Supporting Early Career Starters
Student Hubs' Approach

student hubs

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. 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.

In order to meet our objectives, we've had to ensure the organisation ran smoothly and staff were well supported. Over the past 17 years, we've trialled many different policies and have thought deeply about how people and culture can meet the needs of our team and our work. In particular how we support our early career staff, who we've recognised also meet our long-term theory of change objectives, supporting active citizenship for life.

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.

Our aim is that our legacy work will continue to add to this, even amidst the challenging contexts faced by the sector. We also recognise that our legacy goes beyond our mission statement, and that there are many learnings from our history, including our approach to people and culture, which could support a wide range of organisations across the charity sector.

Foreword

Before I joined Student Hubs I was a fellow on a graduate scheme and in addition to my placement at a housing association I received mentoring, professional development days, a peer network and consistent feedback - I also made several lifelong friends. All of the things you would expect from a graduate scheme.

Fast forward a year and starting my first role outside of that scheme was exciting, but nerve wracking - what would the workplace look like without that support framework: would I ask silly questions, would I build up a positive working relationship with my colleagues, would I have the skills necessary to perform the role well?

As I stepped into my position delivering student social action programmes in Bristol I was pleasantly surprised. I had joined an organisation in which I spoke daily with my line manager and colleagues, even those in other cities. I looked in my calendar and saw regular peer support sessions with those delivering similar roles and programmes as well as team meetings to connect formally and informally. Over the first few weeks my induction was thorough, and the warm welcome made me comfortable asking questions and settling in.

Since joining the national team in 2021, I have been a part of these processes from the other side. I have supported early career colleagues to thrive as their line manager, updated our recruitment process to make it as inclusive and accessible as possible, and reviewed our induction package to make sure all new starters feel welcome and ready to get started with their role. Working with those taking the first steps in their social impact careers is a huge opportunity - they bring so much passion, enthusiasm and innovation, and with the right support you can set them up for success as they continue their journey within and beyond your organisation.

Sophie Payne
**Network Director, Student Hubs**

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Introduction

Student Hubs was a youth social action charity that focused on supporting university students to engage with the social and environmental issues. We were founded by students and over the years our staff team was packed full of individuals early in their careers. This was due to the fact that:

- we had a strong pipeline of student alumni joining the team after being engaged with our work as student volunteers;
- and our roles were delivery focused and the responsibilities and associated pay banding lended themselves to early career individuals.

> At Student Hubs, we define an early career starter as **someone who is in their first or second role**. They might be a university graduate but this isn't a necessary experience.

As our work developed and the organisation grew, we also saw how our mission of supporting active citizens and social impact leaders extended beyond our work with students, and could also be achieved with our staff team. As such, we understood that we had a responsibility to support our staff team as best as we could. We also supported Worthwhile, a graduate recruitment scheme which focused on supporting graduates to join charities and social enterprises in entry-level and junior manager roles, supporting them to take their first steps into a socially impactful career.

In prioritising supporting those early in their career, Student Hubs has a high staff turnover by design, and it was imperative that we had a considered and established approach to working with individuals to ensure they had the best start and experience within their roles. In this report, we'll run through the different stages of the lifecycle of an early career starter, sharing the different process, checklists, and frameworks we used to support them to succeed whilst also meeting our own objectives.

New talent → **Recruitment** → **Induction** → **Ongoing Support** → **Offboarding** → New opportunities
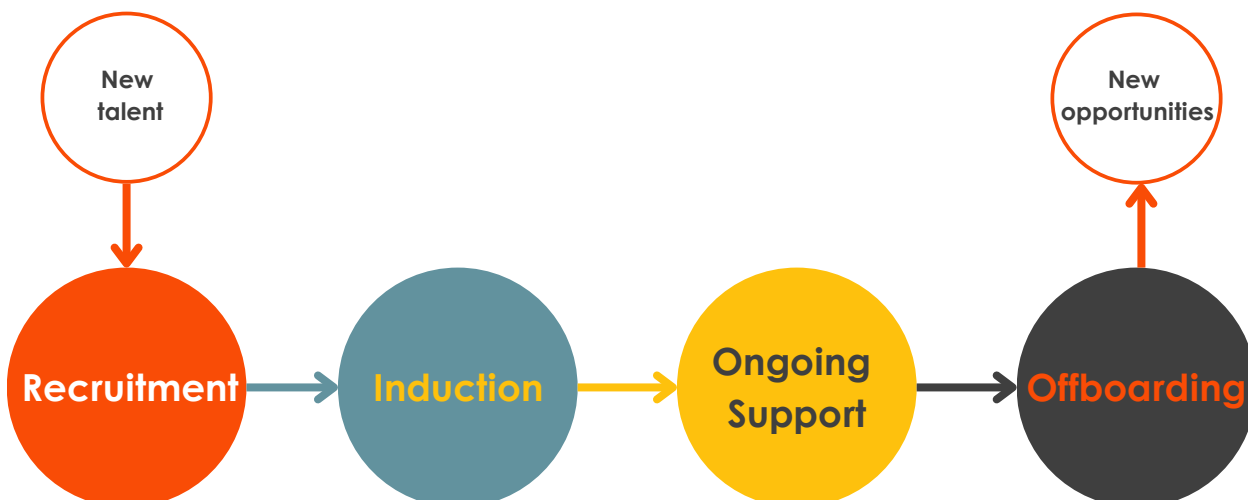
Recruitment

Your recruitment practice is so important - it's not just your opportunity to find the right candidate for the role, but also the first impression you are making on that new team member, your opportunity to build rapport, set expectations and establish trust.

Before you start

Reflect upon the role. What responsibilities will the new starter have? Before recruiting, are there any changes to be made in the structure of the current team? What skills, experience and attributes might the ideal candidate have? How much support is available for this role? Given responsibilities and support, what level of role is appropriate?

Reflect upon unconscious bias. All members of the recruitment team should receive unconscious bias training, and be able to reflect on how their own bias may impact the recruitment process. Having a team who are able to have open conversations about bias is an important first step to setting up equitable and fair recruitment.

Decide on your interview panel. The interview panel could include the hiring manager, a member of the senior management team or peers in the role. Make sure the panel understand their responsibilities, are available as required and are brought-in to (and excited about!) the recruitment process.

Decide on your timeline. Make sure your timeline includes enough time for the role to be advertised widely (we'd recommend four weeks), applications to be assessed and interviews to be conducted (with fair preparation time for candidates) - and don't budge on your deadlines. Candidates may be planning to make an application around other commitments and needs, and you want to hear from everyone who is interested.

Advertising the role

The role description

The role description is the first place candidates will learn about the responsibilities associated with the available role, and your organisation. At Student Hubs our role descriptions included the following sections:

- **About us** - a brief introduction to the organisation;
- **Our approach** - including our values and Theory of Change; HR and people policies; and organisational approach to safeguarding and equal opportunities;
- **About the role** - painting the picture of the role, the development opportunities available, and a bulleted list of responsibilities;
- **About you** - highlighting the three most important capabilities all candidates should have, as well as a realistic list of essential and desirable criteria;
- **How to apply** - an overview of the application process including deadlines, the process and tips for a successful application;
- **What happens next** - a reminder of deadlines and an overview of the next steps in the recruitment process.

Some additional top tips to consider include:

- Be critical of the application process. What do you really need to know? How can you get this information with as little burden on the applicant as possible? How can you make the process flexible? This could look like not requiring CVs, offering candidates the opportunity to submit a video or written cover letter, having set application questions for candidates to answer, etc;
- Offer candidates the opportunity to chat informally with the hiring manager, to ask questions and develop their understanding of the role;
- Include details of your interview panel, selection process and timeline. Be as transparent as possible so that candidates know what to expect;
- Be transparent about pay and only ask for qualifications which are necessary for the role in line with the Show the salary pledge;
- Outline what you are doing to make the process accessible, and encourage applicants to request additional adjustments via a named contact;
- Consider becoming a Disability Confident Employer, offering a guaranteed interview scheme for disabled candidates who meet the minimum criteria;
- Ensure there is a plain text version of the role description available for accessibility.

Promoting the role

In order to attract an amazing pool of candidates you should promote your role far and wide, beyond your usual audience. The following checklist outlines some places you could consider, but is by no means exhaustive. Use your knowledge of your organisation, sector and city to build a comprehensive checklist for recruitment - and update it regularly.

- [ ] Internal website, newsletters and social media platforms;
- [ ] Word of mouth - ask your current team, volunteers, Trustees and partners to share the opportunity. You may also like to reach out to previous applicants;
- [ ] Relevant professional networks - these may be aimed at roles in certain issue areas (e.g. sustainability), with certain responsibilities (e.g. fundraising) or from certain backgrounds (e.g. disability networks);
- [ ] Social media groups - on social media platforms there are lots of groups promoting social impact careers, take the time to find some which feel relevant to your geographic area or social issue area;
- [ ] University portals - a great place to list early career roles which may be interesting to recent graduates and alumni;
- [ ] Local organisations - your local volunteering, charity and social enterprise (VCSE) network, charity coworking spaces, newspapers and job centres are a good place to promote roles;
- [ ] General websites - depending on budget you may like to list your job on Indeed, Linkedin, CharityJob, Inclusive Hires, Evenbreak or other job boards.

Selecting your candidate

Keeping candidates informed

Top tip: create template emails so that candidates can be kept up to date regularly with key information

Key times to contact candidates include:

- **Application**. Let early applicants know you have received their application and remind them of your timelines and any other steps to complete (e.g. completing your equal opportunities form, confirming they are eligible to work). You can also take this opportunity to remind them to reach out with any questions or reasonable adjustment requests.

- **Invitation to interview**. Let successful applicants know the logistics of the interview, including where it is happening, when it is happening, an overview of what to expect, who to contact if they have any issues on the day and who to contact with reasonable adjustment requests; who they can expect to speak to on the interview panel; and what to expect in the interview including the competencies you will be looking for and guidance on the questions that will be asked. Let unsuccessful applicants know they will not be moving forward in the process - so that they are not left wondering.

- **Job offer**. Phone successful candidates but always follow up with an email, giving them a set amount of time to get back to you. Let unsuccessful candidates know they will not be moving forward in the process - including an opportunity to receive feedback from the panel.

Supporting candidates to shine

Supporting candidates to shine is especially important for early career applicants, who may not have experienced a recruitment process before. Key things to remember throughout the process are:

- **Communication.** Make sure it is as clear as possible to your candidates what the role is, what the timeline is and what they can expect from the recruitment process. This may include sharing the capabilities and frameworks you use to mark, sharing information about how you blind applications, keeping them updated via email, sharing interview questions, and more.

- **Opportunity.** There should be several opportunities for candidates to show you each competency. Not everyone excels in writing a CV and cover letter, so why not give them the option to record a video instead which can be transcribed for the assessors to review. Some people get nervous in interviews and struggle with structured competency questions, so why not offer a practical task based scenario to see how they approach work in reality.

- **Equity.** You should make sure your interview process is as accessible as possible, this might look like offering interviews online using a platform with captions, making sure rooms used are wheelchair accessible or having flexibility in interview times to fit around caring responsibilities and prayer times. However, you won't hit everything so make sure you are open to people's unique needs and regularly remind candidates they can let you know what else you could be doing to support them to shine.

Induction

Before day one

Welcome letter. Before they start, why not send them a welcome letter letting them know key information for day one including working hours, dress code, directions and maybe even a reminder to bring their favourite mug to the office. To make them feel even more welcome add in a handwritten card from the team and a bar of chocolate.

Recommended resources. At Student Hubs we also shared a list of suggested resources. These are optional reads, listens and watches to set themselves up for success from day one. It's important to reiterate they are not expected to complete the list before they start, but it's things they may like to take a look at if they want a greater understanding of certain areas - especially as their induction unfolds. If budgets allow you could even offer a small welcome budget to buy a resource they think will support them to start the role well.

Contract explanation. For early career members of your team it is so important that when you send them their contract, you also explain key elements. You may have a staff handbook which explains policies, or you may offer a quick chat to talk through the contract. This is likely to be one of their first times reading a legal document so think about how you are making it accessible for them to understand.

Welcome call. It's also nice to offer a call before their first day, this is a great opportunity for them to ask any little questions and for you to share an overview of their induction plan so they know exactly what to expect. Hopefully this will calm some of their natural day one nerves.

Their induction

The most important consideration when designing an induction for an early career new starter is scaffolding. What do they need to know now, tomorrow, next week, in a month and further down the line. There's a fine balance between overwhelming a new starter by telling them everything at once, and disempowering them by not giving them the information - and trust - they need to do a good job.

The induction you design will depend on your organisation, the role and responsibilities and maybe even the prior experience of the individual. It's likely to include an introduction to your organisation and approach, an overview of core skills the new starter needs, and an introduction to your approach to people and culture.

Top tips for inducting early career members of your team well include:

- Provide a clear overview of what they can expect, and when - and what is expected from them. This may include a clear timeline of deadlines and prioritised responsibilities; workplace expectations around timeliness, communications and inbox management; and other competencies in line with your organisational culture such as proactivity, curiosity and feedback.

- Support your new starter with setting up a task management system that works for them. This will likely be tweaked over the days, months and years but giving them something to start with that you can both review regularly means you are on the same page and they have an understanding from day one of how they are expected to plan, prioritise and record work. It's also a place for them to store floating questions and actions that will naturally arise.

- As well as including workplace competencies in expectations, make sure you have planned spaces for discussion on this. Adhoc challenges or questions might arise, or you might want to develop more formal training on office etiquette, using online systems, inbox management and working well with others. Don't assume these things are known and try and put yourself in the shoes of an individual joining their first workplace.

- Allow lots of space for questions, don't fill all the time but be flexible so that the new starter can reflect and discuss topics openly. It's even better if this is time when you are in person together, as questions arise more naturally, or you could work together in a video call on independent tasks to mimic this dynamic in an online space.

Ongoing support

Line management

It is likely early career members of your team will need more support, both with their role and with general workplace skills. We have found the following tips set you and your report up for success:

- **Spending time in person together so that you can answer questions and give regular feedback and validation.** Think about the quality of time you are spending together in person too - there should be times you are working together on tasks and times you are physically together and working on separate things, but available to answer questions.

- **Offering regular validation.** Let them know when they're doing a good job and let them know when they're on the right track. This will build up the confidence and resilience needed for this role and ultimately help them make decisions and own the role down the line. They may ask if they're doing the right thing, or if they're on the right track, or you may have to offer this validation freely. As their skills build up letting them know you see their growth can continue to offer this support.

- **Supporting them without taking over their work.** Sometimes it might be tempting to take on an urgent task yourself but this may leave your report feeling like they aren't fulfilling their role or that they don't have the skills to do the task. When you are tempted to take on a task, step back and ask yourself how you can empower them to complete the task instead - Could you do it together? Could you show them once and then let them take over? Could you write up the steps clearly for them to reference?

- **Creating psychological safety.** You want your report to feel able to come to you if they're stuck, or if they've failed at something. Instead of judging failures, invite them as an opportunity for growth. Ask them "What did you learn?" and think about how to capture learnings for the future. You should also be explicit in letting them know when they can reach you and that it's part of your role, you are happy and willing to support them.

- **Being decisive early on**. Early career reports will likely look to you for key decisions which support them in their role. Make sure you are familiar with their role and responsibilities and feel able to make decisions. Over time you will support them to make those decisions through asking key questions like "What would be the pros and cons of each approach?" and "What will the impact be on our stakeholders?"

- **Being prepared to proofread and check**. Tying into the validation point above, it's likely early career reports will need support with the emails, documents and other work they are creating. Establish a clear feedback loop by doing detailed proofreads and providing both constructive and positive comment.

- **Scaffolding support**. As mentioned the key to supporting early career individuals is scaffolding information, and support. For example for the first three weeks you may co create their work plan, for the next three weeks you may sit together while they do it and you work on other things to answer questions, for the next three weeks you may ask them to send you the work plan once complete for feedback and then finally they will be a work planning expert. You can review it weekly in catch ups safe in the knowledge that they are capturing their work effectively. When you make these scaffolding plans, communicate them with your report so that expectations are clear on both sides.

Team engagement

Just as it is important for line managers to spend time together in person with their early career reports, it's important for them to spend quality time with the whole team. Time together as a team fosters collaboration, energises individuals and builds a strong organisational approach to work. Colleagues can build a rapport, share passions and expertise and learn from one another as role models and social impact leaders.

To engage the team at Student Hubs we facilitated:

- **In person team days**
  - **What?** Time together outside of the day to day for team building and professional development
  - **Why?** Spending time together in person removes the temptation to check emails, or work in the background, meaning members of the team are present and able to engage with their growth and their colleagues
- **Virtual team days**
  - **What?** A virtual morning together focused on a strategic issue or update, and an afternoon to complete associated tasks
  - **Why?** We found that a full virtual day was too intense for colleagues, and that they needed time to reflect on sessions and complete associated actions
- **Hub Holiday**
  - **What?** An annual staff retreat to set up well for the academic year including organisational updates, working together reviews, time to complete tasks and team building
  - **Why?** As we worked on a clear academic year cycle August was a great time to refresh, and set up well for the following 12 months

Personal development support

All members of the team completed a personal development plan with their line manager following their induction, and probation period. This invited them to reflect on their career (and life more holistically!) ambitions and actions they could take across the following 12 months to work towards these ambitions. These plans meant each member of the team could receive tailored support including:

- Signposting to internal frameworks and resources;
- Recommended external training, reading, watching and listening resources;
- Internal peer support;
- Team training, both designed and delivered internally and arranged with an external provider;
- Regular personal development reflections in their weekly 1-1s with their line manager;
- The opportunity to represent Student Hubs at an event or conference;
- The opportunity to deliver external training and presentations;
- Support to shadow colleagues internally and externally;
- Championing to join - and lead - internal working groups and network areas, such as Sustainability and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion;
- Access to a personal development budget;
- Allocated personal development time.

Flexible working

Part of our approach at Student Hubs was trusting our team to know what worked for them when it came to work, encouraging autonomy and responsibility. For early career members of the team, we supported line managers to have conversations about energy throughout the day, week and month to ensure their work plan aligned with their motivation as far as possible. A big part of this was including conversations about flexible working from early on. However this was balanced with knowing that early career staff would require more support from their line managers, and benefited from structured time together. As such, teams were set parameters for working together at least 2-3 times a week, and then supported to explore how they worked best for the remainder of the week - a key skill necessary for them in future roles.

Employee listening

Our employee listening strategy consisted of an annual staff survey and a six monthly pulse survey. The annual survey covered organisational feedback on our values, culture, commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and strategy; satisfaction with individual training and development opportunities, engagement at work and inclusion in the workplace. The results were analysed by the management team to create an action plan. The results and action plan were then shared with the team to hold us accountable to organisational changes.

The pulse survey happened at the midway point of the year and was based on the key findings in the previous staff survey. For example if we had had feedback about our approach to professional development, and committed to an action plan which included an internal learning and development programme, we would include questions in the pulse survey to get feedback on that. This meant we could be agile and continue tweaking our approach.

Having a transparent and consistent strategy to employee listening made it easier for early career members of the team to provide feedback, and feel confident being honest. In turn, this made it easier for us to meaningfully improve the support available to the team. Where staff could easily see feedback being addressed and influencing processes, they felt more control in their work, trusted, and respected.

We recommend reviewing our **Organisational Policies report** to hear more about how we implemented staff voice into our operational policies, including flexible and remote working.

Offboarding

Appraisals

Appraisals can be a scary word for some - linked to pay reviews and having to pitch your value to your employer. That's not how we approached them at Student Hubs. Our appraisals were instead centred around individual reflection, collecting meaningful feedback and future growth.

When? Every six months, a year between appraisals seems like a long time - so instead we opted to check in formally more regularly

Who? An individual and their line manager, with themes and requests collated by the network lead

What? The table below outlines our structure:

Section	Reflection
Part 1: Job performance	• **Goals** which the individual has been working on over the past 3-6 months. This should include successes, challenges and requests for support • Performance against each competency in the **journey framework**. The framework outlines expectations in terms of workplace, role based and professional development competencies for each role in the organisation. Individuals were invited to reflect upon the skills and strengths they have, and the areas they want to develop in • **Other areas** of work the individual has been working on including one-off achievements and contributions to organisational impact and development

Section	Reflection
Part 2: Learning	**On the job learning** they are proud of, or found challenging. Digging into how that developed their competencies and skills, and areas they could further develop - Collecting and reflection upon **feedback** from internal and external colleagues. Individuals were encouraged to collect feedback on an area they find challenging, recognising that we grow in the uncomfortable - Additional **personal development** they have been pursuing be that through shadowing, joining a working group, attending training, etc.
Part 3: Looking ahead	- Their **current role at Student Hubs** - what's working well and what could be better. What do they enjoy? What don't they enjoy? **Objectives** over the next 3-6 months including anticipated challenges, planned mitigations and requests for support - Ideas for how their role could **develop**. Are there areas of interest for them? Is there a more senior role they would be interested in doing in the future? **Career ambitions** whether internally or externally
Part 4: Values and culture	- How far organisational **values** influence their role and performance, and how they could further embody them in their day to day responsibilities - Contributions to organisational **culture** and how they intend to continue this over the next period - Key strategic areas such as **equity, diversity and inclusion** and **sustainability**. How are they as an individual contributing to organisational commitments?
Next steps	- Action points are captured by the individual and their manager - Feedback is given to the individual by their manager

Line managers were primed to support individuals through the appraisal process by:

- **Taking space to reflect on their report's performance** over the six months prior including identifying performance issues which need to be addressed; examples of where they have acted in line, or out of line, with organisational values; and key strengths they have shown;
- Reviewing their report's written appraisal **before they have a conversation**, identifying key themes and conversations to lead;
- **Planning logistics thoughtfully**. For example considering when in the day and week the appraisal is, which location their report will feel most comfortable sharing openly in, and how to start off on the right foot (e.g. buying them a drink using our staff appreciation budget, establishing a safe space, letting them know they've read the appraisal document);
- **Listening actively**. Their report should be doing most of the talking, with the ling manager instead asking questions to support further reflection and analysis;
- **Staying positive**. As well as providing constructive feedback, reinforcing where things have gone well. When constructive feedback is given ensuring it is effective and focuses on performance, not personality with clear actions to improve behaviours moving forward;
- **Coaching a growth mindset** by asking questions such as "What did you learn from that experience?", "What steps did you take to make that project a success?", "What different approaches could you have taken in that situation?" and "What can you learn from your peers?";
- **Showing a genuine interest in professional development** including taking time after the appraisal to identify suitable opportunities - Could they shadow a colleague? Is there a webinar they could join? How can you champion them to take relevant opportunities in the organisation?;
- **Recording actions** so that they are clear and agreed by all parties;
- **Ending on a high note** with strengths based feedback and a big thank you.

Championing next moves

The intentionality behind our high staff turnover meant we were able to champion our team and support them proactively to take their next steps. This was a key part of appraisals as we sought to understand our team's long term career ambitions, and how their role at Student Hubs was supporting this. We made it clear to staff that their role with Student Hubs was just a part of their larger journey, and encouraged them to:

- reflect regularly on what parts of their role they were enjoying the most;
- identify how they could explore new opportunities within their new roles;
- try job shadowing within the organisation and with our partners;
- take up voluntary positions, including trustee roles;
- and request support with application and interview prep once they started looking for their next roles.

Exit interviews

At Student Hubs every member of the team was invited to two exit interviews - a personal development exit interview with their line manager and an organisational exit interview with the network lead.

Personal development exit interview. This was very similar to an appraisal covering job performance, learning, looking ahead and next steps. The goal was to wrap up the individual's journey at Student Hubs, and support them to reflect on how their experiences to date would support them in future opportunities.

Organisational exit interview. This included the opportunity to feedback honestly on their experience in the role, their work with the team and more broadly the organisational approach. A short form was given to members of the team to complete, followed by a 30 minute conversation with the network lead on their first day. Individuals were encouraged to be honest, and reassured that feedback would be treated professionally and confidentially. Following organisational exit interviews the network lead collated and grouped feedback (to keep it anonymous) and presented the management team with an action plan to discuss.

Conclusion

Supporting staff, no matter where they are in the career journey, is an important part of HR and operations. Supporting your team to thrive at work is both the right thing to do and will result in greater outcomes for your work. As staff move on from your organisation, the better experience they have, the more likely they be active alumni and champion your work with their wider network.

You don't have to do this work alone. You can reach out to other similar organisations, get help from your local VCSE support organisations, ask on a sector forum such as Charity Connect, or use a trusty search engine. In order to move towards the world we want to see, we need to work together.

Below are some further resources you may like to review as you develop your own approach to supporting early career members of your team:
- Evenbreak share reflections and tips on inclusive recruitment
- CIPD have created a full guide to inclusive recruitment
- The Good Growth Hub guide to inducting and onboarding new starters makes sure you have covered all bases
- CharlieHR have a number of resources and templates to support you to onboard new starters well - as well as resources on all areas of the lifecycle
- RootsHR outline why employee engagement is important and how to start your approach
- NCVO reflect on flexible working as a key part of charity sector culture

![student hubs logo]

Student Hubs is a registered charity in England and Wales, no. 1122328.

This report was authored by Sophie Payne and Simran Dhanjal-Field in Winter 2024.

With special thanks to contributions from:
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- Contributions from alumni to our active citizen legacy survey.

This report was designed by Simran Dhanjal-Field.

Visit <u>www.studenthubs.org</u> to learn more about our legacy work