



Students' Union UCL Community Volunteering Strategy

2021-24

U STUDENTS' UNION UCL **Volunteering Service**

where **more** happens



Introduction

“The Volunteering Service is an extremely important asset to Students Union UCL and a fantastic department. I’ve heard loads of stories of the amazing work the volunteers do, which was highlighted in the recent awards ceremony which I had the honour of hosting. Even during the pandemic, students have been extremely active and engaging in lots of different volunteering initiatives, like the social hackathons or the student led projects. Students Union UCL is home to one of the largest community volunteering teams in the UK and the community

feeling is second to none, with many students creating long lasting relationships with other volunteers while giving back to the community. The Volunteering Service does an excellent job in providing opportunities for leadership and development to all students, with an especially good take up by women, disabled students, BAME students and those from a widening participation background.”



Ilyas Benmouna, Activities and Engagement Officer



Why student community

volunteering?

We believe that student community volunteering is a vital part of life here at UCL. At its core, student volunteering is about building bonds – between students and people in other communities, between students and Voluntary & Community Sector organisations, and between students themselves. From this connectivity, all sorts of good things happen. Students consistently talk about how volunteering gives them a chance to get out of the university bubble and put their own values into action. It can also boost their well-being, help them develop new skills and gain insights into their academic studies. In turn, our community partners highly value the energy and creativity of UCL students and tell us about the many different ways they've made a difference.





Our Vision

We want every UCL student to be inspired and empowered to take part in rewarding community volunteering that makes a difference in the wider world.

Background

Student volunteering in London has a long history going back at least to the late nineteenth century, and UCL student volunteering has taken many forms over that time. Since 2002, our Volunteering Service has provided a central point to help coordinate students' activities in communities, expanding the numbers involved and ensuring that volunteers are well-supported. Initially funded through the HE Active Communities Fund, UCL has centrally funded the service since 2006, enabling it to grow to be one of the best-regarded university volunteering teams in the UK.

The Volunteering Service supports three main areas of activity. The team links students with opportunities within London-based volunteering organisations. They support students to set up and run their own community projects. And the Community Research Initiative connects master's students and community

organisations so they can collaborate on research projects.

The service supports over 2000 UCL students into volunteering each year, who regularly give over 50,000 hours of their time. This might sound like a lot, but it's still a small proportion of the total UCL student population. We've drawn up this strategy to help us plot the ways we might increase participation whilst maintaining high standards.

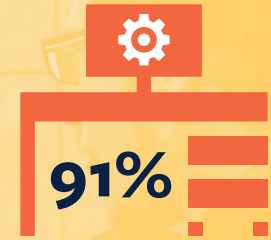
Some of this work will require extra resourcing, so we will be actively seeking out funding to fully realise our ambitions. With the right level of support in place, we believe we can achieve our vision: a UCL where every student is inspired and empowered to take part in rewarding volunteering that makes a difference in the wider world.

UCL Student Volunteering in Figures

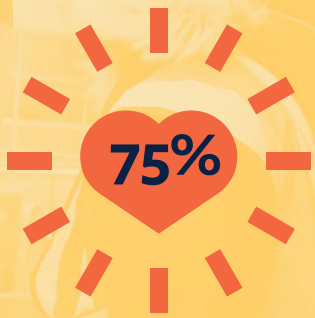


UCL student volunteers recruited and supported

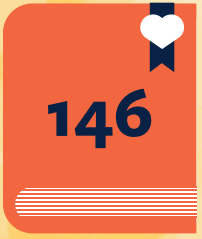
In 2019/20...



Student volunteers said they'd developed useful workplace skills



Student volunteers said their well-being had improved



Postgrad Taught students were supported on our Community Research Initiative



Student volunteers said that volunteering had benefitted their studies in some way



Volunteering hours were given in total

Meet some of our student volunteers...



“Not only does volunteering give you the opportunity to make a difference in a cause you are passionate about, but it also allows you to develop your skills while doing so. Overall, it’s an incredible experience.”

Farimah Beigi volunteered with Project Impactive, a group of UCL Engineering students who co-design improvements to disability aids with disabled people.



“I am very interested in climate change, sustainability and all such environmental issues and I really wanted to get involved rather than stay just passively interested. I wanted to be active in what I am passionate about.”

Clara Sicard volunteered with the Environmental Justice Project, a UCL student-led project which engages young people with issues related to climate change and social justice.



“The best thing about volunteering has been creating genuine connections – with clients and my colleagues.”

Sadashiv Nayanpally volunteered as a Refugee Integration Advice volunteer with the Refugee Council in Stratford.



“It’s a good way to take a break from studying and do something practical that matters to you... by volunteering for an organisation, you can work together with a team of other volunteers to have an impact that wouldn’t easily come out of everyday university activities.”

Victoria Ngai volunteered with Age UK in Kensington supporting their end-of-life projects.



“The experience was amazing! I really enjoyed working as a team with the other volunteers and it felt like we really complemented each other’s knowledge in the different parts of the Hackathon.”

Dora Dimitrova volunteered at one of our Social Hackathon events.

...and some of our partners



“At ReachOut we have worked with the Volunteering Service for a number of years now, and have consistently had groups of committed, engaged and passionate student volunteers. They have been a big help to us in the past, and are always approachable, despite us being just one of many charities they partner with.”

Rebecca Waite, ReachOut



“The CRIS project is such an invaluable resource and I feel very thankful to be involved. I found the initial meeting valuable, it was great to discuss each other’s interests and needs and also explore what the project could be based on. Our student was so flexible and open to ideas. I learnt more about the UCL side of the process and also how many different parties need to be involved in the project (e.g. ethics, trustees etc!).”

George Robertson, Hackney Play Bus



“We have greatly appreciated the UCL student volunteers who have established the ‘Young Achievers project’ which offers Young Carers in Hackney weekly tutoring online. This has allowed the young people taking part to have a dedicated time to catch up on studies that can be impacted by their caring role, and has been increasingly challenging over the past year of restrictions.”

Nancy Bending-Beckett, Young Hackney



“Our partnership with the UCL Volunteer Department has been a fruitful one through the years. We have had many student volunteers from all different stages within their university journey, who’ve helped and supported Castlehaven with a multitude of tasks such as completing a local needs assessment, large project evaluations, gardening and even cake-baking with older people.”

Tricia Richards, Castlehaven Community Association



“The students we get from UCL as volunteer tutors are an essential part of our Adult Literacy Project. We have worked with the UCL Volunteering Service for many years, and our project would be far less successful if we did not have the UCL students.”

Peter Lush, Training Link, Camden

Aim 1:

Making volunteering more visible and appealing

Inspiring more students will require us to increase the visibility of volunteering within UCL – to have everyone aware and excited about its possibilities. We need to improve how volunteering is perceived by students and staff. Our aim is to make volunteering regarded as a core activity for students at UCL, and something readily associated with the Students' Union.

Key Actions:

- Improve our presence on social media, especially Instagram.
- Create a 'UCL volunteering week' to showcase volunteering.
- Improve community volunteering's visibility during the welcome period.
- Increase the amount of volunteering content shared through SU comms and across UCL channels.
- Foreground the connections between volunteering and big, societal issues such as sustainability, racial justice and social inequality.
- Use the Volunteering Service's 20th anniversary in 2022 as a chance to promote volunteering.

Aim 2:

Making it easier to volunteer

Students have told us about the barriers to volunteering they experience.

We need to make it easier to find volunteering that matches their interests and ambitions and broaden the range of opportunities on offer. Time-light and flexible roles can form a good entry point into volunteering and allow all students – whatever their other commitments – to take part.

We also need to use IT systems to make the process of signing up easier for both students and recruiters.

Key Actions:

- Develop our one-off and flexible volunteering programme and make it more prominent in our marketing.
- Conduct a thorough review of the student volunteer journey, ensuring that each step is as easy-to-use as possible.
- Support community partners to develop new volunteering opportunities for UCL students.
- Seek resources for new flagships projects that will broaden the range of volunteering available (see page 17).

Aim 3:

Enhancing the experience of volunteering

Volunteering can be both challenging and enriching. How can we help students make the most of those experiences? They tell us that they would benefit from learning materials putting their volunteering in context. We could also do more to help students identify progression routes from their volunteering, and more generally support their personal and professional development.

Building a more inter-connected culture of student volunteering at UCL will also be important. We can help volunteers share their experiences and learn from each other, as well as feeling part of a larger undertaking.

Key Actions:

- Organise a series of panel discussions, debates and talks focussed on issues of relevance to student volunteers.
- Supplement these with online content – short two-minute videos exploring issues around volunteering.
- Build functionality into the SU website that highlights potential progression routes for students.
- Ensure volunteering is included in UCL's wider work on co-curricular provision and skills mapping.
- Experiment with both digital and in-person ways of bringing volunteers together.

Aim 4:

Supporting the Voluntary & Community Sector

Without our partners within the Voluntary & Community Sector, very little of what we offer would take place. However, the sector has been squeezed during COVID-19; demands for its services have increased whilst income has gone down. It is timely to find new ways we can support the sector and help connect it with other parts of UCL. The success of our Community Research Initiative has shown how we can act as an interface between UCL and the Voluntary & Community Sector.

We have a particularly strong relationship with Camden – 43% of our students' volunteering takes place there. This gives us an opportunity to look at what else we can do very locally and apply our learning from our work in Camden to UCL East.

Key Actions:

- Work with other UCL departments to better coordinate our interactions with the Voluntary & Community Sector.
- Develop our volunteering programme at UCL East, building on our existing networks within east London.
- Introduce fundraising research hackathons to help partners identify new sources of funding.
- Develop a new framework for measuring our impact on communities.
- Expand our Partners Breakfast networking series to include more content on volunteer recruitment and support.
- Increase the number of partners making use of our Community Research Initiative

Aim 5:

Connecting volunteering with the rest of UCL

We have a good evidence base about the impact of community volunteering on many aspects of the student experience – including employability, well-being and students' academic studies.

More broadly, student volunteering can support a host of UCL priorities, especially around student inclusion, sustainability, UCL's role within London and the UCL Grand Challenges.

Within the Students' Union itself, we would like to get student community volunteers more involved with our democratic structures and build on the connections between community volunteering and clubs and societies.

Key Actions:

- Create new elected representative roles for community volunteers within the SU.
- Increase the number of student clubs and societies offering community volunteering activities.
- Utilise UCL Careers' 'Pillars of Employability' framework and the new faculty-based Student Success Advisors to deepen our engagement with UCL academic departments.
- Develop new materials for academic tutors and for course leads around community volunteering.
- Organise regular sessions bringing together students, academic staff and community partners to co-design subject-specific volunteer roles.
- Work with UCL to find the financial resources needed to expand student community volunteering.

Flagship Projects

Whilst putting together the strategy, several ideas for new programmes emerged that – if resourced – could significantly advance community volunteering at UCL, broadening the range of opportunities whilst addressing other priorities identified in the strategy.

UCL Charity Consultancy Challenge

What?

Students would receive training in consultancy skills, and then work as teams with a charity over a 10-week period on a consultancy project. At the end, they'd present their findings to a panel and there would be a prize for best project. The charity partners would provide feedback, detailing how they were going to implement the findings.

Why?

A Consultancy Challenge would be an extension of our Social Hackathons, which have proved popular with students and have provided useful results for our partners. This would help meet the demand for work-related placements and could be tailored for academic departments. We could work closely with UCL Careers on this, potentially connecting with other work-place skills beyond consulting, e.g. data science, web design / development / coding, Customer Relations Management, Social Media Marketing, Market research / Industry Analytics.

Expanded CRIS

What?

The Community Research Initiative connects master's students and community organisations so they can collaborate on research projects. We are keen to explore how we might expand the programme, either to involve more Master's students, or potentially looking at undergrads or PhD students.

Why?

CRIS is a relatively new service and is currently being part-funded by the Office for Students as part of an evaluation into the impact of student Knowledge Exchange (KE). This project should help us identify how we might scale up CRIS, and what resources might be required.



Ultra-local volunteering

What?

Develop a programme for volunteering within walking distance of UCL's Bloomsbury Campus (and, ultimately, UCL East). Such opportunities would be found on a single webpage, would have a distinctive promotional campaign and could encompass students and staff. Local organisations would receive additional support for developing relevant volunteering opportunities.

Why?

Students prefer shorter travel times for their volunteering. The programme would tie in with other work at UCL looking at our relationship with Camden.



Clubs & Societies into the Community

What?

Provide intensive support for clubs and societies to develop programmes within London schools and/or with voluntary organisations.

Why?

We already work with UCL clubs and societies through our Student-led Volunteering Programme, though the number of projects is relatively low compared with the number of groups. There is clearly potential for growth in this area, particularly if more support could be given to clubs and societies in developing links, and more initial on-site support.



Personalised Matching

What?

Rather than advertise volunteering opportunities to Post-Graduate Research (PGR) students, we would ask them to submit information about their skills, experience and interest, and approach community organisations who may have short projects they can work on. Organisations could also search a directory of available students for their projects (for example if they need help with statistical analysis, graphic design or business planning).

Why?

Having a PGR-only service might help attract these students to volunteering. There has been a move towards skills-based volunteering within the sector during COVID-19, and some commentators think this is likely to stay. There are good examples of this kind of service (such as [Digital Candle](#)) that we could emulate and make relevant to UCL PGRs. This approach would also work well with staff volunteering.

How we'll measure our progress

Aim 1: Improving the profile of volunteering at UCL

Aim 2: Making it easier to volunteer

- Number of UCL students volunteering
- Number of students taking part in CRIS
- Engagement with our digital communications
- Attendance at Volunteering Fairs and other events
- Number of website enquiries
- % of students who go onto volunteer, once they've made an enquiry

Aim 3: Enhancing the experience of volunteering

- % of students who say their volunteering was well-run and rewarding.
- % of students who say that volunteering has positively impacted on their personal development, their well-being and their academic life.
- % of students who say that they've learnt about the Voluntary & Community sector.

Aim 4: Supporting the Voluntary & Community Sector

Aim 5: Connecting volunteering with the rest of UCL

- We'll develop a new community impact framework in collaboration with UCL colleagues and our community partners (see page 15).
- Number of UCL departments we have worked with.
- Number of UCL departments we have successfully connected with the Voluntary & Community Sector.

We report on the impact of our work in our [annual review](#).

How we created this strategy

Our community volunteering programme is built on partnerships – within UCL, with students, and with the Voluntary & Community Sector, and we involved many of those partners in drawing up this strategy, including:

- Students
- UCL colleagues
- Voluntary & Community Sector representatives
- Sabbatical Officers
- Student Union colleagues
- Volunteer Managers in other universities.

With the help of the UCL Student Experience Panel, we also gathered feedback from students through a survey.

Thank you to everyone who shared their ideas – we couldn't have done this without you. You can read the full analysis from our consultation along with a more detailed action plan on our [Volunteering Service's webpages](#).

About Students' Union UCL

UCL is London's Global University and our student body represents the diversity of the city and its global connections. Students' Union UCL (SU) was established in 1893 as a charity and was the first organisation of its kind. We operate at arm's length from UCL and represent one of the largest student bodies in the UK with more than 42,000 members. We have ambitions to become one of the top-ranked students' unions in the country and to be recognised internationally as providing an excellent student experience. We support a wide range of student activities, including societies and sports clubs, student representatives, liberation networks, health & wellbeing activities, and community volunteering. We operate Bloomsbury Fitness gym as well as other spaces for students around campus such as cafes, bars and shops. We also run an impartial Advice Service.





 Camden

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 **STUDENTS'
UNION UCL**

**Volunteering
Service**