

Developing volunteering

Innovating in student volunteering opportunities

Volunteering exists across a host a breadth of students' union activities and traditional community volunteering has continued to grow with interest from students. Innovating volunteering provision is key to maintaining interest and sustaining activity.

Introduction

Ensuring that we continue to innovate and adapt service provision is imperative to keep activities fresh and exciting.

Student volunteering is key to this and the changes that we've seen in recent years surrounding students motivations to volunteer and perceptions of the value of volunteering have resulted in much development.

Innovation can seem scary, time consuming and daunting however it can provide a fantastic way to deliver activity in a different way to a different audience.

How to innovate

When thinking about how to innovate NESTA outlined some key phases to go through:

- Exploring opportunities and challenges
- Generating ideas
- Developing and testing
- Making the case
- Delivering and implementing
- Growing, scaling and spreading
- Changing systems

More detail can be found on the [NESTA open workshop site](#).

Innovation could be a whole scale change in your activity, perhaps moving from brokerage

to student led activity or something smaller to changing how you attract student volunteers.

Strategic consultancy agency Uscreates talks about innovation in four different stages:

- Revolutionary work - working with entirely new audiences, on entirely new issues, while creating entirely new offerings within Uscreates
- Evolutionary work - two novel territories, and one existing territory (for example the issue could be something we have worked on before, but we're now approaching a new audience and creating a new offering)
- Incremental work - two existing territories, and one novel territory (for example the audience and type of offering is familiar to us, but we're tackling a new issue)
- Minimal work - working with existing audiences, on existing issues, while creating similar offerings.

You can read more on their ideas on their [site](#).

Contents

This guide includes an opinion piece from a vinspired about latest trends in innovation around volunteering as well as a couple of examples from students' union of their innovation in volunteering provision.

vInspired

About

This case study has been written by Samantha Sparrow, Knowledge & Innovation Manager at vInspired.

Why innovation in youth volunteering is vital

Volunteering is a complex activity, and this is especially true for young people. With increasingly wide ranging demands on their time, a challenging set of economic circumstances to deal with and use of technology to manage their life on the rise, organisations that wish to engage younger volunteers need to innovate – and quickly.

As volunteer involving organisations we can become so cause-focused that often we do not properly interrogate our volunteering roles to see whether they're attractive to the volunteering workforce, including younger volunteers and those who have less time to give.

At vInspired we have spent the last seven years getting to know young volunteers – from how they like to give their time to which causes they care most about and crucially have used this data to ensure we are developing opportunities and experiences that young people will really engage with.

Building skills through volunteering

Many organisations forget that volunteering is an exchange – time and talents from the volunteer, which should be matched with high-quality training and support from the organisation. This enables the volunteer to undertake a role that they enjoy and the organisation to benefit from – and want to

retain – the volunteer.

We already know that many young people volunteer to build valuable skills and experience to support their future employability and career aspirations, and vInspired have developed several programmes such as [vInspired Talent](#) which works with NEET young people to ensure they are building the appropriate skills for their future through carefully managed volunteering activity.

This can be replicated at any life stage of a young person, but the need to develop skills for the workplace is never so apparent than whilst studying at university.

Developing subject based volunteering programmes, as well as programmes that will develop soft skills such as teamwork, communication and leadership ensure that students see the relevance and benefit of volunteering as well as put them in a more favourable position upon graduation.

In fact [our own research](#) even tells us that 96% of managers believe workplace skills can be built through volunteering

Finally, being able to demonstrate the skills they have gained through volunteering is an important aspect of the experience, whether they acknowledge this at the outset or not. Supporting volunteers not only to reflect on their involvement but to articulate their achievements in a meaningful way is crucial.

Reward, recognition and incentives

So how do you support young people to articulate the achievements they have experienced through volunteering? Recognition is an important part of this puzzle. An example of this is our [vInspired Awards](#), which provide a fantastic way for charities to reward young

volunteers for the time they give and the skills they gain. Of course, recognition is just one part of engaging young volunteers, but it's important for young people who give up their time.

Being able to record and register hours, skills gained and achieve awards amongst their peers is also a good incentive to volunteer too, if the level of volunteering is not as high as you'd like it to be. That said, not all incentives are considered equal.

[Our most recent research on digital incentives](#) suggests that young people are looking for intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic incentives, so you can put away the wallets – as money is not an effective incentive to volunteer.

Instead, build both a programme and a recruitment strategy uses an incentive that remains in that original context of a common interest, goal or concern. By doing this you are able to identify with young people, show you are looking to achieve the same thing and reward them in this context.

Appropriate rewards would be something intangible but with value to the young person within the community, such as recognition among peers and evidence that they have contributed to something worthwhile.

Put volunteers in the driving seat

Being able to engage with young people in different ways is an essential factor in meeting the challenge of involving young volunteers more generally.

Creating a spectrum of volunteering activities that attract young people at all stages of their personal development ensures you appeal to a wide range of different skills and experiences, and you have something to keep them engaged

for as long as possible.

At vInspired, we have developed this spectrum of engagement – from innovative micro-volunteering activities such as [Do Something](#), right through to community leadership opportunities such as [Team v](#) and we are involving a wider number of young volunteers as a result. For charities, creative thinking about how this demographic would like to volunteer is required to encourage involvement.

But what about engaging those students in volunteering who do not want or don't fit a traditionally managed volunteering programme? It's time to build ways of supporting the most entrepreneurial young people to engage in their community and lead their own social action – not something that's already been defined before they arrived. At vInspired we encourage those young people to build their own projects through [Cashpoint](#), a grants scheme, and [Igniter](#), a crowdfunding platform, but how can you provide support to those in your community that won't volunteer in your more traditional programmes but are passionate about something which they want to tackle in their own way?

Now more than ever, people have a number of ways they can choose to spend their time, and volunteering is often low down on the very long list. Student Unions should think innovatively about how to target their students effectively, in terms of both using their skills appropriately and also offering opportunities at a time that is right for them and the wider community.

By effectively engaging with this demographic through an offering of choice, flexibility and positive recognition, you can cultivate a legacy of youth participation amongst your student body, and one that is led by the needs, passions and skills of those students.

University of Gloucestershire

About

Since January 2013, students and staff at the University have been logging the hours of voluntary work they do in the communities of Gloucestershire and further afield, with the aim of reaching a massive 10,000 hours of service.

This initiative was developed and run by a group of university academics aimed at highlighting the power of volunteering and the huge impact the University of Gloucestershire has on its community.

The idea

The idea was developed by University of Gloucestershire academics James Derounian, Adam Hart and Kenny Lynch with the aim of showcasing the depth and range of activities that University students and staff are involved with.

Students and staff are able to log their hours and activity online allowing organisers to count hours but also highlight exactly how the individual is interacting with their community.

The project has also really engaged people with volunteering and reflecting on their experiences whilst also allowing the institution to gauge and start to understand its impact on local life.

With such a vibrant and diverse community making up the University of Gloucestershire it is difficult to capture the experiences of everyone but the 10,000 hours campaign has really illustrated the amazing range and diversity of contributions.

To get this going the project made sure it engaged key stakeholders across the University

including the Students' Union and other employability functions within the Institution to promote the campaign.

The Idea came initially from George Washington University in the USA- Michelle Obama challenged the class of 2010 to get 100,000 hours of volunteering time recorded and if achieved she would speak at their Graduation.

Advice

Some key tips in developing a similar scheme:

- Create an identity for your project for example a twitter hashtag.
- Incentivize the project e.g. weekly prize draw for people who submitted idea.
- Involve students in shaping your communication plan.

Logging hours should be as easy as possible for people, try and launch initiative at the start of the year, set a realistic target, get your senior management on board.

Impact

Measuring our outcome was really important and this was really helped by real quantifiable data which really illustrates the breadth of impact that the University community has upon its locality.

This data has been used in Union impact reports to highlight how volunteering is a central component of many people's lives within the University and how other projects are justifiable.

Contact

For more information contact Tom Newman, Opportunities Manager - tnewman@glos.ac.uk or 01242 714367

Exeter Guild of Students

The idea

The overall vision within Activities & Volunteering is of a move towards an 'every student volunteers' aspiration. Every student will at some stage engage in some form of volunteering during their time at Exeter. This is bold, ambitious, aspirational and has the potential to be sector leading.

Students volunteer for a range of reasons:

- To give something back to the community and to make a difference
- To enhance their CV
- To develop skills and to gain experience
- To have a go at something that they've never been able to do before
- To follow their passions, hobbies, interests
- Because of a personal experience, experience within their family or their friendship group that has inspired them to volunteer
- ... the list goes on!

The Students' Guild Activities & Volunteering unit has committed to developing more and more ways to engage students in volunteering, accepting that one size doesn't fit all.

We have recently piloted a new way of engaging volunteers, where the volunteering opportunity sits within the academic College.

We have successfully piloted this type of volunteering in partnership with the English Department:

Care Homes Reading Project – this project sends volunteer student readers into care homes to read to older people

We have also set up:

- Maths Mentoring Project
- Writing Mentoring Project
- Theatre Buddy Scheme
- German, Spanish & French After School Club

We have learned a number of key things:

- That some students, who don't otherwise volunteer, will volunteer for subject based projects
- That providing quality training that is bespoke to the project makes it more successful and sustainable
- Once they have volunteered in this way, they also become more open to other types of volunteering
- That there is an interest amongst the subject disciplines within the University to develop volunteering
- That academic staff respond positively to the notion of student volunteering being of relevance to them

To support the activity we ran focus groups with students and also approached academics and College Managers to find out if there was traction in the idea.

Advice

Key ingredients are needed in order to establish success:

- Bespoke training for the project
- Strong links with the community partner
- Strong links with the academic discipline
- An academic champion who gives gravitas to the project
- Evaluation built in

Follow up

Early days yet but very positive feedback from students, community partners and academics.

We have done evaluations with those 3 key partners but the challenge is finding the time to evaluate robustly.

Now seeing a move to student societies wanting to set up their own volunteering schemes, e.g.:

- German, Spanish and French Societies all setting up after school language clubs
- Theatre Goers Society setting up the Theatre Buddy Scheme
- Maths Society setting up maths mentoring project
- Creative Writing Society setting up writing mentors project etc.

Hopefully it will become the norm at Exeter for societies to manage their own volunteering projects over time.

Contact

For more information on this project please contact [Sara Bennett](#), Activities & Volunteering Manager.

Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t 0845 5210 262
f 020 7380 0794
e nusuk@nus.org.uk
www.nus.org.uk

nus
national union of **students**