

The impact of student opportunities

Making the case for investment

Students' unions recently conducted a wave of research into the impact of opportunities on students and society. What did we learn to help win further investment? Use this summary to inform your campaigns including those to *Keep Wednesday Afternoons Free*.

Introduction

We have sought to explore the impacts of student opportunities beyond those on students as individuals. We focused on evaluating changes **which benefit the whole of society** in the interests of students.

This perspective is important. It helps us to really understand the difference we are making in the world as well as to build the case for the public benefit of students' unions.

7 students' unions contributed 11 pieces of research as part of the [Prove Me Wrong project](#). We owe them many thanks as pioneers in this area. Here I have compiled some of the key findings so far so we can all prepare persuasive arguments. I hope this helps students' unions to win respect, funding, space and whatever else for student opportunities around the country.

I have learned a lot through the process. Firstly that evaluation is impossible without clear social impacts set out at the start. SU plans need to be built from beliefs about how the world should be. Only then we can see how successful we've been. Searching for impact retrospectively is like fishing for tissues in a pond. You might find something, but it probably won't help much.

Secondly I realised there are no absolute truths when it comes to social research like this. Scepticism, honesty and curiosity are the right attitudes. Suspect we might not be making a difference. Accept we can always improve. Commit to building our shared body of evidence with increasingly sophisticated techniques and more robust methods. From this we can learn together what works, and get better.

Lastly I learned (mercifully) that we are making some progress towards a better future – a fairer and more sustainable one. But that doesn't surprise me because I have experienced the power of student opportunities.

I hope this is just the start. The guidance is [still available online](#) and more contributions are always welcome.

Richard Brooks

Vice President (Union Development), NUS, and Convenor, National Keep Wednesday

Afternoons Free Campaign (NKWAFC)

richard.brooks@nus.org.uk



Learnings

Keeping students in education

There is a good case that participation affects retention rates.

This effect has been shown by [Teesside](#), [Liverpool Hope](#) and [Staffordshire](#).

Teesside's analysis proposes drop-out rates among 'involved students' are somewhere between 17% and 33% of the wider university rates each year.

Staffordshire's analysis gives 27%. Liverpool Hope's is around 20% but their sample was quite small.

Qualitative work provides some evidence to reassure us the effect is causal, meaning participation drives retention.

"Of the 9 students we spoke to about their experience being part of a club or society, 7 of them agreed that being a part of it helped them make it through their course."

Teesside have shown this effect extends to course reps.

They have also done some research which suggests involved students are more likely to achieve higher classification degrees overall, but there is limited research to suggest this is causal.

Teesside report participating in a psychological study showing members of clubs and societies are happier students, but we have not seen the evidence for this yet.

In this way student opportunities are contributing **to a fairer education system**,

where students are less likely to drop out if they struggle with their course or find the overall experience challenging.

Facilitating good jobs for all

The evidence we have for this so far from [Birmingham City University](#) tells a positive and intriguing story.

89% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds report if they hadn't come to study at university they would be in a good job. This compares to 97% of students from more advantaged backgrounds. This gives us an idea of the inequalities we are trying to tackle.

Students assert that taking part in opportunities improves their employment prospects.

"I think that employers take into consideration extra-curricular activities because it gives you lots of transferable skills like time management, commitment and teamwork. So being part of a student group puts you ahead."

This is supported by employers. At a recent roundtable Stephen Asherwood, Head of the Association of Graduate Recruiters, said *"social action is more important than your degree result"*.

BCU's evidence suggests students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be part of a student group while studying (29%) than their counterparts from more advantaged areas (19%).

This is a great story because it suggests students' unions (or at least BCU) are actively contributing to solving inequalities in the job

market – getting the students who need it the most involved in employability-boosting activities.

One interesting finding is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds think it's **much less likely** they will end up unemployed after graduation than the group from more advantaged backgrounds. This could either suggest they are naïve about their chances of getting a job after graduating or, hopefully, they are confident their involvement with student opportunities will have made a difference to their future. Further research required.

Encouraging altruism

Research by the Charities Aid Foundation suggests while charitable donations from older people have doubled since the 1980s, the proportion of donations made by the under-30s has more than halved.

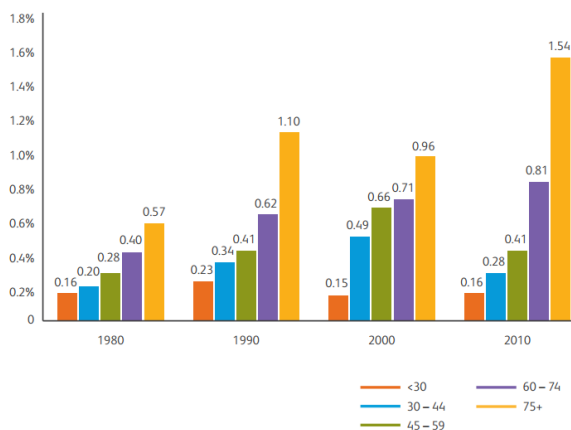


Fig 1: Levels of generosity (giving as a % of total spending) – by age group¹

¹ CAF, *Mind The Gap* report 2012
<http://www.growinggiving.org.uk/assets/files/Mind-The-Gap-Report.pdf>

² Reason Digital, *An insight into the charitable giving of young adults and students*,
<http://reasondigital.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/result-document.pdf>

³ 3,200 students taking part in clubs and societies (Keele SU Impact Report 14/15). 75% <25 years old

This *giving gap* is a challenge for the future sustainability of charities.

[Keele SU's contribution](#) suggests students' unions and opportunities including RAG are key to shaping behaviours and attitudes towards charitable giving at a time of transition in peoples' lives. This is important because work by Reason Digital has reported that the dominant factor in giving is learned behaviour (and not how much extra income one thinks they have).²

From Keele's work we can say being actively involved in a RAG committee and having a good experience with fundraising can encourage and facilitate individuals' long term commitment to charitable causes.

There is limited evidence about the difference made by the students' union to overall fundraising totals. However the opportunity arises to compare the total fundraised by Keele SU clubs and societies members with population averages.

A low-bound estimate at the amount which individuals would fundraise regardless of the SU can be put at £130,000 per year.³ This is around twice the amount Keele SU capture through the RAG TAG fundraising total. We can draw limited conclusions from this because we don't have figures on how much individuals are fundraising outside of the students' union but we can say further work is needed to evidence the difference made by the students' union in this area.

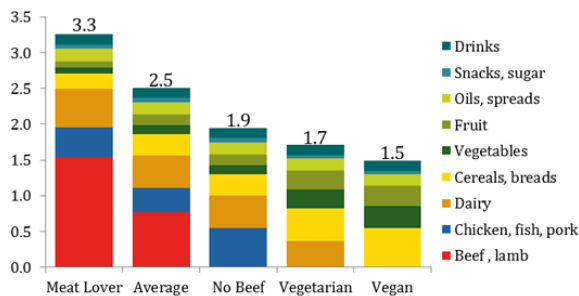
(rough demographic of Keele University). Research indicates 40% would take part in fundraising. Assumption: the amount students fundraise is at least the amount they would donate from their own pocket. (Reason Digital report) Detailed workings available on request.

Slowing down climate change

[Evidence submitted by Keele SU](#) shows interventions by student groups are making a demonstrable difference to the amount of waste going to landfill when students move out of halls, and the amount of electrical energy being wasted overnight.

Looking at the national picture, in 2016/17 through Student Switch Off participating halls managed an average of 6.2% electricity reduction.

[Staffordshire SU](#) increased uptake of vegetarian meals by 22.35%. This makes a difference to reducing the meat industry's emissions of 7.7 billion tonnes of CO₂ each year. A fully vegetarian diet is estimated to reduce your carbon footprint by around 50%.⁴



Note: All estimates based on average food production emissions for the US. Footprints include emissions from supply chain losses, consumer waste and consumption. Each of the four example diets is based on 2,600 kcal of food consumed per day, which in the US equates to around 3,900 kcal of supplied food.

Sources: ERS/USDA, various LCA and EIO-LCA data



Fig 2: Tonnes of CO₂ emitted per person per year on different diets (USA)⁵

Shaping Active Citizens

[Keele SU](#) reports that 21 students have stood in borough and parish council elections since 2014. 76% of them had stood in a Keele SU election prior to the local elections.

⁴ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25795-going-vegetarian-halves-co2-emissions-from-your-food/>

⁵ <http://shrinkthatfootprint.com/food-carbon-footprint-diet>

As context this is magnitudes higher than the national picture. Currently there are 10 peers (1.3%), 25 MPs (3.8%) and 13 Welsh AMs, NI AMs and MSPs (4.4%) who were once elected officers in students' unions.

Further research is needed to determine causation here.

Ensuring positive mental health

We have good evidence to say students taking part in physical activity regularly improves individuals' mental wellbeing.

Notwithstanding many robust national and international studies investigating the relationship between physical activity and psychological wellbeing⁶, we can now contextualise this with work from within students' unions.

[Staffordshire SU](#) saw significant differences across 2 out of 3 indicators used – happiness and anxiety. Stress levels were no different. Their sample of respondents reported above national average for formally diagnosed mental health issues but identified exercise as a key way of managing their condition.

"I dance over 8 hours a week to help manage my emotional state a bit better"

"I find that having something to look forward to with a group of people I'm close to helps manage my mental illnesses a lot"

Effects on mental health are likely to extend to other opportunities as well.

⁶ For examples see Value of Sport Monitor, Sport England <https://www.sportengland.org/research/benefits-of-sport/the-value-of-sport-monitor/psychological-health/>

[Leeds University Union and Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association](#) found

correlations between students who participate in activities more and those with higher levels of wellbeing. They also found some evidence of a link between taking part in activities and lower levels of anxiety.

They have some evidence of the causation as well. 73% of students agreed taking part in a sports club or society has helped their mental wellbeing and 73% of students agreed that coming to university gave them the opportunity to do this activity.

Building Communities

[Birmingham City University Students' Union's](#) research suggests a Varsity sports programme is likely to foster a sense of belonging in the institution for students who take part. More research is needed to say whether all demographics of students will experience this equally.

Bridging Social Divides

The exercise carried out by [Birmingham City University Students' Union](#) indicates students at the university are likely to mix with people not like their friends from home or college. Qualitative research hints that participating in sports teams creates the closest friendships and that students value the connections they gain through student opportunities for supporting them through challenging times.

Next steps

Prove Me Wrong has produced some useful research and has in some cases shown clear causal links between taking part in student opportunities and the wider social and educational benefits we identified.

In the future we would like to repeat a similar exercise with more members to build our evidence base further. Certainly there should

be some revision of the methodology based on experiences of participating unions.