

Welcome

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

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

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

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

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



20,000+ students across 10 Hub locations



100,000+ students attending training, events and conferences



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

Foreword

Whilst 'place-based' activity is becoming increasingly important for universities, it has always been at the forefront of our work at Student Hubs, which has enabled students to work with communities in tackling social and environmental challenges throughout our 16 year history. Our community partners have been wide-ranging, including schools, community centres, libraries, care homes and residential centres, youth clubs, grassroots charities, museums, and social enterprises, with approximately over 1200 partners engaged within our 16 year history.

Across our history, this place-based approach enabled us to provide key frameworks for the programmes we delivered which we called 'key social action activities', and the flexibility to incubate new activities; bringing new programmes into the wider network, and seeing individual programmes flourish in specific locations across our Hubs.

Student Hubs' theory of change, developed in 2015, codified our approach as an organisation in providing a double benefit, which saw both students and communities benefiting as a result of our activities. Over the past 9 years, how we met our theory of change has transitioned as our partnerships changed and our relationships with these communities and partners deepened. This included our definitions of community ranging from the student communities we served, the community groups and grassroots organisations we partnered with, to the university community we enhanced through our activities.

Saying goodbye to our long-standing community partners across our local Hubs has been one of the most challenging parts of our closure period, as we wish them well on their journey moving forward. Our aim with this toolkit is to encourage universities to take up these activities themselves, and evaluate who is missing from their existing provision. This is a stepping stone to building a world in which universities are genuine anchor institutions at the

forefront of change, innovation, and development in their local communities. We want to see that future, and we hope this toolkit will help your university teams in working towards it.

Fiona Walsh McDonnell

Partnerships and Development Director, Student Hubs

Our Legacy

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

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

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

This Toolkit

The toolkit and report is about working with community partners in the context of delivering social action activities, volunteering and in-curricular activities which see students working in direct collaboration with partners.

We would strongly encourage individuals who are interested in or currently delivering these activities to first read the 'Civic Impact Framework' and 'Equitable Partnerships for Civic Engagement: A toolkit for civic, community and university partners' by Sarah Gifford, Daisy Payling, Kimberley Freeman and Alison Blunt from Queen Mary University of London, funded by the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) programme. The latter toolkit explores the initial questions, resourcing, and relationship development which universities should first consider before establishing equitable partnerships with community organisations.



Our approach to community partnership and student leadership

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

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

Studen	t-led means to us:
₹	Students are decision makers Students have budget control and/or influence Students have compliance responsibilities (e.g. safeguarding, risk) Students have ownership of activities
	if your programme is student-led? Ask yourself: Do students own this work? Do students steward this work? Who is responsible for this work? Who makes key decisions in relation to this work?

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





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Chapter Two: How to work with community partners

Auditing your activities
How to recruit community partners
Understanding community partner and
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In Julian Dobson's 2024 report, 'A theory of civic change: how universities can work for the good of their places', he defines civic activities as 'a set of collaborative and inclusive relationships and practices that happen for the benefit of a place, towards a shared set of outcomes co-produced with local institutions, leaders and populations', with civic engagement being 'the process of building and continuously improving locally beneficial relationships.'

Within this framework, we can consider the value of community partnerships for the participants of these relationships, namely students, universities and communities.

The value for students

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



of students agreed they were more likely to tackle further social challenges as a result of their engagement with their Hub activity



of students participating in the Social Innovation Programme, a student consultancy programme, agreed they have developed professional skills from this activity



of Schools Plus volunteers agreed they were more likely to pursue a career in education as a result of their engagement with this activity



The value for communities

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



of partners agreed the students added expertise to their activity



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



of partners agreed students added a new perspective to their activities



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



Chapter Two How to work with community partners



Auditing your activities

We believe that there are far more opportunities for community partnership in existing activities and new activities which universities are delivering with students than what is currently being delivered.

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

Auditing your activities

1. Identify frameworks which already exist for the areas you are looking to embed partnerships within.

Pre-arranged frameworks for engagement can be the easiest way to embed community partnerships, and provide an easy-to-understand opportunity both for community organisations and for students (if they are involved in the activity's delivery).

This could look like:

- Reviewing where hypothetical scenarios or case studies are used instead of real-life briefs or partner input;
- Where a partner is already involved but their role could expand e.g. taking a one-day opportunity and turning it into a longer-term programme;
- Where in-curricular activities are being enhanced with employability opportunities, reviewing how service learning, community engaged learning, or work-based learning could be applied as a practical way to bring community partners into credit-bearing learning for students.

"I went into [the Social Innovation Programme] with no expectations and I had the most fantastic time. It's great to work with university students. We work with university students in IntoUniversity, but it's great to work with them in a different setting, to be able to tell them a bit about what we do and the work that happens behind the scenes but also to work with a small group of students and other community partners. It was nice to meet other charities as well that work in close proximity to us that we probably wouldn't have communicated with otherwise." – Teyah Michalis, IntoUniversity, Social Innovation Programme partner with Bristol Hub in 2023-24

Auditing your activities

2. Identify which frameworks you could look to embed partnerships within that may not currently exist (e.g. new programmes, in-curricular or extracurricular offerings, or pilot activities which could be developed through an existing activity).

You may want to bring colleagues or your team together to do an ideation session for what innovating your activities could look like. Where possible, do this activity in a neutral space away from your usual office or working space, and be open to the possibility of what could be explored.

You may want to use frameworks to guide your thinking, such as:



Using the question 'What if?' and going around your team to ask for suggestions to the conclusion of the statement, to generate new ideas and collaboratively explore the most compelling ideas.



Reviewing your university's strategy and mapping where opportunities are to further strategic areas.



Reviewing your students' module feedback or your course's NSS scores, to understand where gaps might be present and how community partnership opportunities could further learning and engagement.



Auditing your activities

3. Map your fixed, flex and free boundaries of what partnerships you can potentially explore.

Within either existing or new opportunities for partnership, before reaching out to community partners it is important to understand where your boundaries lie in mapping these opportunities, so the community partners can support to the best of their ability. At Student Hubs, when looking at our programme design, a framework we have used is the 3 Fs method of looking at your 'fixed', 'flex' and 'free' aspects:

Fixed aspects are things that cannot be changed

For example, this could be how students are assessed (to avoid module revalidation); the need for students to be DBS checked and participate in safeguarding training if working directly with vulnerable adults or children; or that the opportunity needs to happen within term one of the academic year.

Flex(ible) aspects are things which could be open to change, in the right circumstances.

This might be how many training sessions are delivered as part of the programme to your participants; how many partners or students your activity engages; or how feedback is collected at the end of the project.

Free aspects are where individuals can make decisions for themselves, including students and partners.

This could be for how partners communicate with students they are working with, or how often you as the delivery lead check in with the community partners.

"The impact is a very positive one, as it is so important for old and young to mix. I believe it keeps older people young at heart and also helps them to keep in touch more with the outside world. It also helps young people to be compassionate and patient. The residents enjoy their company because conversations are new, and it's not about aches and pains, and everyday things." – Domenica, Westbury Fields - St Monica Trust, LinkAges partner with Bristol Hub in 2023-24

How to recruit community partners

Establishing strong networks and channels to recruit partners will enhance the types of organisation that come forward to work with you, and show that you are committed to being connected to your community.

Channels you might want to use to source community partners include:

- Web searches: This might include through local newspaper outlets; LinkedIn; newsletters from local community hubs (e.g. local voluntary, community and social enterprise networks); finding who trust and foundations/other funders support in your local area; and connecting with local representatives and groups or individuals who you may have seen featured online.
- In-person or virtual meetings: You may want to attend some local networking events aimed at businesses or grassroots organisations; you could organise an information session about your opportunity; you could ask any potential partners who answer adverts to recommend other organisations to approach about this opportunity or signpost to relevant local networks.
- University internal networks: Don't do this work in isolation: speak to
 colleagues in your volunteering, public engagement and community,
 employability, widening participation, student union and sustainability teams
 about who they work with locally.

"Just by bringing people in from the university into school, you are integrating our young people with people that are not from the school community, that are from the wider community, that these students are coming in from a different organisation and also that may at the moment live in Southampton but may not come from Southampton, [they] may come from a different country and that's massive. That is already broadening [the pupils'] horizons and they are meeting other people." – Karen Allen, Family Support Worker at Shirley Infants and Shirley Junior School, Southampton Hub partner

Understanding community partner and student needs

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

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

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

In our experience, a good partner is:

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

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

An example could look like the following:

Audience	Expectation	What support you can give
Community partners	To take part in a well- organised opportunity which doesn't encroach on their capacity and is a positive experience for their internal staff and for their external brand within the community. To deepen their relationship with the university.	Provide clear communications about the timeline and logistics for the partner. Make sure the benefit of what the community partner receives for participation is clear. Provide resources which they can use to build buy-in from staff (and service users, if necessary).
Students	To take part in a well- organised opportunity which supports their own goals. Good, clear communication from organisers with clear asks and next steps.	Provide clear communications about the timeline and logistics for the opportunity. Make sure the benefit of what students receive
Student- adjacent channels (e.g. societies, courses, volunteering mailing lists)	Supporting their members to further their goals (which may align with the channel the students are hearing about the opportunity through). Good, clear communication from organisers with clear asks and next steps.	for participating is clear. Provide support for reasonable adjustments, deadlines for sign up and key dates involved in the activity, with any other support or incentives.

Timeline for community partner engagement

Consider your timeline across your engagement with community partners as part of this opportunity, including what capacity is required to support, and how you can ensure check ins are happening regularly throughout the process.

1. **Identify** your criteria and associated timelines.

3. **Advertise** the partnership opportunity.

5. **Invite** suitable applicants to phone chat/individual or group interview/full application.

Conduct selection, including ensuring all compliance materials are in order for the partnership to go ahead.

7. Throughout the activity, **conduct** scheduled check-ins.

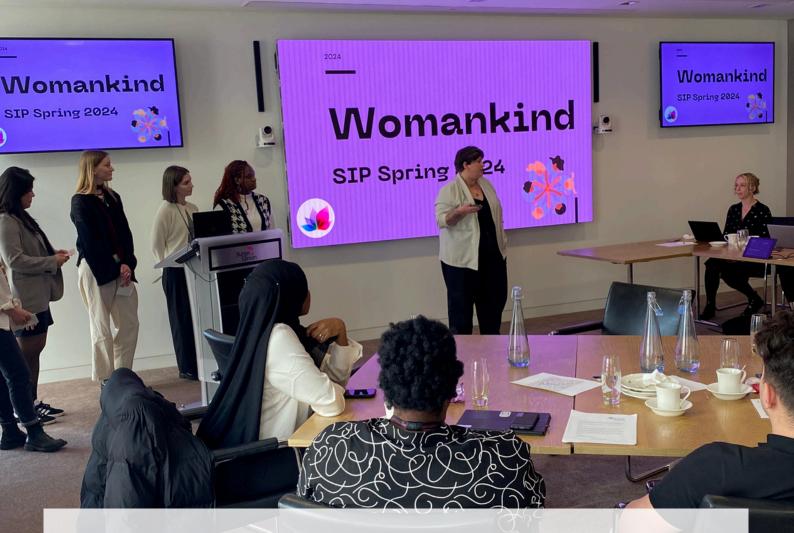
2. **Plan** the recruitment and selection process for each partnership, including considerations for reasonable adjustments such as alternative application methods.

4. **Review** enquiries or applications against your criteria.

6. **Plan** and deliver an activity induction with the community partner and any activity participants.

8. At the end of the activity, conduct a final check-in to ensure monitoring and evaluation is collected, and share information about continuing the programme/other opportunities/why they are not suitable to carry on if there have been challenges during their engagement.

Chapter Three How to foster meaningful community partnerships



Whilst Chapter Two explored how to create opportunities for community partnership, Chapter Three will explore how to retain and grow community partners within your work. Community partnerships are built on trust, mutual understanding and respect, and the knowledge that both parties are benefitting from the shared activities. This Chapter explores how you can enhance these relationships and ensure they remain positive throughout the engagement, from delivery to off-boarding.

Retaining your community partners and developing your partner network

In delivering 16 years of activities in partnership with community partners, our ethos to our approach can be distilled into three key tenets, which we would encourage you to consider within your approach:

Have consistent conversations with partners, giving them the space to discuss their needs and to share feedback about your activity and **Be informed** partnership. Act to signpost, support and steward even if they aren't the right fit for a specific programme or activity. In being flexible, it's vital for you to first understand what you can be flexible on, as discussed in Chapter Two. Don't bend over backwards to Be flexible make things work, but where there is flex, do share this openly and work with partners to navigate what works best for that partnership. Smaller organisations have limited capacity, so for them taking on additional projects is a challenge. Be persistent in follow ups (as you might Be persistent not know the 'right' time for this opportunity), be clear on boundaries and support partners to understand the benefits for both parties of partnership.

Retaining your community partners and developing your partner network

Review what is in your control to manage and ask yourself:

	Do you understand the capacity of the community organisations you are
	approaching? Does this match with what you have identified as the capacity
	organisations will need to give to your opportunity?
	Do your colleagues/team understand what you are trying to achieve? Do
	they recognise how it benefits their students, the university's civic goals, and
	enhancing your teaching, learning and extracurricular offer?
\Box	Do you recognise and celebrate partnerships? What space is there within
	existing structures (e.g. award ceremonies) or other channels (e.g. working
	with the marketing and communications team) to highlight and celebrate
	good work which is taking place at your institution?
	How clear is your opportunity, and can people reach you? Be critical and ask
	others to review the information about your opportunity to ensure it's clear
	what is being asked of organisations and shared about the opportunity itself.
	You should be open to explorative conversations – even if organisations
	aren't quite the right fit for your activity – and make sure personal contact
	details are available.
	Are you taking a leading role? You should be proactive in trying to set up
	partnerships, and show you are willing to lead these interactions. Make sure
	you have processes in place for sharing agendas for meeting, following up
	from meetings, getting in touch with partners, and confirming key dates.
	Don't make the partner chase, as they will likely disengage.



Retaining your community partners and developing your partner network

In areas which aren't in your control and involve wider cooperation (for example, across your university), you may want to consider:

Personal relationships take time, and connections can be lost easily. Many community partnerships are established through personal relationships. At a university level, you may struggle to centralise communications and handovers will always be tough when staff move on. Recognise that these types of transitions between staff members (either in being signposted on or staff stepping into new roles) can be challenging, and make sure you steward your partner(s) throughout: but be prepared to lose connections, and recruit accordingly. Community mapping should happen collaboratively. It's important to have a sense of the local challenges, landscape and social issues which your community face, but this work shouldn't be done in isolation. Speak to teams across your institution about how they work with community groups, and identify where you could work together. **Deepen your impact through frameworks.** You may want to create a theory of change for your activity, or speak to colleagues in your widening participation or civic engagement teams who may have specific strategies for how they are trying to engage the community. Your work will be stronger if you are working against an evidence base and in collaboration with centralised strategies. **Be prepared for animosity**. Community organisations may feel historic anger towards the university based on previous partnerships and projects, and this could be a barrier. Focus on rebuilding trust, transparency and offering them

"I really want to say this that actually Invent Plus has inspired me, that now I know I want to be, when I grow up, an engineer." – Julia, Year 5 pupil participating in Invent Plus with Southampton Hub in 2023-24

the support they need now.

Enhancing quality for community partners within your activities

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

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

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

The off-boarding process

Your community partner might be off-boarded at the end of the programme, when they are expected to end their engagement, or this might need to come sooner than planned if the relationship is not working as expected.

Signs you may need to off-board a partner sooner than expected could include:

- The partner is not complying with what was set out in their partnership agreement;
- When the partner is not meeting the minimum standards of communication required to make the partnership function effectively;
- Complaints being raised, and when other participants in the programme, such as university staff or students, are being consistently disappointed or let down by lack of partner engagement;
- When communication has broken down, and participants and the partners have different stories about what has taken place;
- When key deadlines or milestones are missed, with no reasonable explanation given for why this has happened.

If you do have to end a partnership under these circumstances, make sure you try and have a call or meeting to discuss this rather than resorting to email where possible. Thank them for their support but establish that without fundamental change the partnership isn't functioning as they have agreed, share the impact this is having on the activity/participants/other partners and signpost where appropriate.

Off-boarding at the end of your activity

You should have created a process for off-boarding prior to the start of your activity. This might include:

- Scheduling a final meeting to fully off-board the partner, collect final feedback or input for activity improvements;
- Discussing any further partnership opportunities or deepening your current partnership;
- Collecting any monitoring and evaluation data needed to evidence the activity's work;
- Signposting the partner to other relevant opportunities, and how you will keep in touch.

Conclusion

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

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

Sharing the value of community partnership with your senior leaders, and
building your case for embedding community partnerships within your
activities;
Auditing your opportunities to embed community partnerships within your
existing activities, or to add new activities to your work;
Working with your university team(s) to map out the required capacity,
support, resources, and relevant outputs, outcomes, and processes
needed to recruit community partners;
Implementing our guidance in Chapters Two and Three, and evaluating
and developing your activities from your monitoring and evaluation
activities and consultation with community partners and students.

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

- Delivering High Quality Social Action Activities;
- Engaging Student Leaders;
- Our Guide for Students on Volunteering;
- Our Guide for Students on Incubation.

"Getting to know people that are completely different from me was such a refreshing change from university. I built relationships with some of the residents and developed interpersonal skills communicating with people from different sets of age groups.

These sessions greatly developed my confidence and ability to help people. It was a really good experience, I'm really glad I got to take part in helping the residents and to make their lives easier." – Carol Thomas, LinkAges volunteer with Bristol Hub in

Appendices

Community Partner Template agreement

In your community partner template agreement, we would recommend including the following information:

- The expectations of your agreement in relation to communication and a general code of conduct of how you work together e.g. point of contact, timeframe to reply, emergency contact, who will communicate with students/other stakeholders;
- The expectations of your agreement in relation to delivery logistics e.g. who will recruit and train students/other stakeholders, inductions, risk assessments, insurance, safeguarding support, feedback check ins;
- Approaches to policies such as sustainability, equity, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, people and culture, risk management;
- Timeline of the agreed partnership;
- Data protection and sharing agreement.

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This report was designed by Simran Dhanjal-Field.

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

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