The Case for Social Action Within the Higher Education Experience

student hubs

About the Author

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Acknowledgements

The Student Hubs Team
National Societies and Volunteering Awards, Spring 2023

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Executive Summary

We were Student Hubs, a charity who worked in partnership with UK universities to deliver in-curricular and extracurricular activities championing student social action. In 2016, the Government defined social action as:

'Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It can include volunteering, giving money, community action or simple neighbourly acts. Through the commitment and skill of citizens, social action can empower communities, help people in need, and complement public services. Taking part in social action is also associated with higher levels of wellbeing, and can improve people's confidence and skills.' [1]

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: 'Our vision is a society in which every student participates in social and environmental challenges during their education, supporting them to become active citizens for life. Our mission is to mainstream student social action'[2]. Demonstrated by our theory of change, we 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.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/centre-for-social-action/centre-for-social-action
[2] https://www.studenthubs.org/about/

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.

Throughout our 16 year history, we reached over 20,000 students across 10 Hub locations, over 100,000 students through training, events and conferences, and 1200 community organisations, including reaching over 16,000 community members.[3]

Over the past five years, since 2019-20 we have delivered long-term and one-off social action activities reaching over 6000 students across universities including the University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Kingston University, Leeds Conservatoire, Open University in Wales, University of Southampton, University of Winchester and University College Birmingham. This number doesn't include the students engaged from other non-partner institutions through our training packages and events.

Our activities aimed to support students to meet a range of outcomes, with our final 2023-24 Impact Report sharing outcomes including[4]:
- 88% of students agreed the activity enhanced their university experience;
- 84% of students agreed participating enhanced their wellbeing;
- 91% of students agreed participating in our activities increased their confidence in approaching challenges;
- 44% of students agreed that participating in our activities increased their engagement with their university course;
- 92% of students agreed they gained an increased understanding of social issues;
- 73% of student participants agreed they feel a sense of belonging in their local community.

This impact wasn't only limited to students, as part of our theory of change saw our work producing a double benefit which extended to our community partners and community participants. Key outcomes for these groups in our 2023-24 Impact Report included:

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3 https://www.studenthubs.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Delivering-High-Quality-Social-Action-Activities-University-.pdf
4 https://www.studenthubs.org/our-impact/

- 88% of partners agreed that students added expertise to their organisation;
- 80% of partners agreed that students added capacity to their organisation;
- 76% of partners agreed that students allowed them to innovate and explore new areas;
- 76% of young people agreed that they are more motivated to learn because of Schools Plus (our tutoring and after school club programme);
- 80% of young people attending Branch Up activity days agreed that at activity days they are confident to try new things.

Our closure and the impact of closing

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, but are ultimately reflective of the current landscape for charities and the challenges facing the higher education sector over recent years which includes:

- **Comparatively high costs:** It was important to us to pay our staff a living wage, to sufficiently cover costs relating to programme accessibility, such as travel expenses for volunteers, and to ensure all activities delivered were at a high standard. Staffing programmes to run effectively requires local staff to be embedded within institutions and a national team which can coordinate our local and national reach. Our delivery costs were high to enable our activities with universities and communities to be high quality, with our organisation already running with as many costs reduced as possible from years of efficiencies. We have found balancing our commitment to quality with the funding needs of the organisation to be unsustainable for several years.
- **Insufficient funding from universities and trusts and foundations:** We had seen long-term university partnerships end over the past two years and have not had new long-term partners invest in our Hubs, but we were growing our project partnerships. Our funding through our university partners was inconsistent, shrinking, and we saw our partners being unable to provide a long-term funding commitment, whilst not meeting the full funding needs of their local staff teams. In previous years we have been able to supplement our local Hubs' funding through trusts and foundations, although full funding by universities, as seen at some of our Hubs, enabled those teams to work more effectively in delivering their local activities. However, this funding is becoming significantly harder for charities to access due to the increased demand and changing priorities of funders, which resulted in us requiring our university partners to provide full funding commitment or see our local provision reduced or removed.

- **A commitment to delivering quality and enabling opportunities for early career starters:** Throughout our history, Student Hubs has been an employer which has given early career starters, often graduates or employees who have only had one or two previous roles, an opportunity to build and develop their career. In our 'Active Citizen' report[5] many staff speak fondly about the unique opportunities which Student Hubs provided for them as an employer. In approaching our reduced funding capacity, this could have led to a version of Student Hubs in which we were no longer able to provide the wealth of opportunities for graduates and early career starters which have shaped our organisation across the years. This did not feel aligned with our values, nor did making our provision only accessible by higher education institutions who had the funds to support our work (and therefore making it the privilege of students at predominantly elite universities). This is not a future we wanted for the organisation.

For these reasons, the decision to close was 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.

**Social Innovation Programme Launch
Bristol Hub, Spring 2020**

5 https://www.studenthubs.org/blog/2024/11/active-citizen-report/

Whilst we are hopeful that higher education institutions and our former partners will work to reduce the gaps the closure of our organisation leaves, we must recognise that we are concerned. In sharing the news of our closure with our students and community partners, many acknowledged that our provision could not be matched in what their local university currently provided, and the loss of our programmes would be felt amongst the students and community participants who benefitted from them.

In 2023-24, our activities added 8,000 hours of student social action to the communities we worked within (and with 2023-24 representing our lowest impact figures on students and communities across our recent history, this is a small representation of our impact across the years)[6]. Whilst we would expect students to find other opportunities to contribute, it won't necessarily be with the partners we worked with or the community participants we reached. The loss of those 8,000 hours is stark to the students and communities we served, and so we are calling on universities to enhance, improve and embed their own social action offering to meet the multitude of needs which students and communities are currently facing.

Moreover, we are concerned about the fundamental skills that enable students to be able to tackle the problems not only that society faces, but that they face personally within their lives. Confidence, wellbeing, understanding of social issues, and understanding their skills are vital to students being able to advocate for themselves, assert their needs to their university, and recognise the value of being at university. Our programmes directly sought to improve the outcomes of students who needed this support, with our activities designed to be highly structured to more effectively reach students who faced barriers to participation.

Universities are prioritising work at scale with students, but this leaves little resource or space for the smaller scale yet deeply transformative activities which Student Hubs have delivered in partnership with universities and communities across our 16 year history. We are extremely worried about what happens to students who need space and time to build trusting relationships with university staff and their peers in activities which meet their access and inclusion needs, in a context where universities are unable or unwilling to fund this work.

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6 https://www.studenthubs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Engaging-Student-Leaders-Toolkit.pdf

Our recommendations

We recognise that 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 .

In reviewing how we wanted to present our legacy, our trustees and management team felt that it was important to summarise our overall case for social action and the role it can play for universities in furthering their goals to support their students, communities, and in shaping the graduates of the future.

Our recommendations are provided in full in our Conclusion and Recommendations section, but an overview of these recommendations includes:

- Building social action into in-curricular and extracurricular opportunities, recognising that building in-curricular social action activities should not come at the expense of extracurricular activities and that students should be encouraged and incentivised to participate in social action throughout their university experience;
- Developing bespoke activities in partnership with students and communities, with place-based activities designed in consultation with students, communities and university staff with focus placed on designing listening frameworks which ensure this work can happen across an institution;
- Having a clear theory of change and skills framework, building on expertise from internal colleagues, from students within your institution, and from the needs of your place and region;
- Embedding social action within the behaviours of your institution, developing a top down and bottom up approach to ensure all university staff can feed into the development of this work and an approach to social action and service is enshrined into the values and culture of the institution;
- Working in partnership with local organisations and build your networks, working with the local Voluntary, Charity and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector to co-design activities, support the sustainability of existing activities, and building students into activities which will support regions' economies, skills and opportunities.

Introduction

In 2024, unable to reconcile funding capacity, Student Hubs announced that we would be closing the charity from January 2025, bringing to an end 16 years of student social action[7]. In making this decision proactively, it was important to us to ensure that we were able to leave a legacy to the higher education sector about the power and potential of social action, and this report, amongst our resources and toolkits[8], is part of shaping this legacy.

As a charity which sits between the higher education sector and the voluntary sector, across our history we have witnessed the extent to which both sectors have developed whilst tackling a rapidly deteriorating funding environment: the rate of change and financial insecurity has meant a volatile and unsustainable future for many higher education institutions. Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of digital, and the cost of living crisis are amongst many factors which have hit students, communities and universities hard, and we have seen first-hand how social action is integral to tackling these challenges in partnership with students, universities and communities since our inception in 2007.

We are facing a future in which the higher education sector from 2025 onwards will be smaller, with hope and optimism within the higher education sector at the lowest we have experienced in our history as an organisation. Mass redundancies and department closures across the higher education sector mean that options for students to study modules, their choice of courses to study, and universities' academic and professional services teams will downsize[9]. The Office for Students reported in November 2024 'modelling suggests that nearly three quarters (72%) of higher education providers could be in deficit by 2025-26, and 40% would have fewer than 30 days' liquidity.'[10] The outlook for the sector is concerning enough that the Office for Students has announced it will be pausing its regulatory function of processing new institution registrations, degree awarding powers and name changes until August 2025[11], meaning no new higher education institutions will be joining the sector until these pauses are lifted.

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7 https://www.studenthubs.org/blog/2024/06/student-hubs-closure-announcement/
8 https://www.studenthubs.org/universities/
9 https://qmucu.org/qmul-transformation/uk-he-shrinking/
10 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/bold-and-transformative-action-needed-to-address-financial-sustainability-ofs/
11 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/registering-with-the-ofs/temporary-changes-to-registration-and-other-applications/

Yet the higher education sector is being asked to do more despite these challenging contexts. In November 2024, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson announced an increase to tuition fees which was welcomed by the sector. In her letter to the sector she announced five priorities she expects higher education institutions to meet:

> '1. *Play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students.*
> 2. *Make a stronger contribution to economic growth.*
> 3. *Play a greater civic role in their communities.*
> 4. *Raise the bar further on teaching standards, to maintain and improve our world-leading reputation and drive out poor practice.*
> 5. *Underpinning all of this needs to sit a sustained efficiency and reform programme.'*[12]

As universities prepare to achieve more with less funds, transformative change to the sector is on the horizon. To become financially viable and meet the educational policy priorities of this Labour Government, which is expected to include the roll out of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE); the development of the remit of Skills England; a more diverse offer led by universities on apprenticeships and adult learning; and potential institutional mergers, universities will have to change.

This report aims to share the role that social action can play in shaping and meeting universities' future priorities, with recommendations for taking this approach forward in developing embedding volunteering; teaching and learning; and universities becoming anchor institutions within their regions. We will address all five of the expectations outlined by the Education Secretary above in how social action can meet these needs and be part of the agenda for change which the Labour Government is calling for.

Ultimately, we aim to hand over the mantle of social action to universities and for higher education institutions to see social action as an intrinsic part of the function of their strategic visions; their purpose as institutions; and their means of achieving transformational change for the students, communities and staff which they serve. This report provides a blueprint for what adopting this approach could involve for universities from 2025 and beyond.

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[12] https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2024/11/Letter-from-the-Education-Secretary-4.11.24.pdf

The threat to social action

This report aims to underline the case for why social action matters and should be embedded within the higher education experience for all, yet news from across the third sector in 2024 has highlighted the existential threat which social action faces within communities across the UK.

On 12 November 2024 the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Lisa Nandy, announced that the Labour Government would be winding down the funding of the National Citizen Service (NCS) from March 2025, declaring that 'a new approach is needed to support young people with the challenges of today'[13]. Funding would instead be diverted to youth facilities, equipment, and 'deliver[ing] youth outcomes between 2024 and 2028, supporting the provision of services … and opportunities'. This announcement came as a surprise to many organisations and individuals across the third sector, with the statement from NCS sharing that they were 'sad and disappointed by the announcement … It is our heartfelt belief that there has never been a more important time for the kind of work that NCS delivers'[14].

NCS was founded in 2009[15] and across its history has engaged young people in schools and local communities to take part in social action initiatives, including in-school and residential programmes, with the aim to support the confidence, peer networks and skills of young people. NCS received large scale support from the Coalition Government, with the intent that NCS would act as a 'gateway to the Big Society for many young people, by supporting them to develop the skills and attitudes they need to get more engaged with their communities and become active and responsible citizens'[16]. Between 2012 to 2015, youth social action was seen as a vital part of government strategy for supporting the development of young people's skills, employability and engagement with their communities; the Step Up to Serve campaign was supported by the Government in 2013[17] and later that year saw the launch of the #iwill Campaign to encourage 10-20 year olds to get involved in social action.

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[13] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-national-youth-strategy-to-break-down-barriers-to-opportunity-for-young-people

[14] https://wearencs.com/statement-ncs-following-announcement-dcms-secretary-lisa-nandy-today-government-will-wind-down

[15] https://wearencs.com/about-us

[16] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-citizen-service

[17] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/step-up-to-serve-making-it-easier-for-young-people-to-help-others

NCS was a programme which many universities supported, including through use of their (revenue generating) accommodation for summer residential programmes. For many university students who participated in Student Hubs' activities, NCS represented one of the first engagements they may have had with social action in their local community. Whilst there have been long-standing criticisms of the NCS programme since its inception, including whether the programme represented value for money and the extent to which the young people involved undertook meaningful social action activities due to the limited time-scale of the programme[18], NCS did represent a commitment from various Conservative governments to fund and support youth social action within communities.

The youth sector has seen challenging funding cuts across the last decade, with charity UK Youth reporting that 'funding for youth work has fallen by more than 60 per cent in a decade'[19] following research they conducted in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media & Sport which was published in 2024. So whilst it is reassuring to see a recognition from the Labour Government that reform is desperately needed within the youth sector and funding is required to ensure the sustainability of youth work within our communities, witnessing the defunding of a national social action programme in delivering this change for young people is a concern for an organisation like Student Hubs, where our mission has been to mainstream student social action.

Whilst their funding cut does not relate to our own choice to close Student Hubs, the defunding of NCS does represent the fragility of the social action sector across the UK. The aim for a charity is to close when our vision and mission have been met, and much like NCS, we see our mission of mainstreaming student social action to empower active citizens for life being far from achieved by the education sector. As a result, in closing our organisation we felt it was important to make the case for why social action matters in how universities engage their students and communities, and in how we empower the next generation of young people within our regions. We believe that social action is a solution to many of the wicked problems and financial challenges which the higher education sector and wider society currently face.

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18 https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/time-to-say-goodbye-ncs/
19 https://www.ukyouth.org/2024/02/youth-work-sets-people-up-for-life-but-funding-has-been-slashed-over-last-decade/

In a landscape in which third sector organisations face further cuts due to the increase in national insurance contributions (NICs) as part of the Autumn 2024 budget[20], universities have a major role to play in providing resources, expertise and capacity. This capacity is particularly needed now at a time where in 2024 research '70% of charities expect demand for their services to increase over the next three months … over one third of charities (35%) do not expect to be able to meet demand through the Autumn'[21].

The VCSE Barometer Survey, conducted by the University of Nottingham Trent's Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) Observatory in partnership with Pro Bono Economics, produces a quarterly report on trends from the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector across the UK. In their May 2024 report, their research noted that '4 in 10 organisations stated that they did not have enough volunteers to meet their primary objectives'[22]. These types of figures are a warning that community services and social action will be on the decline without further intervention, and that community services and support is heading to a crisis point, if not already there. As large institutions placed within communities, and the increasing expectations from government about universities' role in 'mak[ing] a stronger contribution to economic growth' and 'play[ing] a greater civic role in their communities', universities recognising the role they play in supporting communities and VCSE organisations through these crises is sorely needed. At Student Hubs we would argue that universities through their civic and fundamental role as learning institutions should be obligated to do this work within communities, ensuring that they are providing structured support for the social and economic development of their local region, especially recognising that this work has benefit not only for the community but for the students and the university's own strategic mission. This aligns with goals two and three in Bridget Phillipson's letter – 'make a stronger contribution to economic growth' and 'play a greater civic role in their communities' – although this will be challenging for institutions as they review their efficiencies.

Finally, there is the threat that student social action itself faces. Students' university experience is becoming more squeezed than ever. Many students lack the funds, the time, the capacity, and the guidance to support them in making decisions about how they get the most from their university experience. Volunteering may appear a luxury that few students can afford in a context where research from HEPI and TechnologyOne shows that 'students need £18,632 a year outside London and £21,774 a year in London to meet MIS' which is 'the Minimum Income Standard … for a minimum acceptable standard of living … for students'[23].

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20 https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/chancellor-responds-to-our-open-letter-on-the-impact-of-increased-employer-national-insurance-contributions-for-charities/

21 https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=5b97598d-91ce-4774-b3f6-541bda6b8af2

22 https://www.ntu.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/2391840/VCSE-barometer-wave-6-report-may-2024.pdf

23 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/09/a-minimum-income-standard-for-students/

When speaking to students as part of this research, the cost of living weighed heavily on both undergraduate and postgraduate students, with:

'Polling for this project suggests that well over half of undergraduate students (55%) and two thirds of postgraduates (64%) feel financial challenges have affected their university experience 'significantly'. When asked to explain why, they typically said the crisis has affected their social life, their mental health, or has forced them to undertake more part-time employment, potentially at the expense of their studies.'

The report goes on to acknowledge that 'The same polling shows more than half of students are giving up important aspects of their university experience, such as social or extracurricular activities, because of financial pressures. Those from a lower socio-economic group are particularly affected'. In these contexts, how fair is it to demand that students add yet another essential such as social action to their increasingly demanding schedules, and give up what little free time they have to plug this gap?

In this report we address how to navigate these challenges and find ways of incorporating social action into the university experience which aim to enrich students' lives and help them enjoy the experience of university, whilst being designed in a way that doesn't compromise the quality of their lives or experiences at their institution. It is due to this that a large part of our recommendations to universities are about how social action needs to be incorporated throughout the university experience, to enable all students to meet our mission of engaging with social action whilst in education, and to meet the increasing demands universities themselves face about delivering higher education, supporting their regions, and ensuring students' university experience sees them leave as highly qualified and skilled graduate workers. Social action is simply another lens through which students can learn as part of their in-curricular and extracurricular experience at university and we want universities to begin harnessing it to its fullest potential for the benefit of their students, communities and to meet their own strategic goals.

Embedding volunteering into the university experience

Volunteering has been at the heart of our offer at Student Hubs across our 16 year history, and we see the volunteering offer of a university as an essential part of the social action experience; we believe it should complement an offer which involves in-curricular social action activities and placement-based activities.

Volunteering can be defined as 'when someone spends unpaid time doing something to benefit others'[24], although we know from our conversations with students, community members and universities over the years that there are many different perceptions (both positive and negative) of what it means to volunteer. Yet across our history, our volunteering offer has been an essential part of how students become what we describe as 'active citizens'.

Branch Up Activity Day, Southampton Hub, 2023-24

[24] https://www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/involving-volunteers/understanding-volunteering/what-is-volunteering/

Participation in civic structures

Active citizenship is part of our theory of change at Student Hubs, and in our definition 'being an active citizen is about continually learning about social issues, connecting with others, and then using your experiences, relationships, and vision, to do something to make the future better'[25]. This definition has been born in part from our interpretation of research by Westheimer and Kahne in 2004[26], in which they outline three categories of what it means to be a 'good' citizen: personally responsible citizen (volunteering, voting, recycling); participatory citizen (community organisers); justice-oriented citizen (interrogating the structures which uphold social issues and injustices.).

When we look through the lens of the experience of university students, we would argue that all three of these attributes are what universities are looking to foster within their student cohorts in how they campaign, advocate and participate within university systems. For example:

- **Personally responsible citizens:** how do individuals within our university communities take responsibility through their own actions? How do we encourage them to vote in Student Union elections; how do we encourage them to keep their campus and residencies clean and use the correct facilities for waste; how do we encourage them to engage with their peers?
- **Participatory citizens:** how do we recruit students to fulfil functions as course representatives, as sabbatical officers, and to lead campaigns to make change both through their Student Union and through the central university?
- **Justice-oriented citizen:** how do we support students to engage with the processes which seek to support them, such as the university AI policy, academic mitigations process, and faculty assessment processes?

There are some who might consider this list and recognise that many of these functions sit within the Student Union and not the university, but we would argue that they are all a part of the make-up of a student body and how that student experiences university, along with being integral parts of participating in any community as an adult within a democratic society. These are the same problems which both Student Unions and universities are trying to tackle. Students should feel equipped to hold the university to account on what it means for them to have a good student experience, in how universities meet their students and communities' needs, and to act as another check that universities are doing what they say they are (for example, in their Civic University Agreements).

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25 https://www.studenthubs.org/blog/2023/11/exploring-active-citizenship/
26 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/00028312041002237

In delivering our Campaigning & Advocacy training to student leaders and sabbatical officers, students shared their enthusiasm for receiving this type of support. One student from our 2023-24 training cohort remarked:

> '[Participating in Campaigning & Advocacy training] has improved my confidence in campaigning, which I have wanted to get involved in but previously was unsure where to start - it has provided key steps, techniques, advice and has shown all the things that must be considered, which aren't always obvious. 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.'

Many university strategies and mission documents talk about their students being supported to be citizens without students having any understanding of what this means. A report published in December 2024 by researchers at the University of Leeds showed that students had a lack of understanding about what it meant to be a 'global citizen'[27], with students sharing that 'it was yet another unnecessarily ambiguous, abstract phrase used by universities that don't meaningfully impact the student experience'[28] and with one student from the research quoted as saying:

> 'I think the term 'global perspective' contains some tensions. Who decides what counts as a global perspective? If we all live in different cultural experiences how can we have one uniform perspective?'

This research shows that in order to meet these strategic objectives, universities must put these concepts into practice. Having theoretical conversations with students about what it means to take part in service, or to be a citizen, is only going to go so far without practical application of these concepts: this is the role we see volunteering playing in this work.

Bridget Phillipson's letter calls for universities to 'play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students' and to 'play a greater civic role in their communities'. Arguably students from disadvantaged backgrounds are the students who have the most to gain from developing their skills and competencies in advocating for themselves through participation in civic structures. They are also the students least likely to do so due to the compounding barriers they face in being time-poor, with less peer networks and resources to put into campaigning or being heavily involved in student societies.

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[27] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2024.2422501#abstract

[28] https://wonkhe.com/blogs/global-citizenship-isnt-a-straightforward-concept-for-students

Volunteering can address these concerns two-fold. One example is through Student Hubs' programme Inspire, Debate, Change, which supported student leaders to design a curriculum for primary and secondary school children to educate them about civic engagement and democracy. This saw students leading sessions on politics, debating, civic structures, and incorporating ideas from the pupils into their session planning. Having this type of opportunity embedded within a volunteering module would practically enable students to be credited to take part in this activity; would support their own learning and skills in civic participation; and is also meeting the access needs of the young people and schools involved in the programme.

Aimee, a University of Bristol student, shared a case study with us in 2023-24 about the impact participating in a programme like Inspire, Debate, Change had on her:

'I took part in two different projects. One of them was the Inspire, Debate, Change programme, which involved going weekly to a primary school in the Easton area [in Bristol] to teach them about civic education and also empower them about civic change in their area, so what their roles are as a global citizen … One of the probably most enjoyable parts was when we brought in the Councillors into the school for the Inspire, Debate, Change programme. I think the children really got a lot out of it … When we were conveying information across [to the children], we had to take into account that there would be different levels of ability within the class. So it taught me two different skill sets … It made me more aware of the different communities that are in Bristol. I think it's quite easy to just stay in your little student bubble and not really leave the campus area, Clifton, Redlands, et cetera. So it was good getting to explore different areas and more diverse areas than the ones near uni …

'I'd say [taking part] definitely had a positive impact because it allowed me to have a break from my studies. It was something that I could do just for fun. I have quite a lot of hours for my maths degree and things outside of lectures. So it was quite nice to take a break from doing maths related stuff, something outside of what I study. It also allowed me to meet new people and gain some friendships there, which is quite nice. We had a shared interest which was quite a good foundation for building a friendship. It's made 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 … I think a lot of students aren't aware that there's these opportunities available to them, and they're quite invaluable opportunities that can provide them with a lot of transferable skills, like work experience.'

High quality programmes such as this, being led by faculties, professional services staff and academics which already operate in these areas such as Politics, International Relations and Education could establish volunteering opportunities like these – open to all students – which would, through their expertise, 'raise the bar further on teaching standards, to maintain and improve our world-leading reputation and drive out poor practice.' Universities have the opportunity to bring high quality civic education to schools, young people with students at the forefront of delivering these activities. These are highly valuable activities which students could undertake through accredited volunteering modules, or through targeted engagement such as incentivising this type of opportunity specifically for students identified from widening participation backgrounds. Volunteering provides the opportunity to meet several strategic needs whilst also undertaking the remit set out by the Labour Government.

Cambridge Climate and Sustainability Forum
Autumn 2023

Supporting international students

Amongst the opportunities for volunteering, universities must also consider the efficiencies called on by the Labour Government, and a large part of this is universities remaining financially resilient especially in their recruitment of international students. In our experience at Student Hubs, volunteering is a highly valuable experience for international students to undertake and provides immense benefits to their university experience alongside their overall employability. This has been shared by sector research too. A report by AGCAS funded by the UPP Foundation in 2023 saw international students reporting about their experience, with the executive summary of the report noting:

'[This report] outlines the barriers faced in relation to living in the UK as an international graduate. This includes welfare issues such as a lack of available housing, mental and physical health issues, and financial concerns. It also includes the perception of the UK as unwelcoming for international graduates.' [29]

Kingston Hub Showcase
Kingston Hub, 2019-20

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[29] https://www.agcas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Resources/Internationalisation/International_Graduate_Routes_-_Narratives_from_the_UK_job_market.pdf

Considering the demand from the sector to recruit and maintain international students, addressing these concerns is of paramount importance. One recommendation cited by the international students surveyed is in the value of volunteering and the impact taking part in these activities had on their skills and university experience. The report highlights:

> *'Participants suggested that gaining work experience, including volunteering, whilst at university was particularly important in order to build their CVs and attract employers:*

> *'"If I would advise anybody, try as much as possible to gather a lot of experience. You can start with volunteering, which is something that I had to do just to boost my experience. I had to volunteer with organisations just to ensure that I immerse myself into the UK system so as to get enough experience."'*

Throughout our activities, we saw that international students were statistically more likely to agree that participating in Hub activities improved their ability to work with others to make change; and participating in Hub activities increased engagement with their university course more than UK students. We must emphasise that this is practitioner research we conducted with a very limited sample size: however, the opportunities for universities to undertake this research given their scale and reach is exciting, and can be part of a strongly evidence-led campaign to embed volunteering within the remit of the whole university.

Furthermore, in a case study of international student engagement at the University of Southampton, we saw '97% of international student volunteers from our Southampton Hub agreeing that volunteering has both enhanced their university experience and improved their wellbeing, and 90% agreeing that they feel a sense of belonging in their community'[30]. This is one example, but it shows that social action has a place in addressing retention and student engagement strategies particularly with international students, with these benefits also seen in domestic students.

This is important given the high stakes through which universities are relying on international students to support their financial resilience. In Advance HE and HEPI's 'Student Academic Experience Survey 2024', they encouragingly saw 'the overall increase in value for money in 2024 appears to be driven strongly by international students, with cohorts from the EU and the rest of the world showing a significant improvement in perceptions of value'.[31]

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[30] https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/04/the-power-of-community-how-local-engagement-can-support-international-students-skills-wellbeing-and-belonging/

[31] https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2024

However when looking deeper into the '26% of students who felt they received poor or very poor value', in the free comment space one student shared, '"International fees are triple the amount. Makes it feel like we're overpaying"', with another comment sharing '"University spends so much on useless things… They charge international students a high amount but don't really provide enough support."' Opportunities like volunteering enable universities to provide more structured opportunities to support international students to gain skills, meet peers, learn about their university and local area, whilst enhancing their employability prospects. All of these are of concern to international students, with research conducted by HEPI, Kaplan and Cibyl in 2021 showing that only 52% of international students 'think their institution is doing well at satisfying the careers support needs of international students'[32].

When considering efficiencies in delivering volunteering, we would encourage universities to think very carefully about how they market these programmes and who they are targeting. The case study from our Southampton Hub mentioned above saw 'a third of its student volunteer cohort as international students volunteering on long-term programmes': there was clear demand from international students to participate in these activities, whilst still reaching a cohort of domestic students. Conducting research and listening exercises to understand what type of activities international students are interested in, and then monitoring the impact of these programmes' outcomes on students, is essential for building a case to justify the funding associated with these activities. In our experience, international students were particularly drawn to opportunities which saw them engage with older community residents; opportunities which took them across the city as part of activity days with young people; and opportunities which saw them practically applying their degree learning, such as through tutoring or subject specific sessions delivered to young people in schools and community centres. Volunteering provides a clear scaffold for international students to build up their connections with staff at the university, with both international and domestic peers, and to learn more about the local community they are now a part of. Building engaging opportunities like this will support international students to feel more valued and get the most from their university experience.

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32 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/10/14/international-students-need-more-relevant-careers-support-if-uk-is-to-remain-a-destination-of-choice/

Staff volunteering

This ethos of facilitating social action as an institution does not only extend to students at the university. To really embrace this concept as an institution, a vision for volunteering should go beyond students and also look at academic and professional services staff in carving out paid leave for volunteering as part of the employment offer. Many universities are tentatively exploring this offer, often pushed by a widening participation remit: for example sending staff into schools to tutor young people and support with reading, or encouraging staff to take up trusteeships or governorships. These roles in particular have the capacity to support the professional development of staff whilst filling a dire need within the community. Research from a November 2024 VCSE Barometer Survey saw that 'finding volunteers to be trustees is difficult too. Less than four in ten (37%) of charities responding to the survey reported having a full board. This leaves almost two-thirds (63%) reporting vacancies of some form'[33].

There are particular gaps also shown in school governorships, with a survey from the National Governance Association (NGA) in 2022 stating:

> *'More than half of volunteers (51%) are 60 years old or older and governors and trustees below the age of 40 is the lowest on record halving over the past 5 years to 6%. Those under 30 remains at just 1% with governors over the age of 80 at 2%. Schools and trusts benefit hugely from the experience of older governors and trustees, who are volunteering for longer, but without younger volunteers also joining boards, they are missing the input of those who have recently experienced school, new perspectives and diversity of ideas.'*[34]

Carroll Centre painting one-off activity Winchester Hub, 2020-21

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[33] https://www.probonoeconomics.com/taking-skills-on-board
[34] https://www.nga.org.uk/news-views/directory/new-report-highlights-governing-board-recruitment-and-diversity-challenges-in-england/

Considering the range of staff which a university employs, especially in the age ranges quoted above as being challenging for the school sector to fill, there is a clear need which universities can meet whilst encouraging staff to play a greater role in shaping their community through volunteering capacity. The learnings which these staff gather through these opportunities will enhance the university's understanding of place, their facilitation of these activities, and has the potential to build further partnerships with these institutions beyond the initial volunteering activity. In incentivising these opportunities, whether through paid time off or employer volunteering schemes run by the university, universities can meet several of the outcomes listed by Bridget Phillipson. Governorships will shape local schools and help address the significant challenges they currently face, 'improving outcomes for disadvantaged students' before they transition to university or their school leaver careers. Staff supporting trusteeships or board positions as part of the VCSE sector is providing a 'stronger contribution to economic growth' in the local community, as well as 'playing a greater civic role'. University staff are adding much needed capacity to their local region, whilst accessing professional development at a time when universities' budgets for professional development are being cut through their efficiencies programmes.

Volunteering in practice

There are a multitude of ways in which volunteering can be embedded throughout the university process. An April 2024 report shared by the Office for Students reviewed practice by institutions who achieved TEF Gold status, and a focus on supporting co-curricular and extracurricular activities is highlighted as a contributor to educational gains:

> *'Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are also highlighted as important enablers of educational gain. These are very wide ranging, and include the clubs and societies run by students' unions and guilds; institutional awards; volunteering and civic engagement; and 'students as researchers' schemes. Additional ways of supporting students include connecting students with alumni; learning development centres; strategies for enhancing students' mental health and wellbeing; and targeted financial support. The importance of careers-focused guidance and structured opportunities for students to take up work-based placements and engage with professionals is also highlighted in the provider submissions.'* [35]

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[35] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/kshdumib/educational-gains-explored-approaches-in-tef-2023.pdf

Examples of successful strategies to engage students within volunteering which Student Hubs have supported at our university partners include:

- **Being accredited through modules:** Providing credit bearing support for undertaking this activity, such as through a module or through an initiative like Manchester Metropolitan's RISE programme[36] which enables students to have the capacity to undertake these roles within their timetable.

- **Providing award-based recognition:** Either through a Student Union or central university award scheme (such as HEAR[37]), students can be incentivised to log their volunteering hours to receive an award which can be translated to their CV or a digital badge. Providing an incentive for students to log this can also feed into other engagement strategies, such as asking them to reflect on their experience to support their employability or for research to be undertaken about what opportunities students are participating in and the value of these experiences as they relate to university strategic objectives.

- **Through Volunteering teams or departments:** These can either sit within the central university or a Student Union (although we would advocate for both with clarity about the difference in what these opportunities provide between both parties). These teams should be resourced to support students through this journey, to match them to organisations where possible, and to do the essential monitoring and evaluation work which will validate the budgets associated with this work and capture the impact these opportunities are having on students' skills, employability and wellbeing.

One-off volunteering
Kingston Hub, 2022-23

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36 https://www.mmu.ac.uk/student-life/career/rise
37 https://www.hear.ac.uk/

In 2021-22, Nathan was a Criminology student at the University of Winchester who took part in our Social Innovation Programme (SIP), a programme which matched groups of interdisciplinary students to a local charity or organisation to tackle a challenge brief over the period of a term as part of an extracurricular project. Winchester students were able to volunteer as part of a volunteering module and were also supported to be recognised through the HEAR scheme:

> '[My] main volunteering was SIP - team member in group of 4, working together gathering research and brainstorming ideas to help [a] charity partner. [I] wanted an opportunity to meet new people, like minded people interested in volunteering social action. [I] wanted to develop team working skills [as these are] useful skills to have. Gained a lot more confidence and the ability to share thoughts and completed research … It has helped with group work skills … In terms of [the] social side of university [it made me] feel more integrated with the community. People from different year groups and courses, nice to have a taste of what they are doing. Helped with university time management - making sure getting all work done. Good process for learning different boundaries … [Participating] helped because it has made me look at the bigger picture of life in general. Volunteering makes you think wider, about the community and external problems - puts own problems in perspective, boradens world view … On the whole experience has been really positive.'

The ideas shared in this chapter aim to inspire universities to look creatively at what a structured and engaging volunteering programme across both staff and students could add for them and to their community, rather than being a cost which is hard to justify. However, we recognise that volunteering can be challenging to attract students to participate in, and that many students will be unable to navigate these barriers to access these opportunities in the first place, which is why the following chapter addresses how the teaching and learning process can play a significant role in delivering social action to students and communities.

Teaching and learning reform

Throughout our experience at Student Hubs, we have seen the exciting ways in which universities can use social action to meet their strategic goals whilst enhancing the teaching, learning and overall experience for students, and universities have the power to do this through teaching and learning reform.

When we consider the current challenges which the sector faces, including financial challenges, the downsizing of course options, and integrating a modular adult learning approach through the LLE and apprenticeships, reforming the teaching and learning experience and embedding social action offers a brilliant opportunity to be at the forefront of change and to equip all graduates in the best possible way for the future. When we look at the earlier adopters of work-based learning and service learning respectively, such as Aston University and King's College London, it is perhaps unsurprising to see that they rank highly on the Social Mobility Index [38]. Helping students to understand employability and their ability to make social change should be embedded within the learning experience, and this is especially important considering universities' financial resilience in being an attractive place for both domestic students and international students to want to study. Focusing on international students, research by HEPI, Kaplan and Cibyl saw:

> *'Students on courses with embedded employability skills are more satisfied: Three-quarters (75%) of students who say employability skills are embedded in their course are happy with their course and university, compared to just 43% for those who say employability skills are not part of their course. Students who feel their courses have not covered employability skills are twice as likely to say that, in hindsight, they would pick a different institution to do the same course (18% versus 8%) and three times as likely to say they would go to a different institution to do a different course (12% versus 4%)'.*

With students more concerned about their job prospects and universities keen to ensure their graduates are in professional and managerial roles, social action can be one method through which employability and skills is emphasised within the curriculum.

We cannot ignore the need that is being felt in communities to upskill adult learners too, and the role that universities may play in advancing this.

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38 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/12/03/social-mobility-index-2024/

In the Kerslake Collection – a set of essays from the UPP Foundation which explored the legacy of Lord Bob Kerslake and the drive for universities to be forces for civic and economic good in their communities – arguments were made for why universities needed to transition back to a model where adult learning and a modular approach was enshrined within the system.

Adult education in the UK has faced decline, with a 2020 report from the Social Market Foundation sharing 'analysis by the Institute of Fiscal Studies finds that, excluding apprenticeships, spending on adult education nearly halved (48%) since 2009-10; equating to a fall of around £1.3bn (in 2020-2021 prices). Current spending on classroom-based adult education works out to just £43 per working age person, down from nearly £86 in 2008/9'[39]. Much like the challenges facing the VCSE sector, universities can aid the defunding of adult education within communities and fill this skills gap – and this may also have benefits to supporting community buy-in for universities' wider role in society. Public First's Rachel Wolf shares an essay in the Kerslake Collection, titled 'The public's view of the civic', in which she argues:

> *'The courses put on by the original civic universities – including Sheffield – were often non-degree, short, flexible and aimed at people already in the labour market ... Provide more adult education, train more of the local political and bureaucratic elite and hire locally, and over the next two to three decades many more local people will think of universities as theirs. Since universities are supposed to exist for centuries, if not millennia, this is a pretty short time frame.'* [40]

This argument touches on all four of the points listed in Bridget Phillipson's letter, in expanding access for adult learners to higher education (particularly adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds); contributing to economic growth by upskilling local workers; playing a greater civic role in communities through offering more flexible ways to get involved in university education; and raising the bar on teaching standards in the innovative practice more mature learners in classroom will provoke. We know that social action opportunities we provided at Student Hubs were popular with mature students: in 2022-23, 30% of our participants who completed our equalities forms shared that they were a mature student.

In recommending how teaching and learning practice could be reformed within higher education, our experiences at Student Hubs have highlighted the value of service learning for outcomes for students and communities.

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39 https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/adult-education-2020/

40 https://upp-foundation.org/essay/the-publics-view-of-the-civic/

Service learning is being delivered by a multitude of universities in different capacities, with a 2023 report from the University of Westminster and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) highlighting examples of practice across the UK and how this practice intersects with goals for universities in 'citizenship', 'professional practice', 'employability and skills' and 'building capacity'.

The report refers to a definition of service learning as 'an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service to provide a practical, progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs'.[41]

At Student Hubs we reached up to 600 students a year at Kingston University at our peak of community engaged learning delivery in partnership with Kingston University from 2018 to 2023. Regardless of the language used, which could also include work-based learning – although we would recommend caution in committing to language before having tested this out with students, as a key challenge of 'service learning' is that students generally do not understand what this means and why it is relevant to them – the aim is for students to build the skills and experiences which will serve them in their graduate careers through practical and live projects which work in partnership with businesses, organisations, and local community.

Student Hubs began delivering community engaged learning due to the need to overcome the barriers which many students face to participating in extracurricular activities: through embedding this work within the classroom, the scale of the students we were able to reach was much larger and these experiences can act as a gateway to further opportunities. Our approach to the journey between Level 4, Level 5 and Level 6 could enable universities to do many things, including:

Building an intentional and joined up pipeline of teaching and learning practice

For undergraduate students, the downsizing of courses and modules means universities can be more intentional about the prescriptive journey they are sending students on to learn. If there is less choice, there is more room to be intentional about what is experienced and connect modules together. We have seen this within our own practice at Student Hubs, for example working with the Geography faculty at Kingston University to design social action modules for Levels 4, 5 and 6 which develop upon students' knowledge, expand their skill sets and build upon prior learning.

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41 https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/final_taking_stock_of_engaged_learning_may_4th_2023.pdf

Invent Plus at University of Southampton Science and Engineering Day
Southampton Hub, 2022-23

Provide social action and work-based learning

The use of practical live projects for students to undertake learning is an easier scaffold for an adult or mature learner to apply to their own prior experiences – as we may expect them to have work-based learning experience already – and the use of collaborative teams to undertake this work provides them with an in-built student peer network. This approach aligns with a report from the Government Office for Science from 2017 which highlights specific benefits which adult learners see, including in 'foster[ing] civic participation … in particular local involvement and volunteering', 'a capacity to be assertive and to collaborate with others in the workplace' and building social capital, where 'adult learning is associated with higher levels of interpersonal and social trust, social connections and community engagement'[42]. However structure is needed around this, for example at Kingston University our Kingston Hub team used to provide additional support including delivering workshops, drop-in sessions and email support which students and particularly an adult learner unfamiliar with the university system would benefit from.

This experience is not only beneficial for mature and adult learners, but also domestic and international undergraduate students who want to apply their degree learning in a way which tangibly helps them to understand what their future careers may look like. Lauree, a mature Photography student at Kingston University, spoke about her experience in a case study from 2022-23 of participating in a community engaged learning module delivered by Student Hubs in partnership with Kingston School of Art:

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42 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a75b790ed915d506ee80f66/Skills_and_lifelong_learning_-_the_benefits_of_adult_learning_-_schuller_-_final.pdf

'I'm neurodivergent, so going to new places is always a bit scary for me. [Participating] pushed me outside of my comfort zone and because of that I did something kind of different from my usual style and I really enjoyed it. So, I guess it initiated a lot of confidence within myself … Tomorrow, I am going and I'm hanging up work for a neurodivergent exhibition with the university. And I think if I hadn't done the Creative Youth brief, I don't think I would have even reached out and said, "oh, hey, like I have some artwork, I might like to show that, you know, talks about my neurodiversity as well." So, because I did this, I've now had three exhibitions, one one in the base room, one with Creative Youth and now one in a different part of the university, all within a month … For me, I'm a mature student and I've had several careers, but I've never had a career involving the arts. So, this is a whole new skill set. This is a whole new way of doing things. It's not like sitting in an interview and then being a financial advisor or, you know, working on the stock exchange like I used to. Without having this kind of Student Hub project, I wouldn't have known how to present my work or had the confidence. Listen, I know it was just a community gallery, but that's huge, especially for an artist. But also, I can't tell you the excitement I had as a mature student going "Wow, I've been through all of these career moves. and like here I am showing my artwork in public for the first time, this is amazing" … A lot of the career stuff I sit through is kind of lost on me, because I used to be a corporate trainer, right? So, I know all these things. But this particular project was great. And I don't think you should leave an art school without having shown your art somewhere. Or having not Interacted with the art world. In fact, that's something I would recommend is that next year having it where everybody can. These were coveted spots for Creative Youth because it was going to be shown and because we were going to get that chance. So, finding more things like that would be wonderful.'

As Lauree highlights, getting professional experience and understanding how to practically apply your degree learning is vital to the success of students and graduates in leaving university. Building in social action which sees community organisations becoming part of the learning experience, benefitting from the expertise and capacity of students whilst enriching the overall teaching experience, is a win for everyone. One academic from Kingston reflected in a 2020-21 case study on our partnership:

'The initiatives have been really great for the students. They have... delivered a more diverse and authentic learning experience … They have also given the students a better experience and a better awareness of their employability skills … From my perspective, it has been win win win all around - win for the students, win for the community partners and win for the teaching staff.'

Build on knowledge exchange and civic practices

Whilst the establishment of Civic University Agreements and an increased role for place in executive leadership team role titles is a positive development, a common challenge we hear from representatives of these areas is they come with limited budgets and small remits across an institution. This is remarkable considering the immense difference which student social action, and student engagement with the public, could have on improving relationships between the community, the university and the wider student population living in these areas. Many members of the public struggle to see the value which universities provide directly to them and instead focus on the challenges which a high student population brings to an area, such as issues with bins, noise complaints, and housing.

If universities want to reshape their value to communities and add value to the economic and social landscape of our regions, that practice has to be enshrined within what many members of the public see as a universities' largest local contribution: in creating and educating graduate workers.

There are significant tensions between the institutional capacity for research; how academics can conduct this work in balance with their teaching obligations; the value of students being involved or exposed to research within their teaching and learning experience; and teaching and learning being a core function of a university[43]. If we want to build research and knowledge exchange culture within the core offer as universities, then building service within the teaching and learning experience is a key opportunity to do this. Projects which facilitate students acting as consultants for their community and organisations are particularly strong as opportunities to get students involved in research. Academics delivering these projects also have the opportunity to build relationships with organisations which could turn into more substantial research projects involving students and community members.

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[43] https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-relationship-between-teaching-and-research-in-UK-universities-what-is-it-and-does-it-matter.pdf

In 2020-21, Dina took part in Community Engaged Learning as an International Business student at Kingston University. As part of their International Culture module Dina consulted for Baytree Centre on adapting their marketing, programmes and outreach to reach a wider community of users in the Greater London area. She said:

'It has been extremely beneficial, mainly because it has given me practical experience in learning more about different cultures. The fact that in this case my team and I were able to deal with issues related to the module whilst being able to communicate with the client directly helped to make a lot of theories and topics come into practice. It has been very inspirational to work directly with a community partner as it allowed me to actually understand the reality behind how some members of society are being integrated and given me insight into details to take into consideration in a professional environment to communicate with clients with confidence and competence.'

Ultimately, seeing students' teaching and learning experience through the lens of social action enables the learning experience to become more vibrant, more relevant to the skills and experiences we want to equip our graduates to have, and provides outputs for the ways in which universities want to meet their strategic goals in employability, civic engagement, and higher quality learning practice. But teaching and learning reform needs to be accompanied by a commitment to delivering co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and being an anchor institution.

**Social Innovation Programme Presentation
Kingston Hub, Spring 2019**

Being an anchor institution

The necessity for universities to build trust within their communities is only growing greater, and never has there been more need for universities to not only be acting as anchor institutions in their regions, but to be perceived as doing this by the community themselves. A report released in 2023 by the UPP Foundation and HEPI found that whilst the majority of the public were in favour of universities and saw the value they brought in contributing to research and innovation, 'a fifth of respondents (22%) agreed with the statement "a university degree is a waste of time", which rises to 32% of 18-24 year olds – and 58% agreed that "a university degree does not prepare students for the real world". Only 18% of respondents had visited a university this academic year, and over half of those from the lowest social grade (DE) have never visited a university at all.' [44]

Research demonstrates that universities are major contributors to our country's economy, with figures shared by UKRI in September 2024 showing that 'for every £1 of public money invested in the higher education sector across the UK, £14 is put back into the economy' and 'the total economic impact of the UK higher education sector on the UK economy is more than £265 billion' [45]. Yet despite this, the idea of putting more investment into universities has been unpopular with the public. Polling from Public First prior to the 2024 general election saw 'only 10% of respondents listed more funding for universities as a priority' and that at the time, raising tuition fees 'polled poorly across voter intentions' [46]. Whilst the Labour Government did grant a tuition fee rise, this was with the caveat that 'underpinning all of this needs to sit a sustained efficiency and reform programme' by universities, with any more funding support unlikely to be forthcoming.

There is a significant tension between communities and universities, with communities feeling the pinch that there is not enough money or resources to sustain the vital services which they need to stimulate their economies, their societies, and support the residents who are facing food poverty, digital exclusion, a lack of jobs, opportunities and skill development within their communities. Whilst the evidence shows that economically and socially universities are a public good, if the public never engage with the institution and their local university never touches their lives or their children's lives, what does that say about the value of that institution to the community?

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44 https://upp-foundation.org/upp-foundation-and-hepi-public-attitudes-to-higher-education-2022/

45 https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/economic-impact-higher-education

46 https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/public-first-education-polling.html

Significantly more needs to be done by universities to engage the public. Student Hubs' activities happened off-campus and brought students into the community to participate within activities. The community needs to see students as a public, social, and economic good. Social action provides a way for institutions to foster trust in how they engage with various organisations and individuals across their regions, in who they choose to align themselves with, and in the learning and development they can stimulate within communities.

Partnership with the VCSE sector

Whilst most universities work very effectively with businesses within their regions, the capacity to deliver social action with SMEs (small to medium enterprises) and the wider VCSE sector has great potential to not only support outcomes for students and communities, but also to build the profile of trust within these communities. Fundraising platform Enthuse's Summer 2024 Pulse Survey found:

> *'Three quarters (73%) of the public has moderate or high trust in good causes (scoring them 6 out of 10 or higher), making charitable organisations by far the most trusted UK institution. Trust in charities scored double the amount of the next most trusted institution; faith and religious groups, which came in second at 36%. It is also significantly higher than trust in corporations (32%), government (29%), the media (28%) and political parties (20%).'* [47]

Universities being a bigger presence to add value to the VCSE sector provides an opportunity to connect with individuals and organisations who have done little to no prior engagement with the university; to win hearts and minds of community members who may sit within the percentage of individuals who believe higher education to be a 'waste of time'; and provide much needed capacity for these organisations who are particularly struggling at this time.

The announcement of £9 million of funding over a five year period by UKRI to support more partnership working between universities and communities in various regions across the UK is an exciting example of where the VCSE sector and universities can come together to conduct collaborative research[48]; meet place-based community needs; and benefit from the agenda on stimulating regional activity.

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47 https://enthuse.com/blog-donor-pulse-summer-2024
48 https://www.ukri.org/news/investment-to-address-regional-priorities-with-uk-communities/

Improving young people's education

Widening participation is doing much to enhance outcomes and access for young people in reaching university, but even more could be done by universities to specifically tackle issues such as supporting young people from NEET (not in employment, education and training) backgrounds. Examples which Student Hubs have tackled in our social action activities include working with early years and primary school age children to support academic attainment, expectations for future life and their relationships with near-to-peer adults; tackling social issues such as food poverty and digital exclusion; supporting social and emotional capabilities; and developing social capital: all of which can hold young people and their families back from social mobility and social justice within their communities.

A July 2024 report from think tank Demos reported that 'an estimated 900,000 young people aged 16-24, equivalent to one in eight (12.6%) of all young people' were NEET, which is 'the highest rate since 2015'[49]. It quoted 'research by PwC and Youth Futures Foundation [which] has shown that UK GDP would increase by £38 billion if the UK reduced the proportion of young people who are NEET to match Germany'. Universities should be working in direct collaboration with local councils, schools, families and third sector organisations within regions who are providing support for these young people, and doing more to prevent the complex circumstances which see young people becoming NEET. Universities need to take the long view on what it means to meet the agenda set out by Bridget Phillipson and tackle disadvantage in communities at its earliest roots, particularly amongst young people and families.

A focus on the need within the early years sector can provide one example of ways in which universities can support. The Sutton Trust's 'Fair Opportunity for All' report shares: 'In 2023, 1 in 5 early years staff members were unqualified, up from 1 in 7 in 2018. Having staff with graduate-level qualifications is beneficial for children's learning outcomes at age 5, with the positive impact sustained over time'[50] More could be done to consider collaborative solutions for enhancing the quality and access to early years education too, with the report acknowledging 'inequality in access to early years education is contributing to a widening gap in school readiness. High quality education in the early years is cost effective and proven to improve a child's later attainment, their access to university and their future salary prospects'.

49 https://demos.co.uk/research/launch-pads-the-future-of-youth-employment-hubs/
50 https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/fair-opportunity-for-all/

One of the gaps Student Hubs filled within our funded partnership work with widening participation teams is that students were supporting educational attainment, and many of our opportunities focused on engaging primary schools and 7-11 year olds (although we worked with secondary schools and colleges broadly across our network too). With the Office for Students and the Government having tasked universities with supporting better outcomes for young people, working with younger children, families and councils could provide transformative social change.

Research conducted into the Sure Start programme which was introduced in 1999 showed that a focus on early years did have a lasting impact on young people's GCSE results and their educational attainment. The Institute for Fiscal Studies report released in April 2024 saw: 'Access to a Sure Start centre between the ages of 0 and 5 significantly improved the educational achievement of children, with benefits lasting at least until GCSEs (age 16). Children who lived within a short distance (2.5 kilometres) of a Sure Start centre for their first five years performed 0.8 grades better in their GCSEs'.[51]

Universities should be a fundamental part of influencing change at a regional level by advising on practice and sharing expertise. This could include enabling students to add capacity through volunteering or work-placement schemes, or academics pushing regional policy which achieves longer-term outcomes for young people and their families. Universities have the expertise to do this work successfully with communities: what is missing is the long-term vision and the relationships developed between key systems and organisations within communities to facilitate these powerful collaborations.

This was echoed by Professor Liz Todd, Professor of Educational Inclusion at Newcastle University, through her report 'Building the foundations of a new 'Sure Start': An evidence-based plan for connecting and coordinating support and services in and around education settings', about which she was quoted as saying: '"We don't need to reinvent the wheel - there are lots of school hub models to build on. But we need to avoid having a succession of short-term initiatives that come and go, leaving people with almost nothing, by having long-term developments that are properly funded and evaluated."'[52]

As Student Hubs comes to a close, ending sixteen years of student social action – including our own flagship programme which tackled educational inequality in schools – we would echo that to make genuine impact through social action and within regions and communities, universities need to be at the forefront of delivering on funding, resourcing and generating solutions to enable long-term change.

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51 https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-medium-term-impacts-sure-start-educational-outcomes
52 https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/latest/2024/05/surestart/

Karen Allen is a Family Support Worker at Shirley Infants and Shirley Junior School in Southampton and has been working as a partner with Student Hubs for nearly a decade, where we have delivered Schools Plus (in-school tutoring with student volunteers and after school clubs) and Branch Up (Saturday activity days for referred 7-11 year olds). In her final case study shared with us in 2023-24, she shared:

> *'Student volunteers in the classroom are an absolute bonus because we do not have enough teaching assistants to support all the children we have. We do not have a number, the same number of parent volunteers that we used to because they've now gone back into the workplace. So just in the classroom alone, the children now get that extra 1 to 1 that they wouldn't get without those students. The after school club would not run. We do not have anybody to run it, so that would not happen. And the children that go on the Branch Up days are children that because of their home circumstances, would never get to do those sort of activities. It just wouldn't happen for financial reasons, social reasons or whatever family complication reasons. So those children, they all benefit in all the different fields. So talking to the young people and also the teaching staff … the pupils don't see [the student volunteers] as adults … so they relate to them more because they are younger, they're nearer their age group, and so they're much, much more relatable: they don't see them as authority figures like they would see a teacher, and I think that enables them to access it more [and] feel more comfortable because they are meeting strangers and that can be really hard for the sort of children that we want to get that extra support. They're not used to strangers. They're not used to people outside their family group or outside of school. So it's a massive bonus, and also it's a positive role model that they see young people that are still in education that still enjoy learning, coming in and helping them with their learning …*
>
> *'You know, early intervention is the key, coming to an infant school or junior school, a primary setting and making good relationships with those young people will carry through because they will take that model with them as they go through senior school. And it will, I believe, will make them more open to opportunities offered to them at a later stage because they've already had that positive experience with an outside organisation with people from outside of their known circle. So you are broadening that circle from a very early age, and I think that's really good because it's the positive … So I know that it works.'*

The gap left for community partners like Karen in Student Hubs closing, and the young people and community participants we supported across Southampton and our other Hub regions, will be large. This is the gap so keenly being felt in communities that we believe universities should be fulfilling as the heart of their purpose as anchor institutions within their regions.

Conclusion
and recommendations

As we close, we want our legacy to be that universities consider and introduce social action across the breadth of their in-curricular and extracurricular opportunities for students and communities. Below our recommendations provide guidance on how we believe this can be achieved most effectively by institutions to enshrine the work of Student Hubs and what we stood for within universities' own legacy for years to come.

Building social action into in-curricular and extracurricular opportunities

As this report has already outlined, students are struggling with time and their ability to commit to even the fundamentals of the university academic experience, with many universities concerned about low student attendance as part of modules and seminars. As a result of this and other factors, there is a narrative within the sector currently that in-curricular is best to ensure that opportunities can reach the maximum amount of students. Whilst this may be the case, we do not agree that these things mean that resources should not be put into designing high quality extracurricular activities in social action. Mandatory participation in in-curricular exposure to social action is a great way to support students to overcome barriers; to learn more about the exciting possibilities of social action; and to transform the learning experience. But students also need the space to explore the social and environmental issues they are passionate about in activities which are student-led, which offer ownership and responsibility, and can be shaped by student interest. This is where extracurriculars thrive and where we have seen the student volunteers and student leaders who have stepped up to these challenges thrive too.

Social action has a role to play in providing the social time and exploration of interests which supports students to learn about themselves, their identity, and what behaviours they want to incorporate into their lives beyond graduation. It may help universities retain struggling students too. In Student Hubs' Impact Report for 2023-24, we saw 84% of students agreeing that participating in our activities had enhanced their wellbeing. The May 2020 poll of the 'National Youth Social Action Survey' saw a similar finding, showing that of all the surveyed individuals, 78 per cent of young people agreed they belong in their community: yet this figure rose to 90 per cent if they had participated in meaningful social action.

Student Hubs' data also goes further, with 44 per cent of students agreeing that participating in our activities increased their engagement with their university course in 2023-24. In the comments shared by students specifically on this question in our impact data collection from 2021-22, students shared the following comments (although we acknowledge that these comments were presented when students were still particularly impacted by the pandemic and many of our activities were virtual or limited in face-to-face delivery):

- 'It gave me a sense of well being and belonging as I was suffering with anxiety and loneliness but this activity boosted my confidence and provided a platform of community interaction which was missing from my daily life.'
- 'It has generally helped my wellbeing and enjoyment of time at university, which has translated into better engagement with my course. It has also improved my communication skills which are necessary to enjoying and succeeding in my degree.'
- 'It has impacted my wellbeing in a good way and given me more confidence in my studies.'
- 'It was part of a module on my course, so it helped to contribute to that, as well as contributing to my wellbeing and sense of achievement.'
- 'Aided my sense of wellbeing and relieved stress which aided in my studies.'

We would argue that involvement in societies and extracurricular activities is a fundamental part of what it means to be at university. For struggling students, there are many things universities could put in place to support this: a fund for social activities which is accessible alongside other financial support; drop-in sessions about time management and organisation to help students prioritise their workload; one-off activities integrated into courses which acts as a gateway for signposting other extracurricular opportunities; mass campaigns to celebrate Student Volunteering Week (which takes place in mid-February each year).

In our conversations with universities across the years, many individuals and institutions have underplayed the immense value of the extracurricular experience and in the necessity of curating social experiences for students, seeing this as the domain of the Student Union and not as a fundamental part of their offer as universities. We would argue that as belonging becomes a preoccupation for Student Services and faculty teams, universities need to address this on a wider scale, working in stronger partnership with Student Unions to embed this work and ensure that students' commitments to paid work and their studies do not exclude an increasingly large student population from accessing these types of experiences, with wellbeing is at the centre of these concerns.

Develop bespoke activities in partnership with students and communities

Our ethos at Student Hubs has always been place-based, considering deeply the needs of the community, university, and students we were working with, and developing activities in response to this. Our incubation processes came from a variety of sources, including passionate staff members, keen student leaders, and expanding upon requests for support from community partners. We believe that rooting universities' work to place is going to be one of the most successful methods for supporting the longevity of the opportunities; building in the ability to adapt and transform these activities as the needs of students, universities and communities change; and being most impactful to the place your university is operating within.

To this end, when designing opportunities, an extended period of listening should be integral to the work of piloting and innovating activities. This includes having conversations; forums; focus groups; conducting surveys; and reading and listening voraciously to the students and communities universities work within. It also requires a culture of feedback and discussion: staff members across an institution should feel able to share and report what they are hearing through their activities, and this should come from a range of sources. These activities should feel like a shared responsibility across the institution and shouldn't sit with one individual or team alone.

Our programme Engage for Change, delivered at the University of Cambridge, is a strong example of this. Students are trained across an 8-12 week period to develop a project in their department, faculty or college which meets the needs of the sustainability strategy of the university. Students are able to lead change and network within their university, access bespoke training and support from staff, and the university learns from student designed initiatives which can be shared across the institution. This generation of students are concerned about issues wider than their employment prospects, looking to the larger state of the world. Student Minds' research with the UPP Foundation in 2023 saw '71% of our student respondents are quite or very concerned about climate change' with '37% of our respondents often or always [feeling] that frustration or anger that not enough is being done to tackle climate change'[53]. If concern about issues such as climate change or social challenges are influencing students' wellbeing negatively, social action provides an outlet for students to learn about how to make change, employability skills and build their peer networks with students who are equally committed to tackling these social challenges. In 2023-24, 90% of Engage for Change volunteers agreed participating has supported them to better understand, and manage climate anxiety.

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53 https://www.studentminds.org.uk/climatechangeresearch.html

The HESA Graduate Outcomes data asks students about how meaningful their current activity is, and in the data 2017-18 to 2021-22, 84% of students agreed that their current activity is meaningful [54]. Although what students interpret meaningful to be in their individual context will be different, that the majority of graduates agree with this question suggests that it is an aspect they are considering in their working careers. A QS Student Pulse Survey conducted in 2022 found that 'over 80% of prospective students consider a university's track record on social issues when applying to university' and 'over half of students interested in studying in the UK are actively researching [universities'] sustainability strategies and efforts as part of their decision-making' [55]. The university experience should start to accommodate the discerning taste of a student applicant population who wants their university to be at the forefront of change.

This will feel challenging and perhaps impossible to achieve: but only through building these systems and processes for listening, engaging, and adapting practice can we build upon the pedagogy of what it means to serve the place that your university is situated within. Universities cannot afford to turn away from this discussion when the stakes are becoming increasingly existential.

Have a clear theory of change and skills framework
The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) released research in May 2023 which identified six essential employment skills for 2035, which were: '(1) communication, (2) collaboration, (3) problem-solving, (4) organising, planning & prioritising work, (5) creative thinking and (6) 'information literacy' (skills related to gathering, processing, and using information)'[56]. When this research was released, at Student Hubs we saw clear alignment with the skills identified in this research and what we heard from our own students' experience of social action opportunities. In our Impact Report for 2023-24, we saw:[57]
- 92% of students agreed participating in our activities developed their skills in communication;
- 82% of students agreed participating in our activities developed their ability to organise, plan and prioritise work;
- 90% of students agreed participating in our activities developed their ability to work with others to make change;
- 91% of students agreed participating in our activities increased their confidence in approaching challenges.

54 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/13-06-2024/sb268-higher-education-graduate-outcomes-statistics/reflections

55 https://www.qs.com/how-does-sustainability-impact-student-decision-making/

56 https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/the-skills-imperative-2035-an-analysis-of-the-demand-for-skills-in-the-labour-market-in-2035/

57 https://www.studenthubs.org/our-impact/

Similar results have also been seen in wider research, such as a May 2020 report with the results of the 'National Youth Social Action Survey', which saw over 2000 young people aged 10-20 polled and where developing skills and confidence from social action was specifically highlighted: 'half of the older age group (16-20) stated that they benefited from social action by increasing their self-confidence/self-esteem (50%) and improving their communication skills (51%), compared with 40% and 36% of their younger peers (10-15) who chose the respective statements.'[58]

Theories of change and skills have a large role to play in how we educate students about understanding what they are gaining from their university experience. Through their access and participation activities and monitoring and evaluation work, many universities have developed robust theories of change for their outreach and community engagement. This is a positive development within the sector, but we would like to see this work going even further. Colleagues from widening participation should be working with their Student Unions to support integration of theories of changes and skills frameworks into their delivery. Students can be part of this work too: for several years we delivered a programme at the University of Cambridge called Impact Labs which saw teams of postgraduate students advising on developing theories of change and other data-led approaches to the local VCSE sector. There is no reason why universities couldn't turn to their own students as consultants to support and co-produce this work: arguably, the work may be even stronger for incorporating the student perspective at the start.

For students, understanding what these activities are trying to achieve from the start and the mechanisms of change they expect to leverage is a fundamental tool in being able to reflect on their own experiences of participating in the activity. Students need a language through which to talk about their skills and experiences which will equip them for the graduate world, and universities should be using these opportunities to have explicit conversations with students about skills and their development.

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[58] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f9b19a3d3bf7f1e4249b3a6/National_Youth_Social_Action _Survey_2019_-_Summary_Report-c.pdf

Embed social action within the behaviours of your institution

Building a higher education experience for students in which skills, development of confidence and experiences are a fundamental part of the offer is vital for how we prepare students for the future: we believe social action is a part of meeting this need. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the reliance which universities have had on expecting these fundamental skills to come from domestic students' school experience, and international students – who the sector is increasingly financially reliant on – are also concerned about gaining skills and experiences.

One of the biggest challenges facing the higher education sector is how to scale activities. Scale is important to be able to make a wide-spread impact on students and communities, but in order to ensure that this work is making the intended impact on the activity's participants, we would recommend starting small and building on these activities. To do this requires investment in various areas, most pertinently resources including funding and time, but also a commitment to a culture which allows risk, failure and innovation to thrive. If pilot projects are only greenlit with the caveat that they must be successful at all costs to justify the spending, very little space will be left to explore emerging areas or scope new practice or partnerships. It will make individuals reluctant to come forward to input or take ownership of these ideas and stifle activity across the institution. So whilst funding for new discrete activities is vital, this needs to be joined up with an approach which emphasises learning and development at its core, rather than fully weighted on the intended outcomes of the activity.

To make sustained change and progress, the attitude towards social action, service and community engagement needs to be enshrined within the fundamental behaviours of a university. Activities can be powerful when led by one individual or a small cohort of individuals, but if this enthusiasm and engagement doesn't permeate across the broader institution, then it will fail to thrive as individuals leave or take practices elsewhere. Both a top down and bottom up approach is needed to facilitate this. From the bottom up, this looks like how staff across all areas of the institution champion and share their work; in how they advocate for additional resource from senior leaders; and how they build the buy-in of the community. From the top down, this includes reviewing university strategic goals, university values, and the core inductions which students and staff receive upon entering these institutions. It is not enough to say what matters to you, the institution must demonstrate it repeatedly. Within your institution and within the sector more broadly find your allies, use the power and platform of membership networks to further the visibility and call for doing and delivering social action within universities.

Work in partnership with local organisations and build your networks

Finally, this work should not be conducted alone. As you find allies within your institution, universities should be looking outwardly to the organisations, community groups and individuals within their regions who have been doing social action and other socially impactful work for years within their place. These individuals and groups will need time invested within them to build trust and a demonstration that the university is ready and willing to use their resources, funds and expertise to genuinely support and be partners in this work. As we have outlined in this report, the VCSE sector in particular is struggling and universities are being called upon by the Government to play a role in tackling disadvantage and improving the economic and social outlooks of our communities. Universities need to step up to this work, admit where things have gone wrong in the past and make a concerted effort to build long-term partnerships and invest in this work. This not only counts for local organisations, but in working collaboratively with other university institutions which share the same regions. More will be achieved through collaboration and the sharing of resources, expertise and investment.

We hope you will take these recommendations to your colleagues, senior leaders and sector partners and we wish you the best of luck in seeking to achieve these goals. Furthering social action is one core way in which you can cement the legacy of our work at Student Hubs and in reaching our vision of active citizenship, which sees us all shaping a better tomorrow.

**Branch Up Activity Day - Donutting
Southampton Hub, 2023-24**

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