [the] classroom yet very essential for success. The universities who are interested in creating social value through education should definitely sponsor [activities like these].” – Student participant, Campaigning & Advocacy Training Series, 2023-24

Tips for High Quality Student Leader Recruitment

2. Assess student leaders applying for the opportunity

Where students are acting in a leadership/representative capacity (especially with members of the public or other students), an assessment process is advised.

Assessment supports:

- Expectation setting, both from you as the programme coordinator and for the students involved;
- Students model the appropriate behaviours (or these can be supported throughout the programme);
- Students' development, and staff's capacity to support this;
- Alignment of opportunity, between what the student is able to get, and what the programme and staff involved are able to adequately provide.

There are many forms that this could take, and you may need to adapt this as you evaluate how the opportunity went and in preparation for another cycle.



Tips for High Quality Student Leader Recruitment

2. Assess student leaders applying for the opportunity

Assessments we would recommend include:

<p>Application form</p>	<p>Is it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As short as it can be (3 questions maximum)? • Asking about motivations, previous experiences, and skills and capabilities? • Giving you an insight into the student? • Accessible and inclusive in format?
<p>A group interview or selection workshop</p>	<p>Is it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed with a mixture of interactive activities, group work and reflective spaces? • Designed for 1-2 assessors per group to be supporting the activity? • Clear to students what is involved so they can show up ready to engage?
<p>An interview or conversation</p>	<p>Is it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifically designed for students taking on higher levels of responsibility? • Designed for at least 2 individuals to be present to mitigate against biases? • Giving a deeper perspective of what has been shared in their initial application? • Enabling space to understand what support that student leader needs to thrive?

Top Tip:

in these settings, we would expect a staff member to be assessing students on their motivations; their soft skills; their mindset towards challenges or problems; and general interest in the programme or activity rather than assessing the skills and experiences they have already gained elsewhere.

Tips for High Quality Student Leader Recruitment

3. Communicate the decision and role expectations

If your recruitment has been successful, when communicating with the students, ensure that you are being clear in reminding them about key aspects of the role.

This includes:

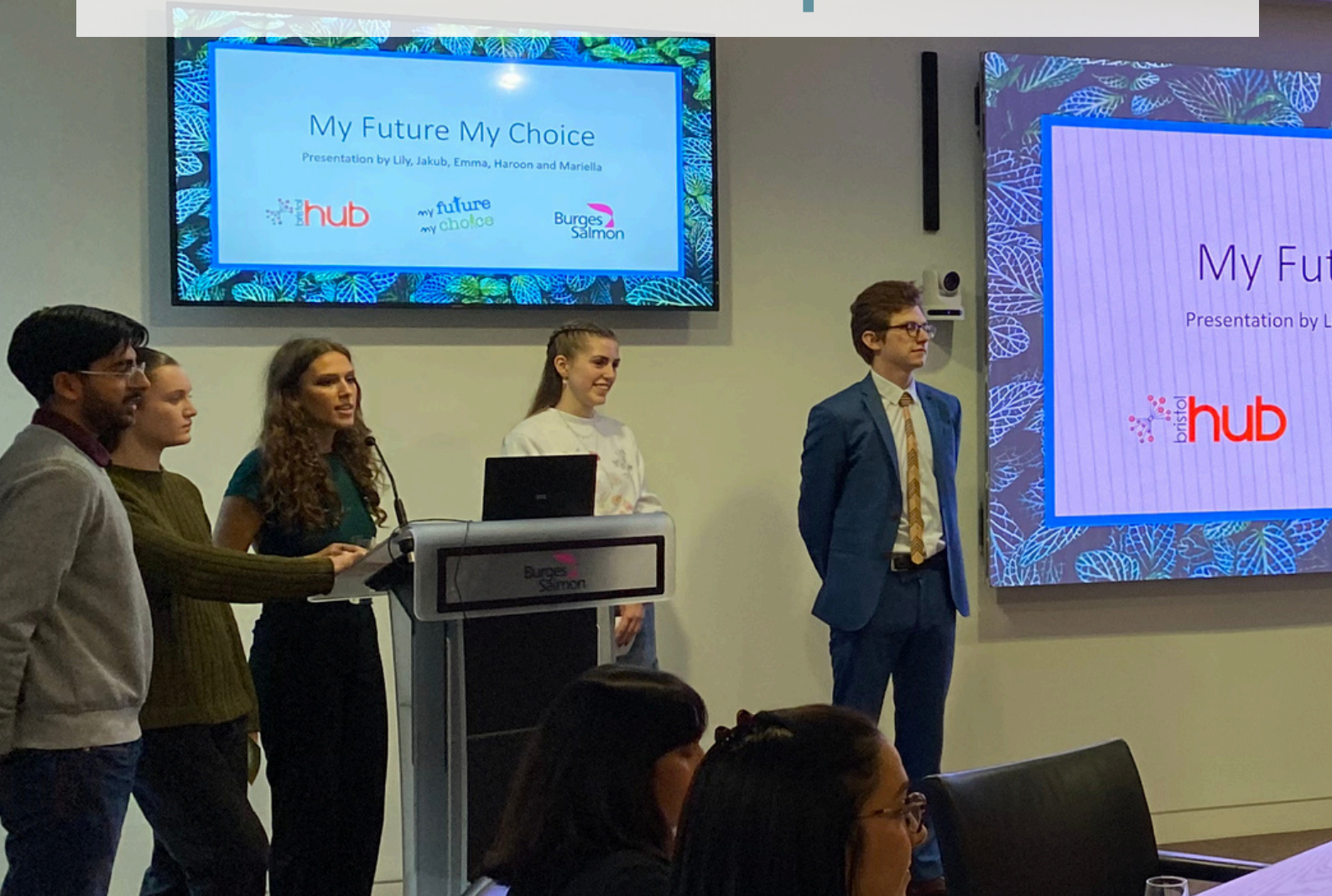
- **Commitment level:** what is expected of them in terms of time commitment, key dates to be available, and when the role ends.
- **Team:** share who they will be working with, who they may report to, and introduce them to any other team members they may not have connected with yet.
- **Volunteer/role description and agreement:** having an agreement and role description is highly useful to share with the student, as it allows you to set expectations early. If a student is not meeting these expectations later on in the programme, you have a neutral document to reference and signpost to the students about where they are not meeting what they had agreed to.

In Chapter Three, we cover strategies for retaining these student leaders once they are recruited, and how you can support them to thrive in the role.



Chapter Three

How to grow student leadership



Whilst Chapter Two explored how to embed student leadership within your activities, Chapter Three will explore how to retain and grow student leadership within your work. Students may be quick to volunteer for these opportunities, but supporting them to navigate barriers to engagement; maintain their motivation and drive; and support their personal and professional development within these opportunities is vital for retaining and growing your cohort of leaders. This chapter shares our expertise in doing this effectively, and how to best support your leaders to succeed.

Fostering a culture of leadership

Although Chapter Two covered how to recruit student leaders, what is also required for a successful programme is fostering a culture of student leadership whereby students can see and imagine themselves in these roles.

At Student Hubs, the value of peer-to-peer learning (both in students working with each other and students working with young people in the community) is an important factor in meeting our outcomes, particularly in students' perception of their confidence, leadership, ability to work with others, and professional skills. As an organisation, we have tried to encourage a non-hierarchical approach with a culture of support and equity and inclusion, so that students and participants at all levels are able to trust, engage effectively, and cultivate positive relationships with staff, other students and community members through our initiatives.

Top tips for introducing this culture of student leadership within your activities includes:

Start small and grow outwards

When developing your initial team, we would recommend starting small. There is a reason most Student Unions insist that societies have three to four core members before they can affiliate. Once you have established how well your small team is working together, you may look to grow the team the following academic year, or expand to other activities or issue areas you may wish students to lead on.

In our experience, these key roles have included:

- An overall leader who is supervised by staff;
- A student leader who supports us to run our newsletter, social media content, and communicates and shares about our work with students;
- Student leaders who have a designated responsibility for either a specific programme or remit such as fundraising, events, or one-off opportunities.

"I think facing challenges and coming up with solutions with my teammates is definitely going to help me in the future because no matter which field I get into ... people work in a team. One of my strengths and key learning[s] from this programme was teamwork. This is something that's going to be useful in every area of my life, not just work but also maintaining my personal relationships because communication is very important." – Alisha, Social Innovation Programme participant and University of Bristol student, 2023-24

Focus on building a team rather than a network of individuals.

The challenge in recruiting for specific roles and responsibilities is that your overall student leader may not feel highly connected to the programme specific work which your Coordinator is doing. It's up to your staff to ensure that you build in opportunities for team cohesion and for your student leaders to learn more about each other and see each other as a joint unit, not students working in isolation. We have found that having weekly or fortnightly 'committee' meetings have helped to foster this bond, along with delivering joint training sessions, delivering social activities, and working specifically with the overall student leader to help them to foster this culture and check in with their peers.

Spend time introducing student leaders to your wider cohort.

In order to build your talent pipeline for future years, and for students to recognise the potentially new role which student leaders play within your activity, staff should ensure that student leaders are exposed to your wider student cohort. This could be through a social media 'introduction' campaign, such as Instagram reels which see student leaders videoing a short introduction to who they are, their role, and how they hope to connect with students that year. You can also think about your communications and who these come from (e.g. being sent by your student leader or jointly signed off); your students' role in attending training even if they aren't co-delivering; and your student leaders reaching out to members of your student cohort to check in throughout the programme.

"I think facing challenges and coming up with solutions with my teammates is definitely going to help me in the future because no matter which field I get into ... people work in a team. One of my strengths and key learning[s] from this programme was teamwork. This is something that's going to be useful in every area of my life, not just work but also maintaining my personal relationships because communication is very important." – Alisha, Social Innovation Programme participant and University of Bristol student, 2023-24

Consider the perks and benefits for student leaders specifically within your activity.

Student leaders should have distinct benefits for being part of your programme, and these perks should be marketed to them and other students accordingly e.g. access to training activities or social activities; an enhanced reference from the staff team; access to leader or skill-specific training; signposting to other leadership opportunities within the university or through your programme; professional development support; or accreditation through your university's award scheme.

Use your student leaders' peer network to your advantage (and help them to grow and foster it).

One of the most successful ways of marketing our activities historically has been through the connections which our student leaders have to other students. You may need to support students to understand the ways in which they can mobilise this network. It may be challenging for them to put themselves out there to do this work, but this can be seen as a great way to enhance their confidence, self-belief, and understanding about how they can network.

Top Tip:

Examples may include supporting them to write a social media post about their student leader role and the activity you are recruiting for; asking them to do a lecture or seminar shout out about the programme (with the permission of their academic); helping them draft an email to ask for information to be circulated via a faculty newsletter; or simply through approaching students as part of a stall or leafleting campaign on campus.

Retaining your student leaders

There may be circumstances in which your student leaders need to step back or step down from their roles, but in working with student leaders in our activities, we have found ways to try and mitigate or prevent this from happening.

Build trust

Trust between student leaders and the staff team supporting them is vital for a positive relationship. Trust takes time to build, and we have typically frontloaded how staff engage with students – and particularly student leaders – to build this relationship early. This can include in how you vet your applicants for student leader positions, in 1:1 support you provide them on a semi-regular basis, in training and induction sessions you deliver, in how you communicate with them (we have used Slack specifically to keep connected with our teams of student leaders each year), and in how you check in.

Create touchpoints

Having regular touchpoints to check in with students is important to ensure you notice if a student shows signs of disengaging. This might be a weekly, fortnightly or monthly meeting they are required to attend, and where possible, in-person is preferable to virtual. Your volunteer/role agreement may stipulate that they need to reply to your emails within a certain timeframe, and that if you haven't heard from them, you may have a system to escalate how you check in (i.e. a follow up email, a text or call if no response to this). You may also work with another student leader to ensure they are also checking in with the team or other student participants, and letting you know if they have any concerns raised.

Tips for committee meetings (ideally led or supported by your student leader(s):

- **30-60 minutes in length**
- **They should cover: a wellbeing check-in; reviewing actions from the last meeting; individual updates; support requests; agreeing and allocating actions**
- **The agenda and resources should be shared in advance**
- **Attendance should be mandatory, with any absences communicated in advance**
- **Mini training sessions can be embedded within this format**

Retaining your student leaders

Prioritise development and support

The development of your student leaders should be central in how you work with and support them. Ideally you would have a relationship whereby students who are struggling or facing barriers to engaging with you come to speak to you about any issues they are facing, but if this is not the case, you may want to try and re-engage them through the angle of development. This could be in framing your check in communications around what support you can provide, whether this is in the form of additional training, a skills 1:1 check in, or a phone call about what they are facing. You may also want to remind them of their commitment in the volunteer/role agreement which they signed, and where lack of engagement risks them losing some of the benefits they had signed up to the opportunity for i.e. an enhanced reference, or not being invited to attend further training.

“It’s been nice having a space with other student leaders and sharing experiences. Learning these skills now by being a student leader that are then enhanced by the sessions is great for future personal and professional development.” - Emma, a University of Warwick student involved in our Student Leadership Training Series, 2023-24

Tips:

Key areas we would emphasise include not being afraid to make phone calls; prioritising wellbeing and problem solving; having clear expectations and consequences which are implemented; signposting if it's not the right opportunity for them; and ensuring skill development, getting a reference (depending on length of engagement) and reflection opportunities are still offered to them.

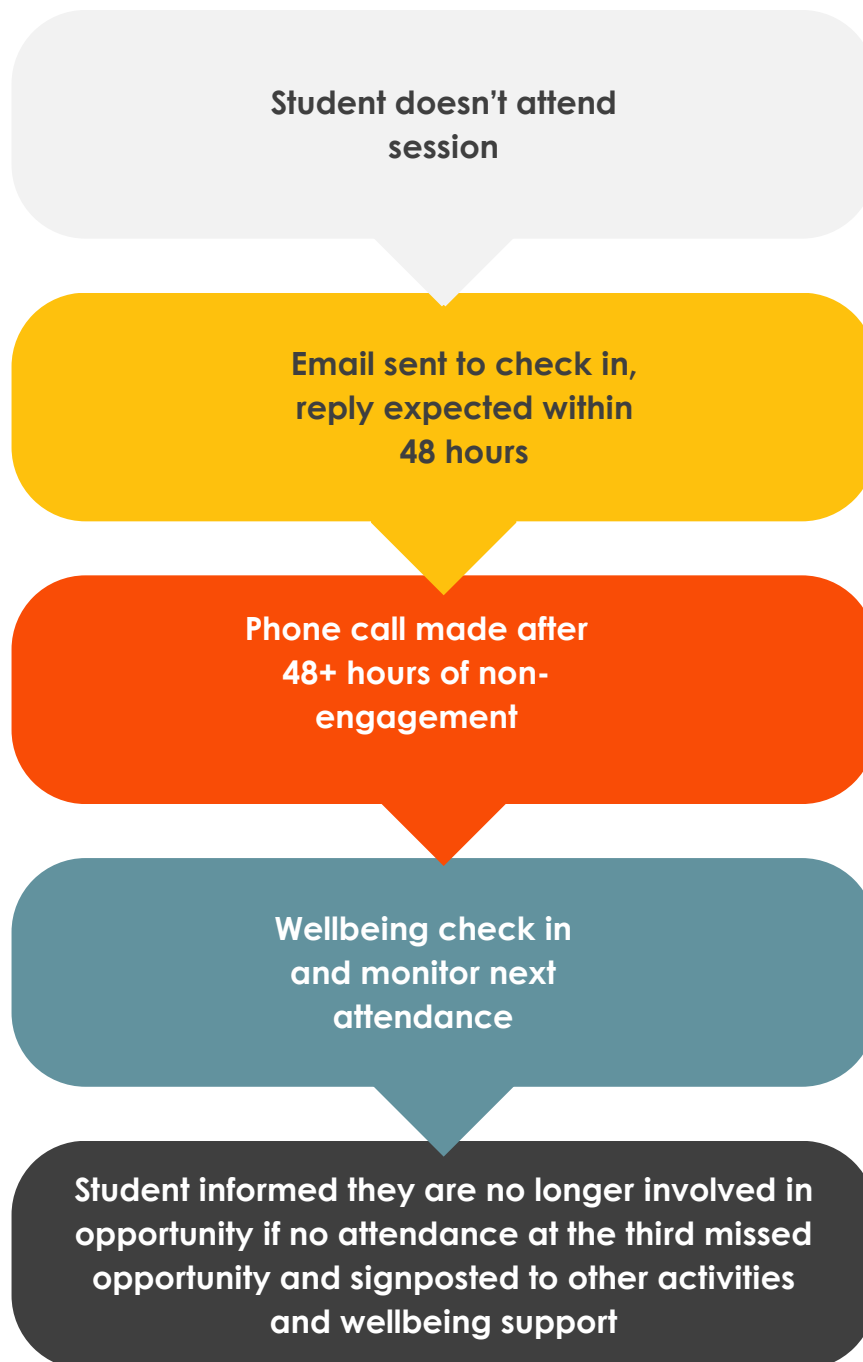


Retaining your student leaders

Having a considered exit strategy

Whilst you may do as much as you can to try and retain your student volunteers, knowing how to offboard them well will support you and the students to have as positive an experience as possible.

A process for disengagement might look like this following journey:



Delivering personal and professional development for student leaders

There are three aspects of how we have typically delivered personal and professional support for student leaders, beyond what we may deliver as part of our regular volunteer support.

Training and skills support

Key sessions which we have delivered as part of our student leader training include:

- **Induction sessions:** introducing them to Student Hubs, our staff team, each other, and the basics about the programmes and what we do. These also include our expectations, about what each student can expect in their role, and boundaries.
- **Pre-delivery sessions:** this can include specific training about our recruitment cycle, including how to recruit volunteers, how to lead at freshers' fair, compliance, safeguarding and equity, diversity and inclusion. We tend to cover this content in one half-day session rather than splitting them out to encourage our student leader team to get excited and motivated for the start of the delivery cycle.
- **Additional support throughout the year:** in the past we have delivered skills and topic specific training to our student leader cohort, either virtually, during their regular committee meetings, or at the request of a student leader or cohort. These have previously included sessions on leadership; communication; finance and fundraising; volunteer management; project and event management; public speaking; resilience; and teamwork and managing conflict.

"The process of meeting new people and taking on a new role makes future roles seem less daunting. With the end of university looming and the leap into the workplace approaching, this is quite reassuring. Branch Up has acted as a gentler transition into work and workplace skills, where we have responsibility but always with supervision and authority figures around to help." – Emma, Branch Up participant and University of Southampton student, 2022-23

Delivering personal and professional development for student leaders

Development check ins

Development check ins are useful touchpoints at the start, midway through, and the end of your student leaders' engagement.

- In your first check in, you should aim to understand what skills they are looking to gain from this opportunity, what support they need, and make an action plan for this.
- In your midway check in, you should aim to understand if the role is meeting the students' expectations, the highlights and challenges they have faced in their role so far, any additional support required, and how they feel their skill development is going.
- In your final check in, you should aim to understand the impact the role and experience has had on the student, help them to understand what skills they have gained and how they can be applied in other contexts, any support with including the role in their CV or future job applications, and signposting for other leadership opportunities.



Delivering personal and professional development for student leaders

The offboarding process

Student leaders should feel they have a role to play in supporting the development of the activity your staff team is delivering, or the future of your scope of work. You should also consider doing this for any students who perhaps had to step down throughout their engagement but still delivered a significant amount of work as part of the opportunity.

This could be through:

- **Handovers:** writing and receiving a handover document is incredibly valuable. For the outgoing student leader, it enables them to capture and reflect upon their learnings, what has worked and what has been challenging, and provide pointers or next steps for the incoming student leader to make sure no momentum is lost.
- **Reflections session:** having a session towards the end of your activity with all of your student leaders to reflect on what they have learnt and what improvements they think the activity should have for the following delivery cycle. This also gives you space to encourage students to think about how they can add this role to their CV or future job applications and signpost to Careers & Employability services at your university.
- **Celebrating what they have achieved:** making space to recognise and acknowledge your student leaders' achievements should also be a key part of your offboarding plan. This may be in the form of a social event, an awards event, an AGM, or through a personalised email, conversation or social media campaign.



Conclusion

As we have demonstrated throughout this toolkit, student leadership offers a range of benefits, not only for students' professional development but also for your university's strategic outcomes, your community and place-based relationships, and in creating active citizens who will enhance the workforce of tomorrow.

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

- Sharing the value of student leadership with your senior leaders, and building your case for embedding student leadership within your activities;
- Auditing your own internal student engagement activities to understand where opportunities for student leadership may lie;
- Working with your university team(s) to map out the required capacity, support, resources, and relevant outputs, outcomes, and processes needed to recruit student leaders;
- Implementing our guidance in Chapters Two and Three, and evaluating and developing your programmes from your monitoring and evaluation 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:

- Delivering High Quality Social Action Activities
- Working with Community Partners
- Our Guide for Students on Volunteering
- Our Guide for Students on Incubation

You can access further resources to support engaging student leaders, such as our self-assessment guide for students and our checklist for universities, at our website (www.studenthubs.org) until 31 January 2025. Beyond this point, resources will be hosted via the Civic University Network at civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk.

Appendices

More about our data:

In summer 2023 Student Hubs undertook a piece of research to explore how development of key skills (confidence, leadership, teamwork and resilience) varied for students from different backgrounds. This was largely practitioner research which is collected to prove and improve our activities. Additional qualitative questions were added to the end of programme forms to better understand the mechanisms of skill development for students. After collection questions around skill development (and student experience) were cross referenced with equal opportunities data so that averages could be found for quantitative responses split by background. In order to calculate statistical significance of differences in quantitative data chi-square test of independence was used with a 5% confidence level. Qualitative data has been used to supplement statistically significant findings to try and understand the difference in experience. There is likely to be self selection bias in who responds to our end of programme feedback, with about a 65% response rate from students who took part in our activities.

Top Tip

As universities with larger data sets and resources than us as a social action charity, we would highly recommend conducting your own statistical analyses from your student cohorts participating in these types of activities. We have conducted this type of analysis before with a university partner, and based on our experience, we were able to review the following data which may also be of value to your institution, including: your students' demographic profile; their average UCAS tariffs and clearing enrolment information; their qualifications upon entry to higher education (e.g. are they more likely to have studied vocational subjects?); their progression, retention and attainment outcomes; and their graduate outcomes.

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Visit www.studenthubs.org to learn more about our legacy work

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