



**Open University Students  
Association**

**Volunteering Research  
Project 2018**

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## Foreword

One of the things that make the Association so great are its volunteers, and the difference that they make to students' lives. Student volunteers are involved in key parts of the Association's community building and student representation work – hosting our radio show, contributing to university committees, supporting fellow students at residential schools, and much more!

When the opportunity arose to commission a research project on student volunteering, I was really excited about finding out more about what motivates our volunteers and how we could encourage more students to volunteer. For me, being a volunteer made a huge difference because it overcame the isolation so many OU distance learners feel, when actually they are part of the UK's largest university! And so we chose two themes to focus on; the first would explore the different reasons students are motivated to volunteer, and the second would invite volunteers' thoughts on how community-based volunteering might work within the distance learning context of the Association.

During the focus groups held as part of this project, many students also mentioned how wonderful and rewarding it is to help other students and to make a difference to their OU journey. 82% stated that 'meeting new people and making friends' was a key benefit of volunteering and 84% stated that they were motivated by a wish 'to help the student community'. We also learnt about areas where we can improve the information and support offered to volunteers, such as transferable skills that could be gained through volunteering and how volunteers could raise awareness of their work within the wider student community.

The Association continues to develop a variety of volunteering roles to help students get involved flexibly and in a way that suits their interests. I hope that this report will enable the Association to further the work it currently does and encourage many more students to join our brilliant community of volunteers!

**Caroline Poppenga**  
**VP Representation and Research (2016-2018)**

## Foreword

As Caroline has already mentioned, we are very lucky when it comes to OU Students as they are masters of time management, jugglers of tasks and some even seem to have found Bernard's watch. OU Students are busy people and yet many of them choose to volunteer for us on top of everything else they are doing. This is a testament to the strength of this student community.

I can honestly say that all the positive comments volunteers have shared are a result of the hard work put in by volunteers and staff working alongside each other. I welcome the suggestions regarding areas for improvement as we are always looking for ways to grow our service to support more students to volunteer, and to ensure our volunteers have a rewarding experience with the Association.

Following this research project, I am happy to say that the Volunteer Team alongside our new Deputy President have already implemented some of the recommendations, and will be working on several others in the coming year.

A big thanks to all the volunteers who took the time to share their experience of volunteering at the Association with us!

**Beth Metcalf**  
**Head of Student Volunteering**



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## Executive Summary

- This report presents findings from the OU Students Association's Volunteering Research Project (2017-2018). Commissioned by Caroline Poppenga (Vice President Representation and Research) and the Student Volunteering Team, this project was undertaken to explore two key themes: students' motivations for volunteering with the Association and their thoughts on the introduction of community-based volunteering opportunities.
- The most common motivation for volunteering was 'To help the student community' (84%), and the response was similarly high for 'meeting new people and making friends' (82%) when considering the benefits of volunteering; the feedback also suggests that awareness of the benefits of volunteering with the Association could be improved.
- Feedback on the challenges faced by volunteers suggests a need to improve advice on time management, identify clear lines of communications between volunteer groups and the Association office, and provide more guidelines on how volunteer roles interact with each other and how volunteers can feed back to the student community.
- Volunteer perceptions of community-based volunteering suggest a need to clarify how students can get involved in such projects, what community-based projects entail and how they would work in practice. Student volunteers listed their previous experience of volunteering with other charities and organisations, and identified some of the key features that would encourage students to get involved in community-based volunteering projects (e.g., efficient management, clarity on outcomes, recognition of student contributions).
- These findings will be taken forward within the Association staff team and the student leadership team, and will inform future developments in the opportunities and support offered to student volunteers.

## The Volunteering Research Project

The Open University Students Association's mission is 'to be the voice and community for OU students', and student volunteering is central to how the Association engages the student community. The [OU Students Association](#) (henceforth Association) supports students through its work in areas such as student community, student voice and student support, each with a dedicated staff team. Student volunteering is pivotal to this work, and we have a growing pool of students volunteering with the Association in a variety of roles. The opportunities we currently offer students are thus focused on volunteering with the Association itself (rather than the Association signposting students to other volunteering-involving organisations).

Student volunteering with the Association has grown both in the number and variety of opportunities on offer. The Association provides training and guidance, covers volunteers' expenses, and uses a variety of communication channels to enable volunteers to keep in touch with each other and with the wider student community. To engage students within the part-time distance learning context of the OU, the Association has developed volunteer roles that allow students to get involved in ways that suit them. This has recently included new initiatives to offer more online and home-based volunteering roles, as well as exploring whether student volunteering with the Association can be linked to different subject areas and local communities.

These developments have prompted a systematic exploration of different aspects of volunteering with the Association. Through early discussions with the student leadership team and the Student Volunteering staff team, we narrowed the focus of this project to two key themes:

- Motivations for volunteering with the Association.
- Perceptions around community-based volunteering.

These themes correspond to our key strategic objective to '*engage students in a vibrant and supportive community and create new opportunities*' (['Our Strategy'](#), p.11), and have proved helpful in identifying how students make connections and come together to support each other as a community within what is a geographically dispersed student body. The findings from this project will help us identify ways to improve the support we offer our volunteers and enable better matching of volunteering opportunities with students' interests and motivations, as well as informing how we assess the impact of student volunteering and develop new community-based volunteering opportunities.

## Methodology

For this project, our focus has been on inviting feedback from students who are already involved in a variety of volunteer roles. This has helped us gather rich qualitative feedback, exploring volunteers' personal motivations for volunteering, the benefits that they felt volunteering has brought to them, their thoughts on community-led volunteering, and their perceptions of the challenges that students could face while volunteering.

To ensure that we heard from as many volunteers as possible, we used a variety of feedback channels for this research project. These have included an online survey, face to face and online focus groups, individual interviews and a workshop; this allowed volunteers to commit as little or as much time as they could offer, whether it was taking part in a twitter poll or participating in focus groups held at the Milton Keynes campus.

- **The NCVO's Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit**  
The National Council for Voluntary Organisation's Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit (VIAT) has been the key resource for this project, informing our approach in collecting feedback through different channels such as focus groups, surveys and volunteer diaries. These have been adapted to the specific context of student volunteering with the Association.
- **Workshop with the Student Leadership team**  
The Volunteering Research Project was launched in September 2017 with a workshop attended by members of the Association's student leadership team, the Central Executive Committee (CEC). The (NCVO) Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit was used, with an activity based on the *Matrix for Identifying Impacts*; the feedback from this workshop helped in identifying the two key themes explored in this project.
- **Focus groups**  
The focus groups were designed to encourage volunteers to share their personal experience of volunteering with the Association, while engaging with the two key themes (motivations for volunteering and community-based volunteering). Volunteers participated in 3 focus groups, 2 face-to-face and 1 online, between December 2017 and January 2018.

Participation levels in the 2 face-to-face focus groups was low, with each of them attended by 3 volunteers. Feedback on one of the Association's online forums suggests that travelling to the OU campus in Milton Keynes might have been a barrier to attending. Two further focus groups were organised; however, as only 1 volunteer attended in each case, these were changed to an interview format.



- **Interviews**

The feature stories showcasing the work of our volunteers, were held as short Skype interviews lasting between 15-20 minutes. Additionally, 2 detailed interviews were conducted in place of focus groups due to only one volunteer attending; while these interviews were impromptu and without prior notice, both interviewees agreed to the semi-structured format and shared their personal experience of volunteering with the Association.

- **Online Survey**

An online survey invited feedback from all current student volunteers. The survey questionnaire adapted the VIAT's Core and Supplementary questionnaires to the context of student volunteering with the Association, and included questions about motivations for volunteering, the benefits of volunteering, and barriers to volunteering. The response rate was just under 40%, with 69 out of 174 current volunteers taking the survey.

- **Volunteer Journals**

The VIAT's '*volunteer diaries*' were adapted for this project, and volunteers were given a template with questions about how much time they spent on their role, the benefits they had experienced through volunteering with the Association, and any additional training and support that they would have liked. This was accompanied with a guidance document that offered advice on how often participants were expected to fill in the journal and how they could undertake this activity in small chunks of time.

- **Social media engagement**

Quick polls on social media were introduced as light-touch engagement to generate interest in the research project.

- **Student Consultation**

Grateful thanks are due to the [Open University's Student Consultation Office](#), who facilitated the Association's Consultation on Student Volunteering between 19 June and 3 July 2017. The Consultation Office also shared a summary of the forum discussions, which has been invaluable in understanding students' perceptions around community-based volunteering.

## Findings

### *Volunteering with the Association*

The Association offers a wide range of volunteering opportunities, allowing students to get involved in different ways, such as choosing a role that offers a good match in terms of time investment or having the flexibility to work individually or in groups. A need for volunteering opportunities that allow students greater flexibility is recognised by the Association, and the last two years have seen the introduction of a variety of roles that allow students to fit volunteering in with other demands on their time. Conference Makers, STUDIO Hosts and Archive project volunteers are just a few examples of new volunteer roles that offer students the opportunity to volunteer on a seasonal or one-off basis.

The Association's Student Volunteering team has oversight of the volunteer policy and guidelines for recruitment, offering training and organising activities and events to celebrate student volunteering. Each type of volunteer role is further supported by different staff teams within the organisation; these teams have responsibility for day-to-day support, communicating with volunteers regularly and developing training materials on specific topics (for example, writing reports or using social media).

For this project, the online survey respondents were asked to indicate which volunteering roles they had held in the two years prior to the survey. Students often hold more than one volunteering role with the Association; for example, a Central Committee Member could also volunteer as a Graduation Volunteer. Table 1 lists the volunteering roles that students can undertake with the Association, together with the number of respondents (out of a total of 65 who answered this question) selecting each role.

- These numbers were high for roles that are supported by the *Student Voice* team at the Association: Central Committee Representatives (42%), Learning Experience Representatives (32%), and Senate Reference Group Members (28%). This was not unexpected, as there are currently over 150 students volunteering in roles related to the Student Voice arm of the Association's work (Academic Representation, March 2018, p.4).
- Of the respondents, 8% volunteered as Community Champions, a role that is supported by the *Student Community* team at the Association; 22% volunteered as Graduation Volunteers, supported by the *Operations* team; and 18% volunteered as Disabled Students Group (DSG) Committee Members, supported by the *Student Support* team.
- Respondents also mentioned other roles such as Archive Volunteer, Conference Steering Committee Member, and those on the committees of affiliated Societies.

<b>Volunteer Role</b>	<b>Number of respondents choosing this option</b>	<b>Proportion of respondents (out of 65)</b>
Area Association Representative	5	8%
CEC Officer (President, Deputy President and Officers)	7	11%
Central Committee Representative	27	42%
Community Champion	5	8%
Conference Helper	6	9%
Graduation Coordinator	6	9%
Graduation Volunteer	14	22%
Disabled Students Group Committee Member	12	18%
Faculty Association Representative	2	3%
Learning Experience Representative	21	32%
Meet-up Host	16	25%
Online Forum Moderator	11	17%
OSL Director	1	2%
OUEST Ambassador	2	3%
OUEST Trustee	2	3%
Peer Supporter	1	2%
Photographer	3	5%
PLEXUS Committee Member	4	6%
Podcaster	1	2%
Radio Host	3	5%
Residential School Lead Representative	3	5%
Residential School Representative	4	6%
Senate Reference Group Member	18	28%
Student Council Member	1	2%
Writer for Students Magazine	7	11%

**Table 1.** *The volunteer roles that the online survey respondents had undertaken in the two years prior to the survey (65 respondents answered this question).*

In the online survey, we asked respondents how much time they were spending on their role(s) and how often they engaged in volunteering-related activities. This was in response to earlier feedback through our 'training needs' surveys, where volunteers had asked for better clarity on the overall time commitment that different roles require.

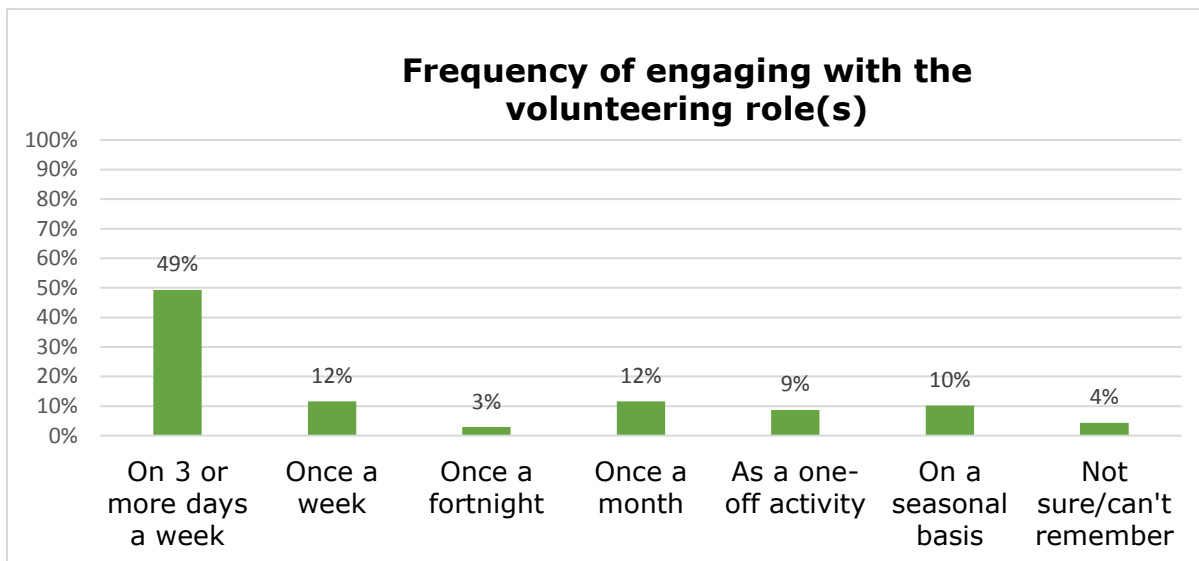
- The answer options for frequency of engaging with the roles ranged from 'on a seasonal basis'/'as a one-off activity' to 'on 3 or more days a week'. Nearly half of all respondents (49%) engaged with their roles 'on 3 or more days a week' (see Chart 1).
- Similarly, for the time spent on volunteering each week, the answer options ranged from '2 hours or less' to 'over 20 hours'. 38% spent '2 hours or less' per week on their volunteering role, while a small proportion of respondents (7%) spent more than 20 hours per week on their volunteering role (see Chart 2).
- Notably, many of the survey respondents had held a variety of volunteer roles; 27 respondents, or 42% of the 65 respondents who answered the question, had held 3 or more roles during the specified time period. All 5 respondents who spent more than 20 hours per week on volunteering with the Association had undertaken multiple roles during the specified duration, ranging between 5 to 10 different volunteering roles (each of them engaged in volunteering on 3 or more days each week).
- The students who had kept a Volunteer Journal for this project had listed all the activities, big and small, that they had undertaken as part of their volunteer role(s) (see Table 2). These activities can be categorised variously as online interaction (in blue), attending face-to-face events organised by the University (in turquoise) and attending events organised by the Association (in pink).

While the Association can clarify the time investment that a student needs to anticipate before undertaking a specific role, feedback suggests that individuals may be investing far more time than would be expected from a volunteer. As a journal entry explained, one volunteer found it difficult to distinguish volunteering time from simply engaging with or helping students (this was especially the case while interacting with fellow students on social media). The survey respondents also gave similar feedback:

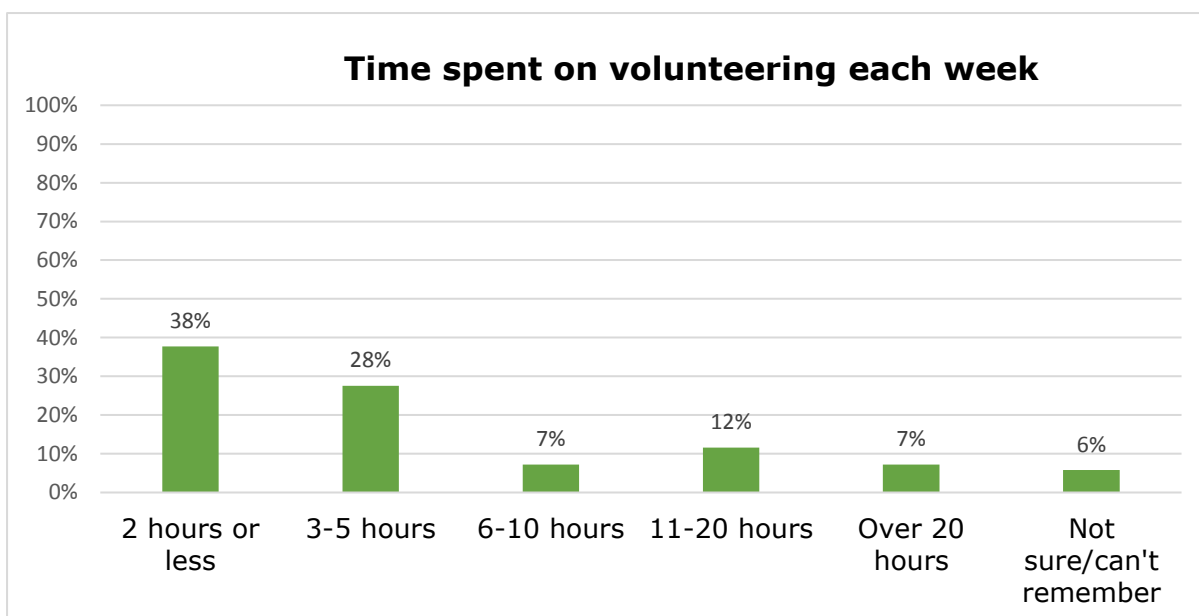
*"How a (misplaced?) sense of responsibility and wanting to help everyone can make it a far more time-consuming role than intended."*

– Survey respondent

This suggests that support for volunteers could potentially include advice on managing time, managing the expectations of fellow students, and achieving a sustainable balance between volunteering activities and other commitments.



**Chart 1.** Online survey respondents indicated how often they engaged with their volunteering role (all 69 respondents answered the question).



**Chart 2.** Online survey respondents indicated the time they usually spent on their volunteering role each week (all 69 respondents answered the question).

**Table 2**

<b>Participant Journals</b>	<b>Volunteering role(s) held</b>	<b>Events attended and activities undertaken</b>
1	Student representative on university committee	<p>Responding to emails, engaging on online forums, collecting feedback</p> <p>Preparing for university committee meetings</p> <p>Attending Societies committee meeting</p>
2	Community Champion, Senate Reference Group Member, Student representative on university committee	<p>Engaging on online forums, undertaking online training, responding to student queries</p> <p>Attending a university committee meeting on campus, preparing for committee meetings (reading papers)</p> <p>Attending workshops on campus, attending the Central Committee Representative Seminar, participating in the Community Champions online chat</p>
3	Central Executive Committee (CEC) Member	<p>Engaging on online forums</p> <p>Working Committee meetings in the Nations, Q&amp;A events organised by the University, External events/conferences (related to QAA work)</p>
4	Central Executive Committee (CEC) Member	<p>Engaging on online forums, answering emails</p> <p>Preparing for committee meetings at the MK campus</p> <p>Attending Societies meetings, attending training days, working on projects with fellow CEC members</p>
5	Area Association Representative	<p>Engaging on online forums</p> <p>Attending OU face-to-face consultation events</p> <p>Attending CEC meetings in MK</p>
6	Area Association Representative	<p>Engaging on online forums, responding to emails, talking to fellow students on social media</p> <p>Attending CEC meetings in MK</p>

## Motivations for volunteering

Students' motivations for volunteering was one of the key areas that we took as the focus of this research project. Table 3 lists the different statements around motivation used for the online survey, together with the proportion of volunteers who chose each one. All 69 respondents answered the question; respondents could select as many options as they wished. The most common motivation, chosen by 84% of the respondents, was *'to help the student community'*. A recent National Union of Students (NUS) study exploring student volunteering reports similar findings, where *"improving things/helping people"* is a key motivation to get involved in volunteering (Ellison and Kerr, 2014, p. 4), as do other studies on volunteering (Brewis et al., 2010, p.27; Low et al., 2007, p.34).

Other motivations were *'to "give something back" to the Students Association'* (65%) and *'to represent my fellow students'* (64%). Other motivations that over half of the respondents selected were *'to meet and socialise with fellow students'* (52%), *'to support fellow students with study'* (52%) and *'to gain new skills'* (51%). The most common motivations, therefore, focus on volunteers' interactions with fellow students and being a part of the student community.

*"To help the feelings of isolation that you get as a distance learner."*  
– Survey respondent

Motivations for volunteering	Proportion of volunteers (out of 69)
To help the student community	84%
To 'give something back' to the Students Association	65%
To meet and socialise with fellow students	52%
To support fellow students with study	52%
To represent my fellow students	64%
To learn more about the Students Association	33%
To learn more about the Open University	49%
To gain new skills	51%
To use my existing skills	43%
To add new experiences to my CV	20%
The role matched well with my interests	35%
My friends were volunteering and I felt encouraged to join	6%
I had spare time that I wanted to put to good use	33%
I felt there was no one else to do it	7%

**Table 3.** Listed are the different statements around motivation used in the online survey and the proportion of respondents who chose each one.

As Table 3 shows, there is a contrast between the number of volunteers who wanted 'to gain new skills' (51%) and those wishing 'to add new experiences to [their] CV' (20%). Moreover, a few comments received through the online survey suggest that motivations around employability skills or adding volunteering experience to one's CV was contrasted negatively with the perception of volunteering as an altruistic activity. For a discussion of studies exploring altruistic motivations and the possibility that the stress on altruism might be "*socially conditioned*", see Rochester et al (2010, p.120-121).

*"Unless someone is going to pay me to chat to other students all day then it has no bearing on my employability. Honestly. Some of us are here for other reasons than trying to get roles to put on a CV to make us look better to employers."*

– Survey respondent

*"I am not volunteering to gain anything and in my book, nor should anyone else be. CV builders do not tend to make good or helpful volunteers - it should be for the good of others"*

– Survey respondent

While some survey respondents saw gaining skills as benefitting them in their profession, others saw it more in terms of personal development. It is important to bear in mind the unique nature of OU study; as mature learners, students who volunteer with the Association may already be in full-time or part-time work, which informs the extent to which professional development might be a key motivation for them. Reasons for volunteering, especially regarding career and skills, have been shown to differ with age (Low et al., 2007, p.35). The Association's volunteer database, together with volunteer surveys, could be used to identify distinct groups of volunteers who might benefit from gaining transferable skills.

A distinction also needs to be made between employability skills - which volunteers may not consider relevant to their personal circumstances - and the skills that were classed more as 'personal development' in the survey feedback. Box 1 shows how volunteers taking the online survey responded to the statement '*Volunteering with the Students Association has developed my employability skills*'.



*"I have gained skills and abilities I didn't believe I had. As a manager in my company, it has helped me to better empathise with the people I work with."*  
– Survey respondent

*"Volunteering does develop employability skills but I don't need them!"*  
– Survey respondent

*"I'm self-employed so not sure that anything would improve my employability, but it's good to be able to say what I've done - I feel that just the fact of trying something new says something about me."*  
– Survey respondent

Such comments can be better understood by exploring the detailed feedback given by focus group participants. During the focus group discussions, we took a different approach from the online survey and did not offer participants preselected phrases to describe different kinds of motivations. Instead, we introduced an activity that asked volunteers to first list their motivations for volunteering on separate post-it notes, and as the second part of the activity they discussed if individual motivations fell into any natural groupings. The exchanges between participants, as they discussed where to place a particular motivation, helped us revisit the phrasing commonly used in surveys to describe the broad motivations for volunteering. For example, phrases such as 'gaining new skills' were interpreted very differently by individuals, and were classed under distinct categories of personal development and professional development.

- During this activity, participants identified and named categories such as 'helping students', 'personal development', 'teamwork', 'transferable skills', 'making a difference', 'social', 'people', 'skills' and 'knowledge' (see Tables 4 and 5). One of the motivations listed, 'to have a voice that is listened to', was seen by all participants in focus group 1 as an overarching motivation that encapsulated all categories.
- Participants also pointed out the overlaps between categories. For example, 'meeting students' and 'sense of belonging' were seen as very similar motivations. All participants in focus group 1 agreed that 'help and support others' and 'helping new students adjust' belonged to the same category of Support.
- Participants discussed how some motivations were often phrased similarly but needed distinguishing from each other. For example, 'feeling part of a team' and 'feeling part of the community' were seen as being distinct, with the former seen in terms of the organisation (the Students Association) and the latter in terms of the student community. Similarly, 'confidence building' seemed difficult to categorise as participants felt it could be classed under both 'personal development' and 'social'.

- Participants also pointed out that motivations to volunteer could be very subjective and individual, and in focus group 1 they listed 'Individual reasons or interests' as a separate category.

This activity has alerted us to the possibility that phrases such as 'building confidence' or 'gaining skills', often used in the Association's volunteer-focused surveys, may not be self-evident for students. Braime and Ruohonen's 2011 study on student volunteering (using the VIAT template), for example, lists the various benefits of volunteering under categories such as '*personal development*', '*transferable skills*', '*academic life*', '*employability*' and '*social and cultural impacts*' (p. 7-11). With this approach, they were able to gauge volunteers' agreement with several statements under each category, thereby arriving at a more nuanced understanding of such phrases.

The following exchange illustrates how such concepts can be perceived very differently by individuals. 'Gaining skills', for example, could be viewed as part of personal development, gaining transferable skills, or gaining employability skills. Once these competing views are taken into consideration, the Association can refine its communications around the benefits of volunteering (for example, demonstrating the kind of transferable skills gained through volunteering and how students can put them to use).

*"Participant 2: Improving Skills...that is different to the personal development [category] there, because that is sort of professional personal development, isn't it?"*

*Participant 1: When I wrote that, it was for professional, well, it was developing what I can do outside rather than inside.*

*Facilitator [Referring to participant post-its]: Is that Transferable Skills?*

*Participant 1: So transferable skills, yes.*

*Facilitator: And do you want the word professional in there?*

*Participant 2: No, it doesn't have to be professional."*

- Participant discussion, focus group 1

In the focus group discussions a motivation to gain transferable/employability skills was not seen in a negative light, with participants suggesting that professional skills could be useful to all age groups and could be a valuable experience to add to one's CV.

*"it could be an old person...what stage of life you are , I mean people change jobs even at 50, 55..."*

- Participant, focus group 1

*"If someone's been unemployed for a while, it shows that they've done something positive in that time."*

– Participant, focus group 1

*"I think, if you've done a year of volunteering and you think you've got transferable skills, it's nice if someone comes into their volunteering for whatever reasons, and they've got a little certificate to say thank you, this is what you've learnt, if it's something they've been trained in – I think that's nice! I mean it's not necessarily something that everybody is going to want, but why not."*

– Participant, focus group 1

### **Box 1**

#### **We asked**

***To what extent do you agree with the statement:***

***'Volunteering with the Students Association has developed my employability skills.'***

#### **Our volunteers said**

12% of respondents chose 'strongly agree' and 33% chose 'agree'. Agreement with this statement, however, is not as strong as with the statement about volunteering supporting students' personal development (*Benefits of Volunteering* section). In the feedback gathered through the focus groups and the open comments from the online survey, participants explained that while volunteers develop transferable skills, they may not relate them to career progression or employability.

#### **Next steps**

Volunteer feedback indicates a need for the Association to tailor both its communications and training packages to different motivations, especially when promoting volunteering as a way to gain transferable skills. The motivations that the Association commonly lists for volunteer surveys could also be made more granular in light of the distinctions made by the focus group participants. For example, future iterations of volunteer surveys would benefit from adding more nuance to phrases such as 'personal development' and 'professional development'.

Support	Me—Personal Development	Social
<p>To have a VOICE that is listened to</p> <p>Get others involved</p> <p>To support others as I have been supported</p> <p>Help and support others</p> <p>Helping new students who are a bit lost and who to direct to</p>	<p>Gives independence (even with health issues &amp; disability)</p> <p>Sense of belonging</p> <p>"I can"</p> <p>To be valued</p> <p>Keeps me busy and good for my mental health</p> <p>It's fun and addictive</p> <p>Confidence building</p> <p>To feel wanted/needed</p> <p>Because I can!</p>	<p>Part of the community</p> <p>Meet other people</p> <p>Meet new interesting people</p> <p>Meeting other people</p> <p>Opportunity to visit campus</p>
Transferable skills	Faculty organisation, teamwork	Making a difference
<p>Improve skills</p> <p>Interest in a role for personal development</p>	<p>Getting OU Student Association 'out there'</p> <p>Learn how the cogs fit together</p> <p>Help the work of the organisation</p> <p>To feel a part of a team</p>	<p>Making a difference</p> <p>Having a positive role in making a difference</p> <p>Making a difference</p>

**Table 4.** Motivations for volunteering: The different categories identified by participants in focus group 1.

People	Skills	Knowledge	Miscellaneous
<p>Meeting other students</p> <p>Meeting faculty and students</p> <p>Opportunity to visit campus more often</p> <p>Making a difference to student experiences</p>	<p>To write reports &amp; hone writing skills</p> <p>Experience</p> <p>Increasing public speaking skills</p> <p>Organisation skills</p>	<p>Learning about modules</p> <p>Understanding matters around the university</p> <p>Taking part in making decisions</p> <p>CV?</p>	<p>(We couldn't think what else to call it)</p> <p>Responsibility</p> <p>Status</p> <p>Running in 2016 elections</p> <p>The opportunity existed at the time</p>

**Table 5.** Motivations for volunteering: The different categories identified by participants in focus group 2.

The Association's work is informed by the values of equality and inclusivity, and wherever possible volunteer roles accommodate for individual accessibility needs (for example, application forms for volunteering roles are offered in alternative formats). In the focus group discussions, another reason given for students wishing to get involved with volunteering was *'because I can!'*; participants had experienced volunteering as an enabling activity and were appreciative of the support offered by the Association office to make volunteering accessible.

*"Participant 1: Why do you volunteer, what's your motivation, because I can volunteer! And the thing is, there's a lot of volunteering roles that we can't do anywhere else...but here, you adapt for it. So that's important, I think. Because we can volunteer, there hasn't been anything that I've gone forward for that I haven't been able to do because of my health, my situation, distance, adjustments, or my own capabilities. I've gone for things that I didn't know whether I could do or not, but I've gone out and turns out I can do them. Because I can.*

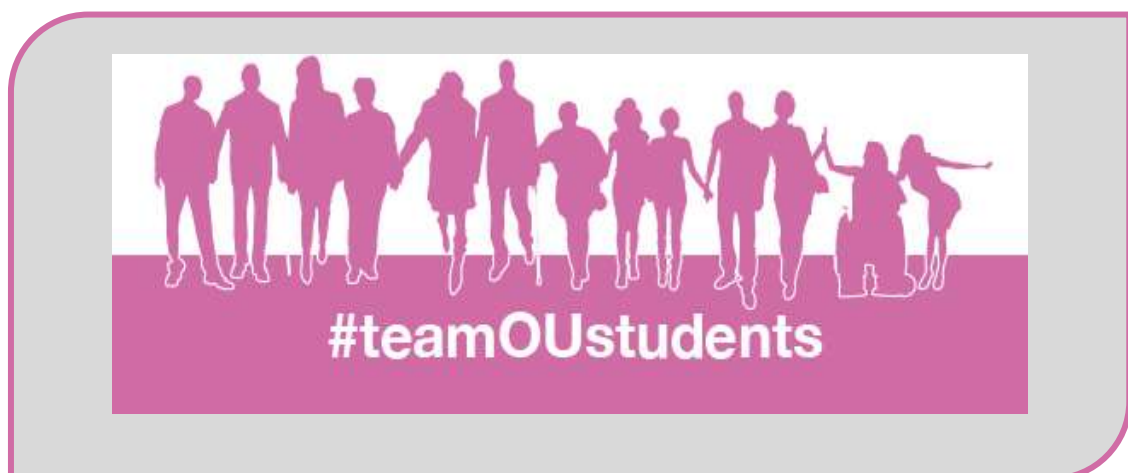
*Participant 2: 'I can', this is literally the first time in my life that I have felt that, that I have felt supported through my disabilities, in any way, shape or form."*

- Participant discussion, focus group 1

The participant went on to describe the imagery used for the Association's [Spotlight Sunday award](#) as an example of how they saw student volunteering as enabling and shared their experience of seeing the design for the first time:

*"It's recognition of the team as well...and a wheelchair volunteer on the cup! That's a little bit of detail, I know it sounds silly, but it's the first thing I noticed, 'ooh it's a little wheelchair!'...the imagery, it represented what I feel about the Association, that we are all one team. And we are all different."*

– Participant, focus group 1



*The Spotlight Sunday logo*

Finally, it was also suggested that students new to volunteering may not have clear ideas about the benefits of volunteering, and that the Association's communications around such opportunities should include information about the different ways in which students can volunteer, the impact this has on the student community, as well as the benefits for volunteers themselves.

*Participant 1: I think for a lot of volunteers, volunteering is something they haven't tried before, rather than link it with something they already do. It's to experience something different, although you are helping other people and the organisation, you're actually doing it for yourself as well.*

*Participant 2: oh yes, but I think also that motivations change...and evolve.*

*Participant 1: I mean what the difference between other voluntary organisations and the Association is it's supporting our own studies as well. It makes our studies feel different, it makes us part of the Open University, and it's supplementing and complementing our studies.*

- Participant discussion, focus group 1

## Benefits of volunteering

In considering the individual and collective benefits of volunteering during the CEC workshop, participants commented on the difficulty in distinguishing between the different beneficiaries of volunteering. Since the student volunteers and the wider membership of the Association are both part of the student body, they felt it was harder to identify distinct groups that benefit from student volunteering. During this workshop, participants discussed benefits such as learning new skills, drawing on a wide range of experience, the opportunity to access training, and developing friendships with fellow students from diverse backgrounds.

Taking our direction from the CEC workshop and the VIAT framework, we listed the benefits of volunteering for the online survey (see Table 6). Most benefits selected by over 70% of the survey respondents related to community-building: *'I have met new people and made friends'* (82%), *'I have had the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of people'* (79%), *'I have a better understanding of the kinds of issues people may face'* (74%), and *'My sense of belonging within the student community has increased'* (71%). This is similar to students' motivations for volunteering, many of which revolve around their interactions with fellow students, such as 'to help the student community' (online survey) and 'sense of belonging' (focus groups). The number of respondents choosing the statement *'I have gained professional and transferable skills'* (44%) was comparatively lower.

Benefits of Volunteering	Proportion of respondents (out of 66)
I have met new people and made friends	82%
I have gained professional and transferable skills	44%
I have put my existing skills to good use	71%
My sense of well-being has increased (e.g., confidence)	61%
I have had the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of people	79%
My sense of belonging within the student community has increased	71%
I have a better understanding of the kinds of issues people may face	74%

**Table 6.** This table lists the different statements about the benefits of volunteering used in the online survey, with the proportion of respondents who chose each statement.



The open comments from the online survey mention additional benefits of volunteering, such as offering students the opportunity to gain a new experience, helping them feel supported during their OU studies, and potential career benefits:

*"Widened my experience and got me involved in areas I would never have considered before"*

– Survey respondent

*"The support/ incentive to carry on with studying when feeling snowed under with it all"*

– Survey respondent

*"I have a sense of fulfilment"*

– Survey respondent

*"I can get insight from other students, their experiences, and challenges. This is useful in my professional role."*

– Survey respondent

In sharing the highlights of their volunteering experience with the Association, focus group participants mentioned both the wider OU student community and the community of student volunteers. In both cases, they saw volunteering as helping students connect with each other, meet each other face-to-face in an otherwise distance-learning set up, and thereby improve their experience of the Open University by lessening the feeling of isolation.

*"Participant 1: I think volunteering events, I mean I meet a lot of volunteers anyway, but watching other people meet each other for the first time, and they've only known each other online... It was watching it build, it's like a community, isn't it, no, it felt more like family. Because everybody was doing the same things for different reasons, but all with the same sort of aims."*

*Participant 2: The highlight for me is very similar, but to sort of illustrate it – it's the realisation that the OU and the student community is more than a 14 inch laptop screen. It's almost like, through the looking glass kind of scenario, isn't it. There's more through that screen."*

*Participant 1: I think once you make that connection, once you've got that connection, when you're behind the screen again you actually feel that you've connected to the people through that screen."*

– Participant discussion, focus group 1

- ✓ Over 92% of respondents would recommend volunteering with the Association to fellow students, with 59% choosing 'strongly agree' and 33% choosing 'agree'.  
Online Survey

- ✓ 24% of respondents chose 'strongly agree' and 50% chose 'agree' for the statement:  
*Volunteering with the Students Association has supported my personal development.*  
Online Survey

*"It made me discover my limitations and strengths. It gave me a better insight about how my studies can be applicable in everyday life and enjoyment as a student."*  
– Survey respondent

*"Increased self-esteem. Feeling useful, and part of something worthwhile. Proud to be involved with OU and OUSA."*  
– Survey respondent

The opportunity to meet OU faculty members involved in developing modules that volunteers might be studying was also mentioned as a highlight of volunteering. The feedback on staff/student interaction from volunteers involved in academic representation roles was positive (however, as discussed in the *Barriers while volunteering* section, not being able to discuss policy changes with the wider student community was a source of frustration). The experience of articulating the student viewpoint at committee meetings and writing reports for fellow Central Committee Representatives had additional benefits such as increased confidence and communication skills:

*“One of the things about volunteering is that it’s given me a lot more confidence in myself and in my communication skills...the other thing is...I’ve learnt a lot about different modules available on my courses. And thirdly, I’ve got to know a lot of the faculty and students...My first Board of Studies meeting was just over a year ago and I was really impressed by the way, the respect that I was treated with by the professors and the academics on the BoS. And they seemed to be genuinely interested in my opinions, our opinions as CCRs. That’s really encouraging.”*

- Participant, focus group 2

## Communication Channels

The Association uses a number of ways to connect with volunteers and share information about upcoming events and opportunities; this is done through news stories on the [website](#), through the Volunteering Newsletter and the [OU Students Magazine](#), and through social media using [#teamOUstudents](#). The Twitter hashtag is used to promote upcoming volunteering opportunities and events, and to feature the latest Spotlight Sunday awards for volunteers. The Twitter hashtag was also a useful platform for light-touch engagement during the course of the research project, with quick polls on different aspects of volunteering between March and May 2018.

We wanted to know how volunteers themselves were choosing to communicate with each other, and the ways in which communication channels lent themselves to different uses. Therefore, in the online survey a question about volunteers' use of different communication channels was included - listing emails, online forums, and social media. The feedback suggests that certain channels are preferred over others for specific activities; the communication channels registering 75% or higher usage for a particular activity were:

- Emails to communicate with Association staff members.
- Social media to communicate with the wider student body.
- Online forums to communicate with fellow volunteers.

In the face-to-face focus groups, participants mentioned communicating with fellow students on a daily basis, and that this could be either face-to-face or online. Volunteers offered different improvements that could be introduced, such as trialling SLACK to engage with fellow students, highlighting the impact of student volunteering, or clarifying the lines of communication between volunteers and the Association office.

Where gaps in communication were identified, the common theme appears to be the need for clear lines of communication, and clearer expectations around how different groups can feed back about their volunteering work. One participant raised the issue of the communication gap that could exist between different volunteer groups, giving the example of the Central Committee Representatives working together with the Learning Experience Representatives.

*“The frustration for me is... the idea of having [the CCRs and LERS] communicating...I've posted [on online forums] and I've got nothing back. So I'm not too sure how we're supposed to work...We are taking the time to engage with the LERs and the student body, and then nothing's coming back.”*

– Participant, focus group 2

The need for different volunteer groups to have more opportunities to interact and share information was a theme raised across the feedback channels during this project. As the comments below suggest, this was seen as key to improving volunteers' effectiveness, whether in terms of discussing policy changes or increasing the visibility of Association events for the wider student community. The feedback also suggests an expectation that the Association would provide such opportunities, together with guidelines for how volunteers could promote events and report back to staff contacts.

*"I'm quite sure a lot of the CEC don't really know most of the Central Reps and vice-versa. So it might be worth having occasional get-togethers of both groups, and that – as well as being a get-together – has as a focus some presentations on some of the things that are going on in the University at the present time."*

- Interview

While the comment above suggests ways of bringing different groups of volunteers together, in other discussions volunteers spoke about needing more ways to engage with the wider student community. One focus group participant suggested that events such as meet-ups and coffee mornings could be used to raise awareness of volunteering opportunities, and that the Association could provide meet-up hosts with print material that could be distributed to other students. This was also seen as a way to reach students who may not be active on social media:

*"I think that in the packs that go out for people who host meet-ups, to have a list of current volunteering opportunities and maybe forms for those. Because not everybody follows the forums, not everybody follows on social media, so how do some of these people know? So when I went, at my last meet-up I had 9 people there as it was Freshers, it was brilliant. If I had been able to turn around and say to some of those, 'here's what you can...' – because they were saying, 'how do you get involved?' – and I could say 'these are the current opportunities that are out there...'"*

– Participant, focus group 1

Similar feedback was received regarding the role of Community Champions and the platforms they could access to promote events and reach the student community. In the comment below, a volunteer suggested that awareness of the Association's website was still low and that social media platforms needed to be used more actively:

*"I know we haven't got an official route, official pages for [the region] on [social media]. But I don't know where else to advertise.... So we need more, especially social, platforms to be able to advertise our meet-ups....[students] don't go to the website. They say, 'oh we don't know where the Students Association is, how do we get there' – it's on the left-hand side, it's always been on the left-hand side on the Student Home."*

- Interview

The discussion between focus group participants also highlighted the different uses to which communication channels were put, whether to exchange information, discuss a topic, or engage in more light-touch interaction with fellow students. As shown in the exchange below, it was felt that more guidance was needed around how volunteers could engage with different platforms and switch between different kinds of interaction. Balancing the formality (and confidentiality) of policy discussions with gathering student opinion and informing students about their work, was identified as a potential pitfall for volunteers involved in Student Voice roles.

*Facilitator: When you list all these spaces, social media, consultations, forums, does that influence the kind of interactions you are having? More chatty, more informal, or more formal...*

*Participant 1: Yes. Forums are more formal.*

*Participant 3: Facebook is more like people making jokes and that sort of thing.*

*Facilitator: So it's quite light-hearted...*

*Participant 2: Yeah, Facebook is not the sort of place to go and turn around and say 'oh, by the way, the Open University are considering [a module-specific topic].....', you don't do that on Facebook...I think this is probably where the whole LER thing sort of falls down, is because on one end the input they are getting from the CCRs is formal...but are they getting supported, are we supporting them as an Association, in how to translate that into something that's not as formal? So how do you as a LER take a formal subject and make it light-hearted enough to be able to capture that information from a variety of social media platforms?*

- Participant discussion, focus group 2

Volunteers also felt that follow-up after events, when volunteers could report back to the Association office and discuss any concerns, was something that needed to be integrated into the process. In order to build on their work, volunteers require support not only in the run-up to, but also *after* the volunteering event has taken place. Some of these support needs are discussed in the next section.

## Information and Support Needs

In the online survey, we asked respondents to indicate how much weight they would give to different kinds of information before deciding to undertake a volunteering role with the Association. Chart 3 shows responses for each of the options:

- *'Clarity about the time commitment'*: 66% of the survey respondents selected 'very important' and 31% selected 'important'.
- *'Whether I will need to travel (e.g., to Milton Keynes)'*: 40% of the survey respondents selected 'very important' and 31% selected 'important'.
- *'The kind of training that I can access as part of my role'*: 20% of the survey respondents selected 'very important' and 67% selected 'important'.
- *'Whether this role allows me to represent fellow students to the Open University'*: 41% of the survey respondents selected 'very important' and 47% selected 'important'.

Respondents pointed out that determining how much time a role would need was complicated by factors such as travel requirements (for example, to attend University committee meetings on the Milton Keynes campus) and whether volunteers had the flexibility to choose when to do the role.

*"The pattern of the time required e.g. it's quite different if one has to go to MK for a day once a quarter than if one had to go for several days a month."*  
– Survey respondent

*"need for business-hours meetings. 20 hours, done whenever, may be much easier than 3 hours, with no flexibility"*  
– Survey respondent

A common feedback theme was volunteers wishing to talk to fellow volunteers who had had some experience of undertaking a particular role. While the 'handover' suggested in the comment below has been common practice for the student leadership team, there is appetite for something similar being adapted for other volunteering roles.

*"I didn't get a 'handover' document from my predecessor. I know it's an extra time commitment but even a few bullet points with useful tips about what works well and what doesn't, plus a heads up about upcoming issues would be very useful."*  
– Survey respondent

For the Student Voice volunteers attending university committee meetings, timely access to training materials ahead of the official start of the role was important, and participants felt that they lacked support when these timings were not aligned. One volunteer suggested that the Association could take an initiative to demystify some of the governance processes for students new to volunteering, which would enable them to understand policy changes and thereby articulate their impact on students when they attend committee meetings:

*“a brief guide to these sorts of things...Just to give a brief outline of what they are, because otherwise I fear that when reps sit on particular committees, and particularly those that are faculty level or school level, to some extent they’re simply having to nod various things through because they don’t really understand what they are about!”*

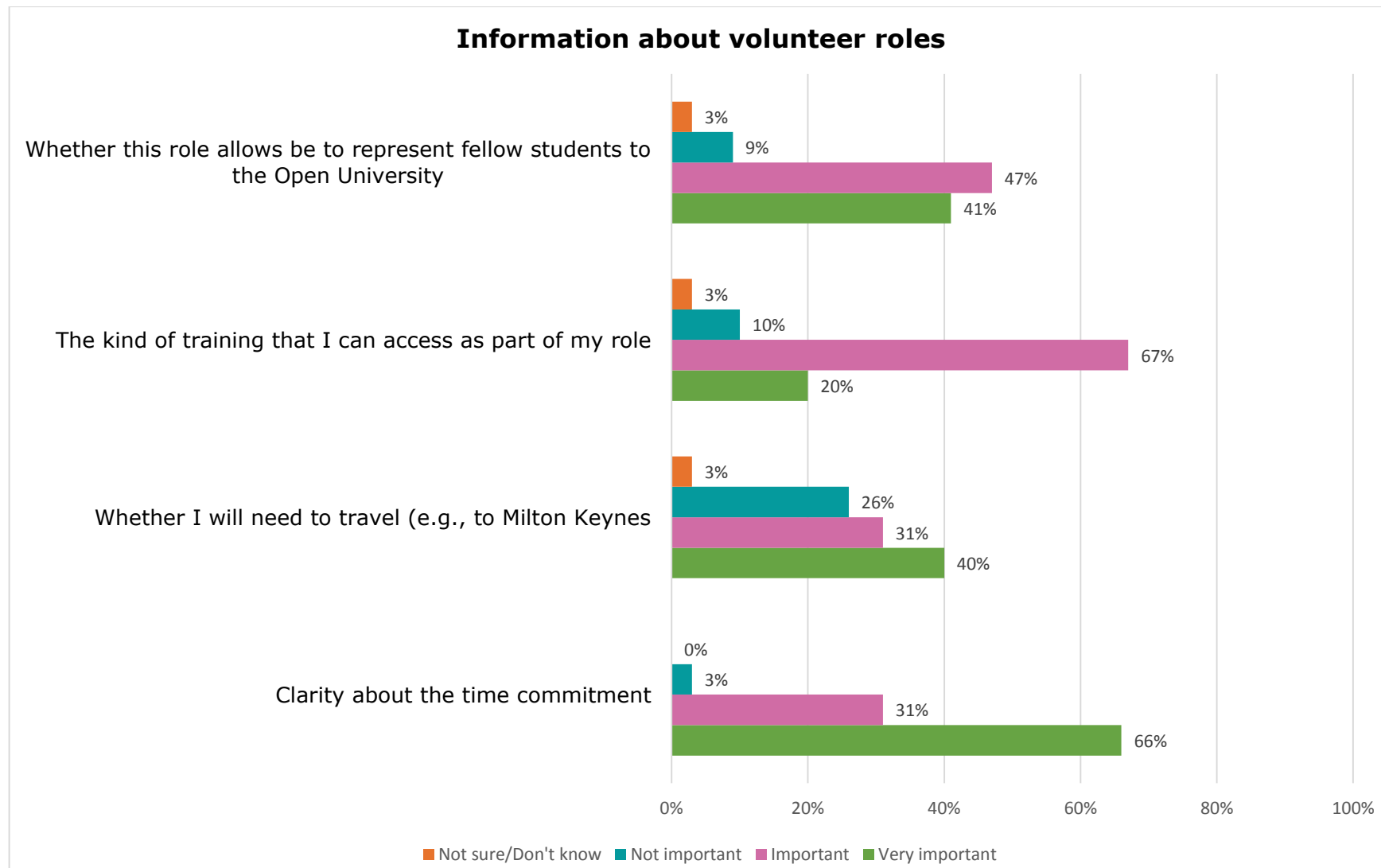
– Interview

The feedback from the interviews and focus groups has also highlighted other support needs, such as clear communication channels (see the *Communication Channels* section), better signposting to online training resources, and signposting students to other volunteer roles available if their application for a particular role was unsuccessful (see the *Barriers while volunteering* section). The Student Volunteering Team have been responding to similar feedback by further developing the Volunteer section of the Students Association website:

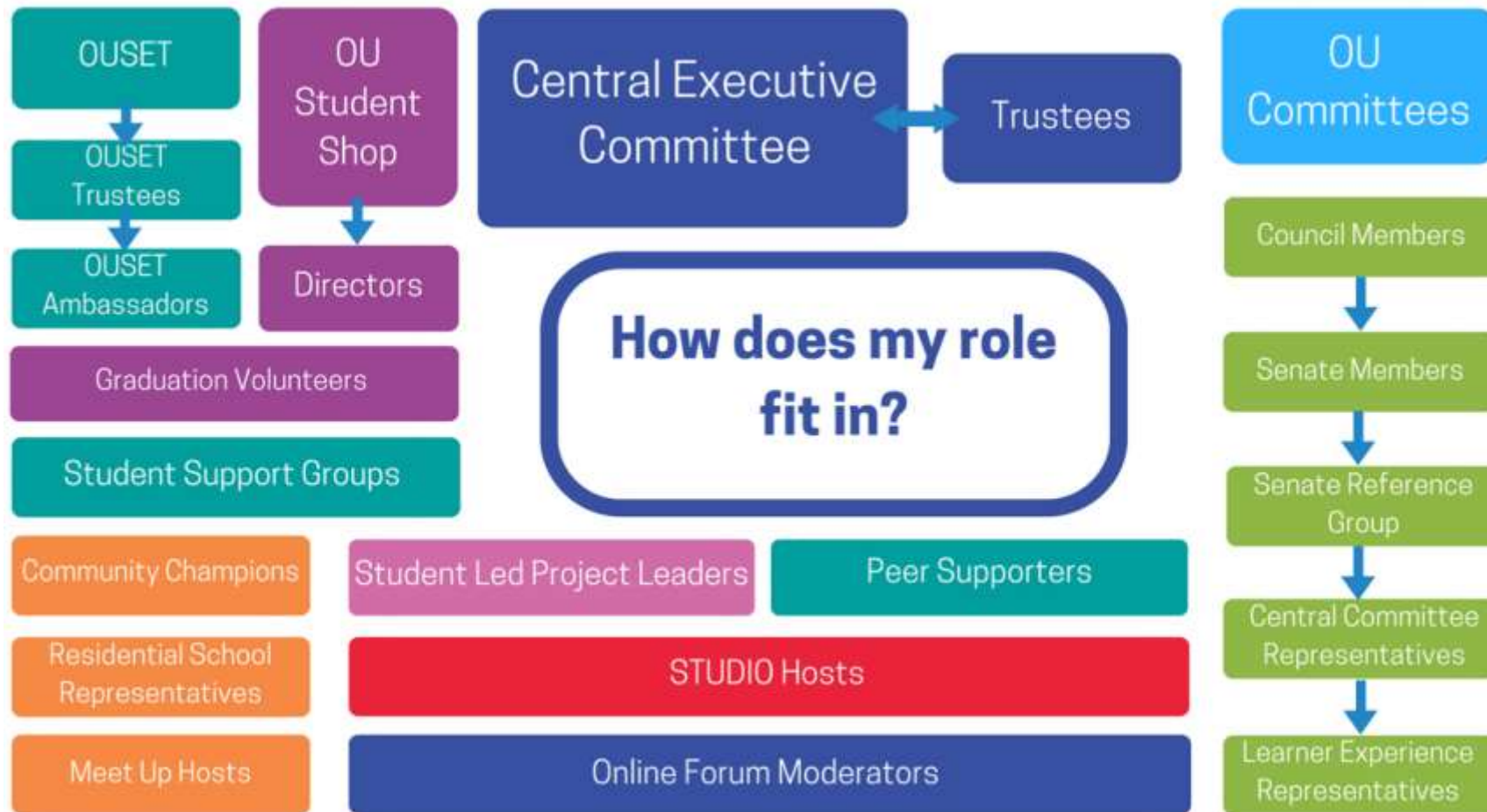
- A [new template](#) has been introduced so that role descriptions now include information under headings such as ‘*What will I be doing*’, ‘*How much time do I need*’, and ‘*Can I do this role from home*’, to help students considering a volunteering opportunity to get a good idea of the demands that it will place on their time.
- An added functionality of searching for roles using different filters has been introduced. This includes distinguishing between the different ‘spaces’ for volunteering (such as face-to-face and online), as well as the kind of time commitment required (such as weekdays or weekends).
- Volunteer roles are also mapped according to the different arms of the Association’s work (see Chart 4), where different roles are colour-coded according to Student Community, Student Voice, Student Support and so on. This gives students a broad overview of the opportunities being offered by the Association, and helps them identify the type of role that most interests them.
- A wide variety of training resources are being consolidated online on the newly developed Volunteer Zone on the Association’s website, offering general guidelines as well as training specific to different volunteer roles.



- The volunteer handbook has been developed to help volunteers understand the Association's work and how student volunteering makes a contribution to this work. It also manages expectations, with sections such as what volunteers can expect from the Association and what is expected of volunteers. Introductions to staff teams and team emails are also provided.
- The Student Volunteering team at the Association have worked on a suite of welcome emails directing students to the volunteer zone, to support volunteers in finding this resource. This includes ensuring that an email is sent to those who have been unsuccessful in getting a place, and signposting them to other relevant roles in order to encourage continued engagement with the Association.



**Chart 3.** The online survey respondents indicated how much weight they would give to different kinds of information before deciding to undertake a volunteering role with the Association.



**Chart 4.** Volunteer role-mapping introduced by the OU Students Association.

## Barriers while volunteering

In the online survey, we included different statements about the challenges that students might face when volunteering with the Association. The question included the option for respondents to indicate whether they had felt something to be a barrier previously and whether it was still a barrier: '*Sometimes, it is hard to get involved in volunteering activities, and listed below are a few of these reasons. Have you felt these to be a barrier to volunteering, now or in the past?*'. The feedback highlights some of the improvements that could be made in terms of advice around effective management of time, better signposting for volunteering-related information, and information about the training available as part of the volunteering role.

Charts 5 and 6 show responses for statements that have been grouped together under 'time constraints' and 'information about volunteering', respectively, while concerns about skills and shyness are grouped in Chart 7. The survey respondents identified time constraints as a key challenge:

- '*I had very little spare time*': 28% identified lack of spare time as having been a barrier in the past, while 25% identified it as still posing a challenge to getting involved in volunteering.
- '*I wanted to focus on my studies*': 13% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 25% identified it as an ongoing challenge. For over half of the respondents (51%), juggling volunteering with studies had not been a barrier.
- '*I had family commitments*': 16% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 26% indicated that they still felt this was a barrier.
- '*I had work commitments*': 22% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 31% indicated that they still felt this was a barrier.

Time constraints are one of the most common reasons for not engaging in volunteering (Ellison and Kerr, 2014, p.4; Brewis et al, 2010, p.40; Low et al., 2007, p.64), and it is unsurprising that our volunteers have also cited it as being a barrier to volunteering. Interestingly, of the 25% who selected '*I had very little spare time*' as being a current barrier, respondents had either undertaken a number of roles within the specified 2-year window, or had undertaken only one role. 5 out of 17 had volunteered in three or more roles while 11 out of 17 had volunteered in only one role, suggesting that students may either be juggling too many volunteering commitments, or perceiving volunteering as being too time-consuming and be reluctant to try out different roles.

Better support is therefore needed to help volunteers manage their time effectively: taking into account both the need to promote those opportunities that require only a small investment of time, as well as advice on how many roles students can reasonably manage on an individual level.

*"I don't think they are aware of the roles and also I think with trying to balance their degree with work and family commitments can also put students off because they have enough to deal with as it is."*

– Survey respondent

Some of the statements about barriers to volunteering were phrased around information about volunteering opportunities that students may not be aware of and which may pose a potential challenge for students trying to get more involved with the Association:

- *'I was not sure if my expenses would be covered'*: 18% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 6% still felt unsure about their expenses being covered. For over half of the respondents (53%), concerns over expenses had not been a barrier. In focus group 2, a Central Committee Representative (CCR) mentioned delays in the reimbursement of expenses as a source of frustration; however, in the case of CCRs expense claims are submitted to the University rather than the Association.
- *'I did not know where to look for more information'*: 25% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 21% still felt unsure about where to look for volunteering-related information.
- *'I did not realise there was an opportunity to volunteer with the Students Association'*: 23% identified it as having been a barrier in the past, while 10% still felt that this was a barrier.

Two other statements about potential barriers to volunteering were phrased around students not knowing if they had the relevant skills for a particular role, and feeling shy about meeting fellow students:

- *'I felt I didn't have the skills for the role'*: 18% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 27% still did not feel that they had the relevant skills for their role.
- *'I did not know any of my fellow students and felt shy'*: 19% identified this as having been a barrier in the past, while 10% still felt shy about meeting fellow students.

It is concerning that 27% of the survey respondents still did not feel confident about having the skills needed for their volunteering role. As mentioned earlier, the Association's website now hosts a Volunteer Zone, with training materials available for different types of volunteering roles. While developing these resources further, there is also a need to highlight how students can learn new skills while volunteering. The Association has trialled some 'training needs' surveys in the past for the student leadership team, and the feedback above suggests that this process might need to be adapted for other volunteering roles as well.

Other barriers mentioned by the survey respondents were travel requirements, disabilities, and communicating with those students who prefer not to use social media. A few of these have already been discussed in the *Communication Channels* and *Information and Support Needs* sections.

*"Requirement to travel to MK regularly for many volunteering roles"*

– Survey respondent

*"Some students have suggested that they felt distance and/or disability might exclude them from volunteering"*

– Survey respondent

*"I am not a social media user. I started out with great intentions, but have found that most of the communications regarding this role seem to be carried out on social media, and so I am excluded."*

– Survey respondent

*"Having tried to stand or volunteer for roles in the past and been rejected."*

– Survey respondent

*"I just wasn't sure where I would fit in, and how I could help."*

– Survey respondent

Some volunteers mentioned past rejection of an application for a volunteer role as off-putting; however, other volunteers had a very different attitude and were upbeat about applying for other roles even if a past application had been unsuccessful:

*"I remember I applied for one volunteering role at the Association and got an email back saying 'not this time, because, maybe get some more experience doing x, y, and z and doing this role or that role'. I mean...I thought it was really useful for me to realise that OK, I was putting my name forward for something, but the people who know what that role actually entails were saying no this time, but if you take other opportunities and develop your skills in this area, you're fit for it."*

– Participant, focus group 1

Participants in focus group 2 spoke about some of the challenges that volunteers face while undertaking their role. Confidentiality agreements, which restrict how freely volunteers in academic representation roles (such as Central Committee Representatives) can talk about policy changes within the university, was mentioned as a source of frustration. Volunteers felt that such restrictions could act as a barrier to volunteers discussing their work with the wider student community as well as with fellow volunteers on different committees.

*“P1: We can’t communicate and support each other as CCRs because we can’t discuss...”*

*“P2: So how do you engage with [the student body] and tell them the work we do?”*

– Participant discussion, focus group 2

Participants keeping the Volunteer Journals also made suggestions about the kind of support the Association could offer to overcome some of these challenges:

*“I think more detail about the structure of the OU and the OU Students Association could be given to new volunteers so they can understand how the wider structure of e.g. Senate and Council and other areas work and interact with one another.”*

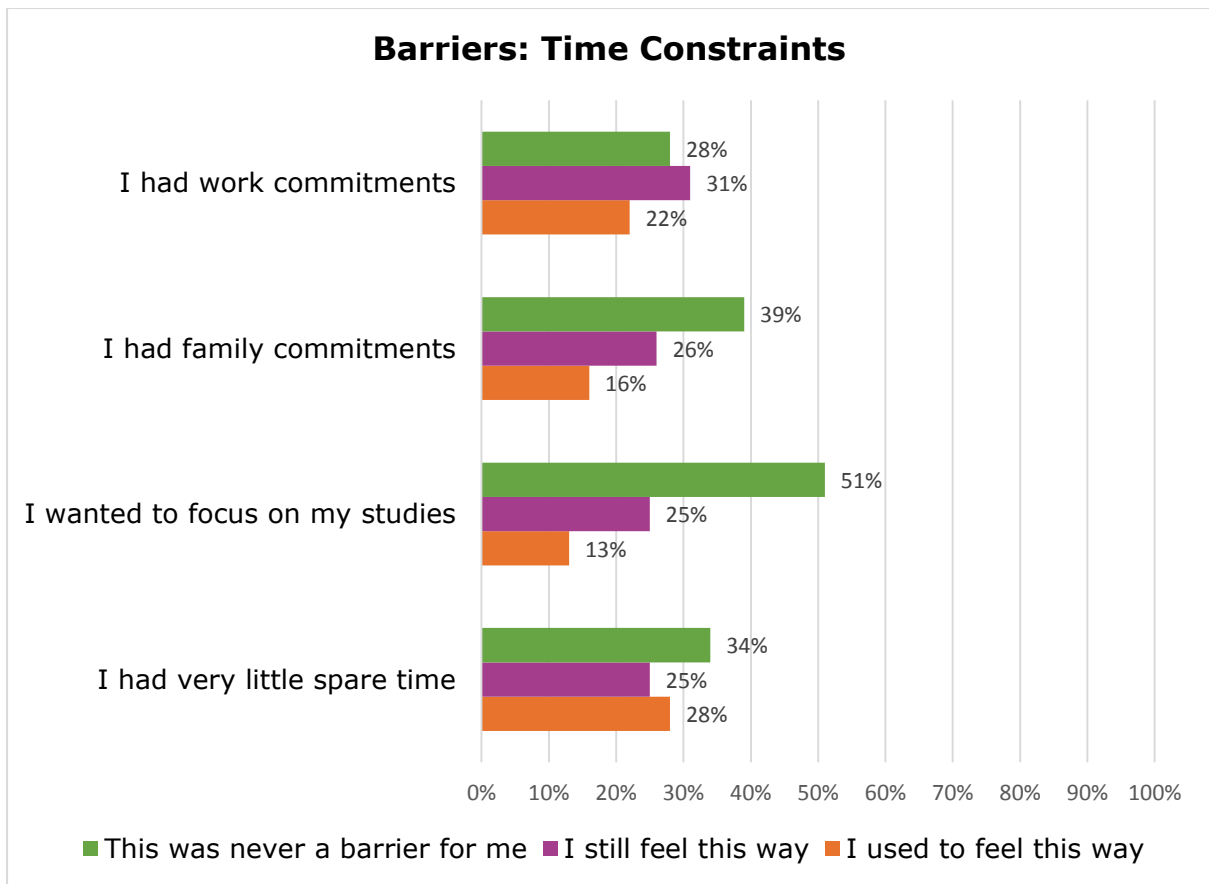
– Volunteer Journal

*“If there were one area where I think more training was necessary, it would be social media, especially functionality and etiquette, as this is hard to learn for those unfamiliar with eg Facebook and Twitter.”*

– Volunteer Journal

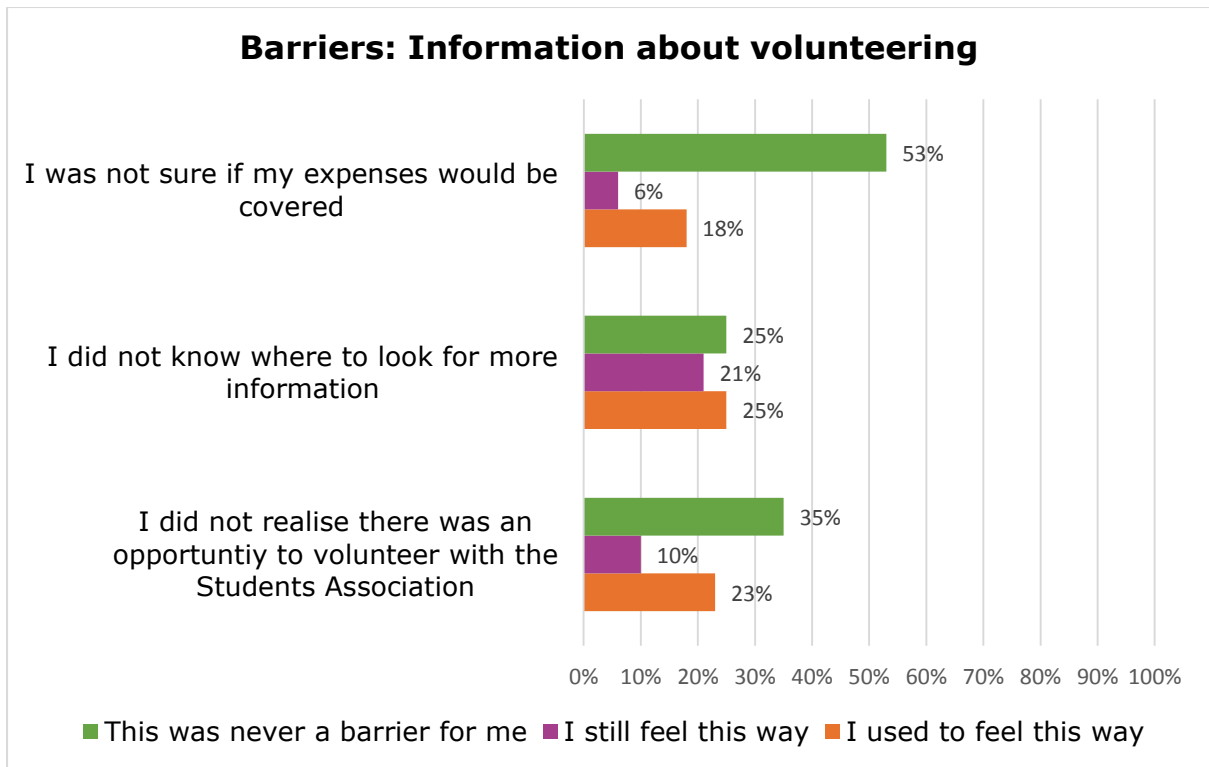
*“Maybe ask the university to have the link to the association given at the start of modules as well as pointing the association out to those starting their degrees. Get the student association words on student home in bold, so that students are easily drawn to it. More competitions in the magazines, students seem to love them and a prize doesn’t have to be expensive.”*

– Volunteer Journal

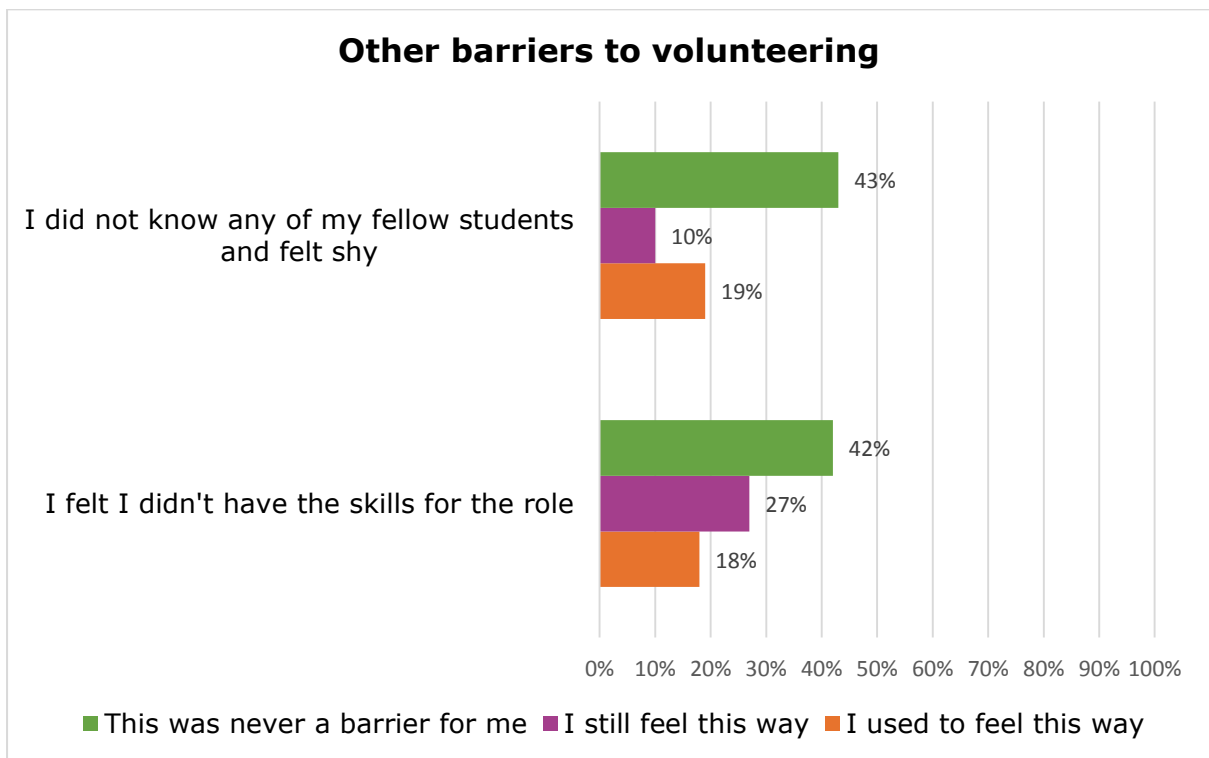


**Chart 5.** Responses for statements grouped under 'time constraints' from the online survey.





**Chart 6.** Responses for statements grouped under 'information about volunteering' from the online survey.



**Chart 7.** Responses relating to concerns over skills or shyness from the online survey.

## Recognising Volunteers

The Association currently organises different face-to-face and online events to thank volunteers and celebrate their work. Between 2017 and 2018, for example, these events included the Spotlight Sunday awards, a Volunteer Recognition Event, and celebrating the national Student Volunteering Week. Our focus group participants also gave valuable feedback on the ways in which the Association can recognise volunteers' contribution. One participant felt that receiving something through the post, such as a postcard from the Student Volunteering Team, was a simple but effective gesture – it encouraged further exchanges between volunteers, made them feel a part of the community, and made volunteering more visible to other students. This was also shown by the *Helping Out* survey, where “receiving verbal and written thanks from an organisation were the most popular forms of recognition” (Low et al., 2007, p.59).

*“And there was all this chatter on social media, and on the forums – ‘oh my god, it was out of the blue!’. Thank you for the last year you’ve done in volunteering. And all this popping up, and you find out who else is a volunteer, someone put it up on their big OU group and everyone said ‘I’ve got one, I’ve got one’. And they were taking photographs of the same card, to show that they had one! I mean, that was amazing...that’s how other students get interested.”*

– Participant, focus group 1

### The Spotlight Sunday Awards

- The [Spotlight Sunday](#) initiative encourages students and members of the Association staff team to nominate volunteers who they feel have gone the extra mile. Winners are announced through tweets on [#teamOUstudents](#) and posts on the Association’s website, and each winner also receives a teamOUstudents branded mug. Both individual volunteers as well as groups of volunteers undertaking a particular role can be nominated.
- Past winners have included individual volunteers as well as the Association’s [Archive Team](#), the Conference Makers (students volunteering during the biennial Students Association Conference), and students who participated in the [‘We are #OUstudents’ campaign](#). Each winner/team of winners is accompanied by a news story, which further helps showcase the impact of student volunteering.

### ***Celebrating the national Student Volunteering Week***

- Association staff members [shared their own experiences of volunteering](#) during the Student Volunteering Week in February 2018, discussing how people can get involved with different volunteering activities and the ways in which it benefits the community. During this week we also highlight our student case studies and share volunteer journeys. In 2018 a thank you card was posted to all volunteers for their commitment to the Association.

### ***Celebrating Trustees Week***

- In November each year the Association celebrates its two teams of Trustees, sharing information on what a Trustee is, the need for trustees in charities, and sharing case studies/volunteer blogs from our student trustees.

### ***Long service and Honorary Life Membership***

- The Association recognises students who have committed a large amount of their time to the Association over the years, and who have had a lasting impact on the organisation. This is rewarded by Honorary Life Membership in exceptional circumstances. From 2019 onwards, volunteers committing a large amount of time to the Association over a smaller duration will be recognised with a silver pin and certificate.

### ***The Volunteer Recognition Event***

- The [Volunteer Recognition Event](#) was held on 15 July 2017, and included workshops, a dinner, and keynote speeches. It was attended by 100 volunteers, some of whom met face-to-face for the first time. The event was focused on recognising all the hard work that volunteers put into their roles, and the impact this has on our organisation and the wider student community.

## **Demographic information**

As part of this research project, we wanted to understand the demographic make-up of our volunteers, and whether more could be done to improve the representativeness and inclusivity of student volunteering at the Association. In the online survey, personal information about respondents' age, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, geographical location and disability were requested, and 68 out of a total of 69 volunteers taking the survey answered all of these questions. The data collected was anonymised and only aggregates have been used for this research project.

Charts 8 to 13 present the information about the demographic make-up of the volunteers who answered the survey. With the convenience sample used for this project, these figures are not representative of the entire cohort of students volunteering with the Association; however, we have used these as indicative figures in order to identify any groups that appear to be underrepresented. In order to appreciate how the data from the online survey broadly compares with the larger OU student body, the Open University's student data as provided in the Equality and Diversity Annual Report 2017 has been referred to (this data is based on overall undergraduate student numbers who studied with the Open University between 2015 and 2016).

- **Age group**

Chart 8 shows the age group of the survey respondents; the largest proportion of volunteers was from the 'over 55' age group (37%) and the smallest was from the '25 and under' age group (9%). When compared with overall student numbers in the Equality and Diversity Annual Report (2017), the '25 and under' age group appears to be underrepresented in the volunteer numbers; the university figure is at 22% while the volunteer figure is at 9%. The opposite is the case with the 'over 55' age group; the university figure is at 7% while the volunteer figure is at 37%.

- **Disability**

40% of the survey respondents indicated that they had a disability, compared to the university figure of 18% (Equality and Diversity Annual Report, 2017).

- **Gender and Sexual Identity**

More number of volunteers selected female (62%) than male (35%), which is similar to the university figures of 60% female and 40% male (Equality and Diversity Annual Report, 2017). 78% of respondents indicated their sexual identity as 'heterosexual or straight', 4% as 'gay or lesbian' and 6% as 'bisexual' (the Association's LGBT+ group, PLEXUS, provides a supportive community for OU students and has an active social media presence).

- ***Geographical Location***

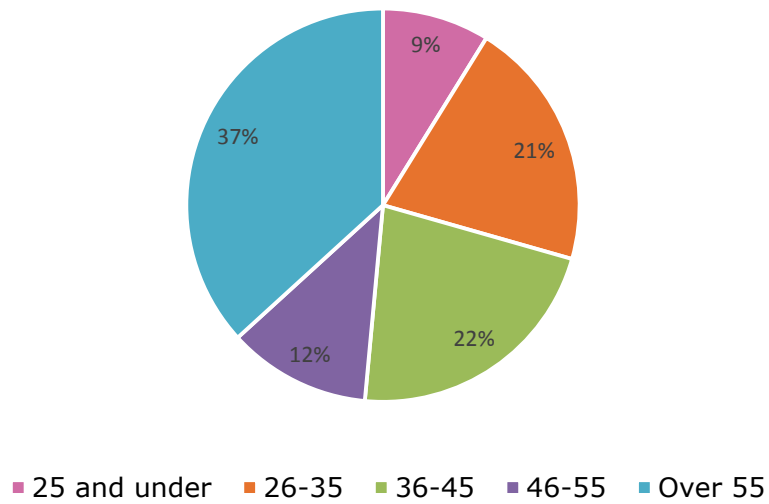
In terms of location, the survey respondents were mostly based in England (69%), with 4% based in Wales, 10% in Scotland, 6% in Northern Ireland, 1% in the Republic of Ireland and 6% in the European Union.

- ***Ethnicity***

76% of the respondents chose White British, 4% chose White (Irish) and 7% chose White (Other background). 1% chose Mixed ethnicity (White and Asian), 1% chose Mixed ethnicity (White and Black Caribbean), and 1% chose Mixed ethnicity (Other). For this survey, none of the respondents were from Asian or Black ethnicities; while reiterating the non-representativeness of the sample, the absence of any BME volunteers from the survey feedback was identified as a concern in preliminary briefings with the Student Volunteering Team.

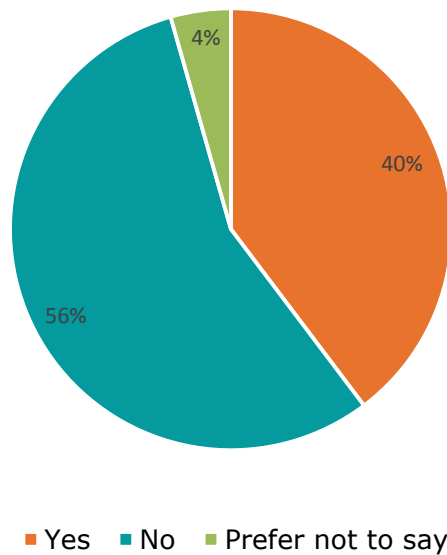
As suggested by other student union studies, volunteer cohorts may not always reflect the diversity of the student population (Brown, 2016, p.9), but identifying areas where we can improve representativeness of student volunteers is a good start. The Association is committed to equality, diversity and inclusion, and recognises the need for more work to encourage students from a more diverse ethnic background to participate in volunteering.

### Age Group

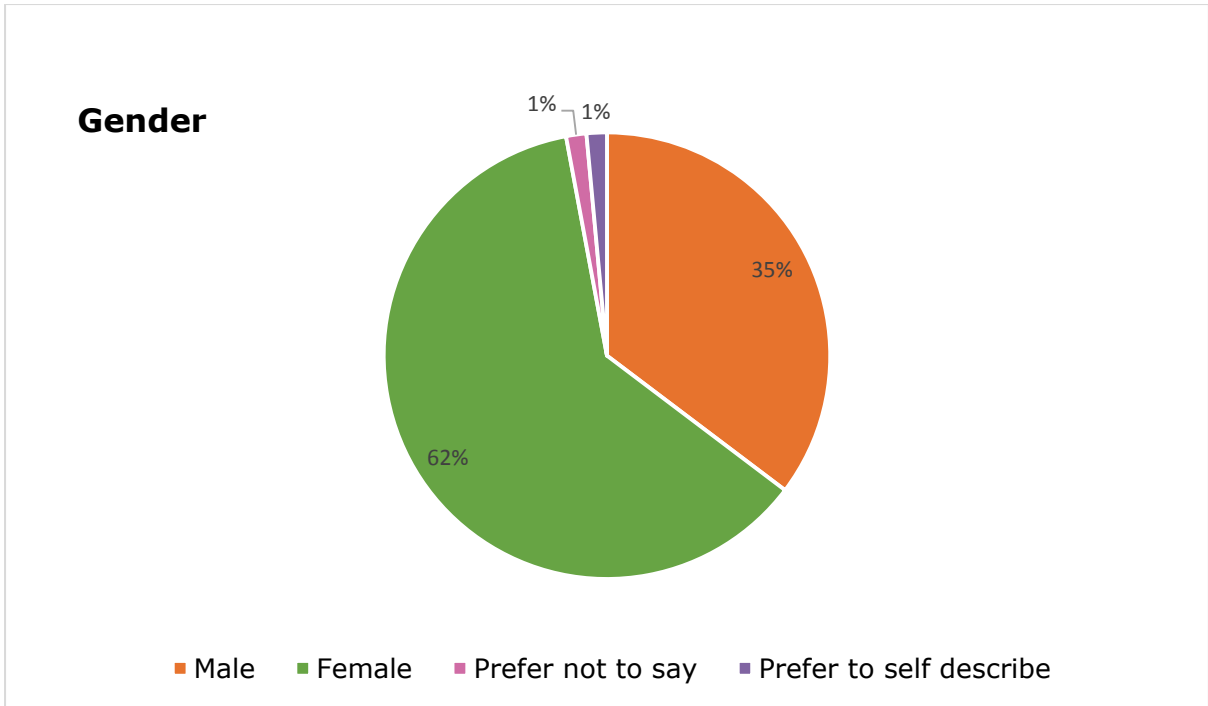


**Chart 8.** The age group of student volunteers who took the online survey (68 respondents).

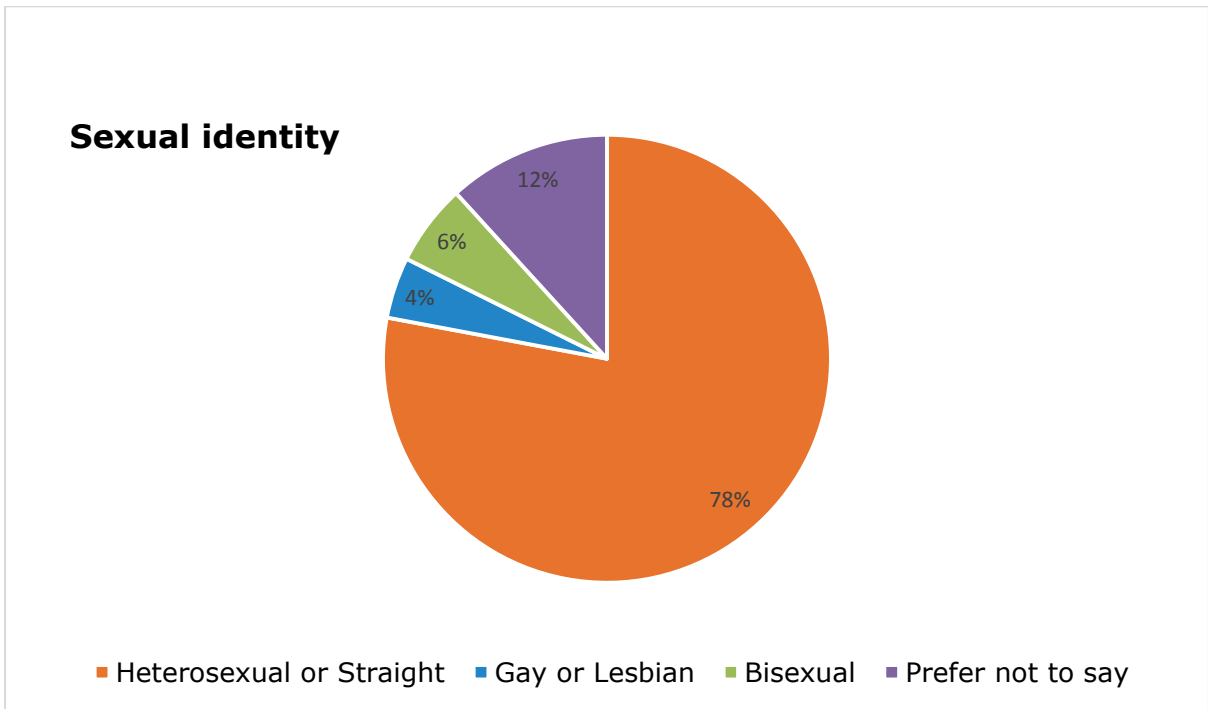
### Disability



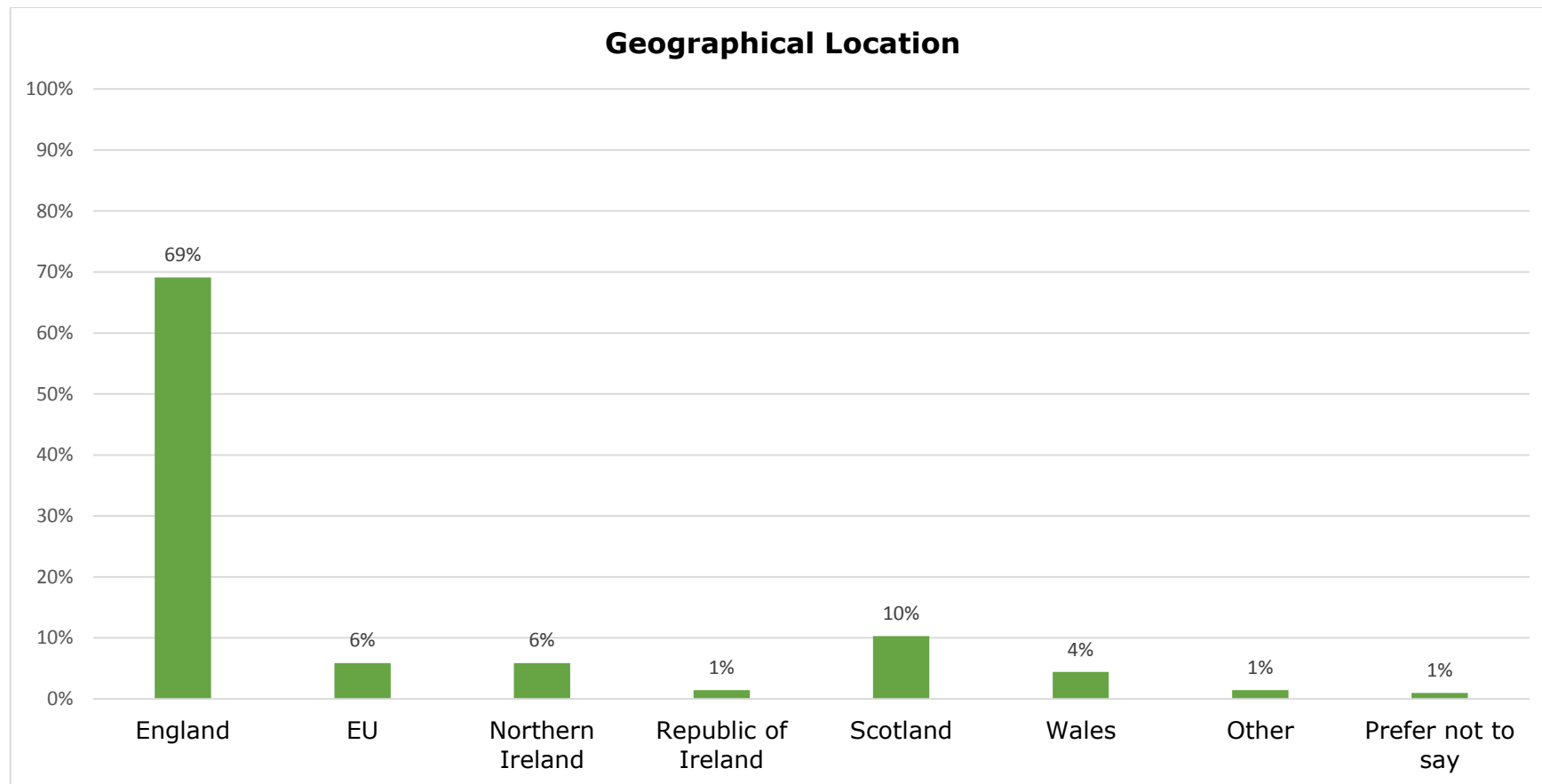
**Chart 9.** Disability as indicated by student volunteers who took the online survey (68 respondents).



**Chart 10.** Gender as selected by student volunteers who took the online survey (68 respondents).

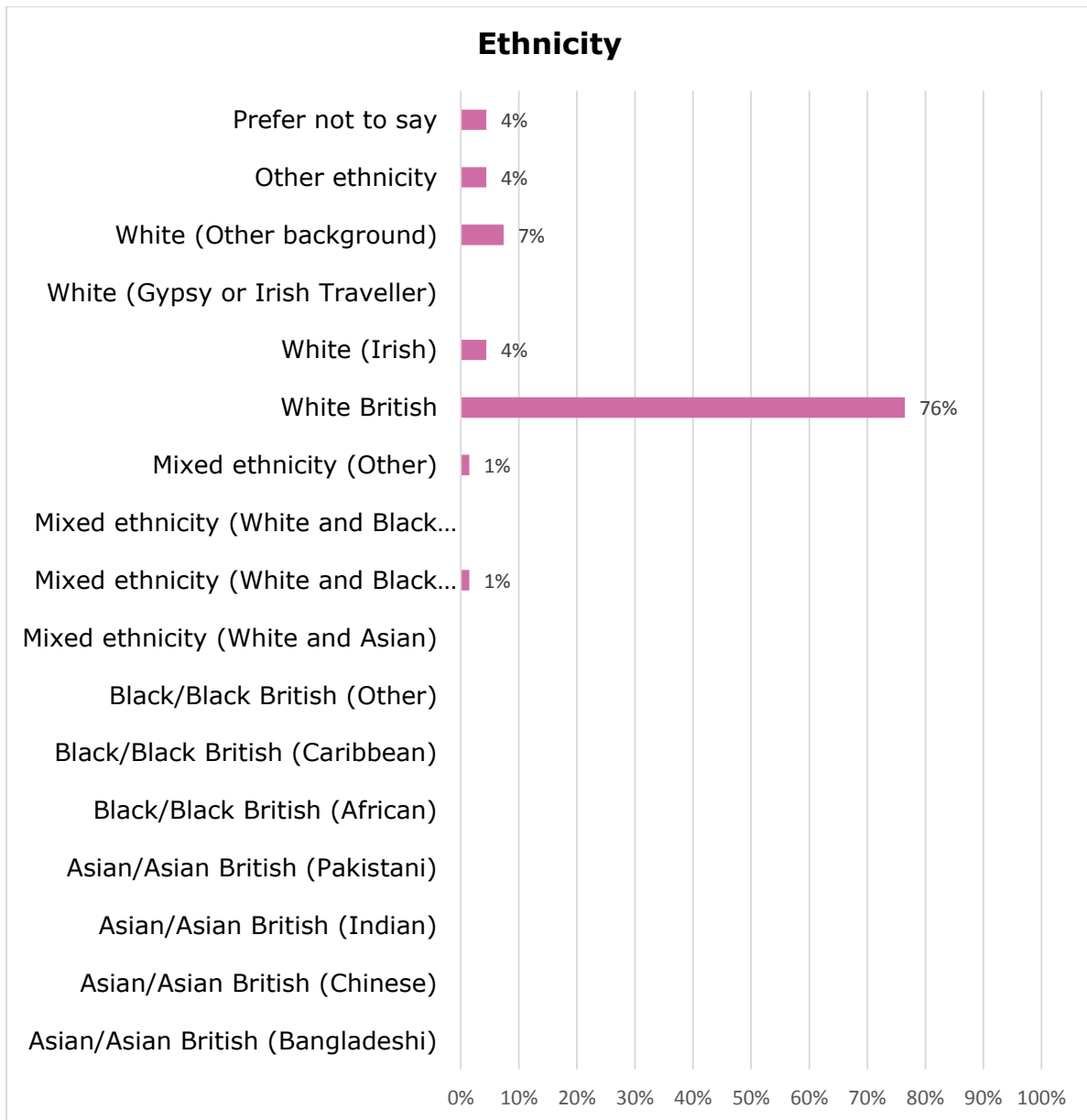


**Chart 11.** Sexual identity as selected by student volunteers who took the online survey (68 respondents).



**Chart 12.** Geographical location as indicated by student volunteers who took the online survey (68 respondents).





**Chart 13.** *Ethnicity as indicated by student volunteers who took the online survey (68 respondents).*

## Community-based volunteering

As adult learners, OU students bring a wealth of skills and experience to their volunteering with the Association. Our second key theme – community-based volunteering – explored areas such as students’ past experience of volunteering with other charities/organisations, volunteers’ perceptions around community-based volunteering, and the kind of opportunities that they were interested in. This theme has been explored through the online survey, through focus group discussions, and also through the Association’s online consultation with students facilitated by the University’s Student Consultation Office.

### Feedback from the online survey

The majority of respondents had experience of volunteering with another organisation; 62% had *'volunteered with another organisation in the past'*, while 33% were *'currently volunteering with another organisation'*; 19% chose the option *'I have only volunteered with the Students Association'* (see Chart 14). Respondents had worked in a variety of different roles, which involved mentoring, acting as trustees, being a student representative, being a union representative, volunteering in libraries, supporting local charities and heritage projects, helping out in charity shops, and undertaking roles as counsellors and advisors.

The word cloud below shows some of the charities and organisations listed by the online survey respondents:



An open question invited respondents to share the most enjoyable aspects of volunteering with other organisations; together with the opportunity to work with other people, the comments also mentioned the opportunity to use one's skills and explore new activities:

*"Enjoyed: being active, responsibility, being your own boss, doing something useful, working with other people, getting access to things and places you wouldn't normally, being outdoors, satisfaction when events are a success, using your commercial and practical creativity, being part of a team."*

– Survey respondent

*"I like giving back and getting to know other people with common interests"*

– Survey respondent

*"I enjoy this role because it gives me opportunities to do things that I would never have otherwise tried"*

– Survey respondent

For the survey, we identified different aspects of community-based volunteering that might have a bearing on how students would wish to get involved in such projects. These were listed as separate statements in the survey questionnaire, and respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they would agree or disagree with each statement.

- *'I am more likely to volunteer if friends/family are already volunteering at the Students Association'*: Few respondents chose either 'strongly agree' (4%) or 'agree' (7%) for this statement. In fact, 34% of respondents chose 'neither agree nor disagree' and 34% chose 'disagree'. In contrast, meeting fellow OU students appears to be a stronger motivation.
- *'I am more likely to volunteer if the opportunities are local to me'*: Over half of the respondents agreed with this statement, with 12% choosing 'strongly agree' and 41% choosing 'agree'. The Association's [Student-Led Projects](#) initiative will offer students ways to contribute to their local communities, and this response indicates potential interest in such opportunities. However, many respondents did not state a clear preference, with 23% choosing 'neither agree nor disagree'. This suggests that local community-based volunteering (especially within the part-time and distance learning context of the Association) might require more explanation, with examples of how such volunteer roles could work in practice.

- *'I am more likely to volunteer for a role that involves face-to-face interaction with fellow students'*: Face-to-face interaction was a strong motivating factor, with 17% choosing 'strongly agree' and 41% choosing 'agree'. The Association promotes such events on its website and through social media, and events such as the Big Meet-ups have proved popular with students.
- *'I am more likely to volunteer for a role that involves online social interaction with fellow students'*: 12% chose 'strongly agree' and 25% chose 'agree' for this statement, indicating a healthy interest in such roles. However, this statement also registered a high number of respondents who did not state a clear preference, with 42% choosing 'neither agree nor disagree'. This suggests a need for greater visibility of online-only or home-based volunteering opportunities, as students may not be aware of all the ways that they could interact online with fellow students.
- *'I am more likely to volunteer for a role that is linked to the subject I am studying'*: Over half of the respondents agreed with this statement, with 12% choosing 'strongly agree' and 43% choosing 'agree'. A detailed summary of students' views on volunteering roles linked to their subject area can be found in the OU's Consultation on Student Volunteering Summary document (internal access only, through the Student Consultation Forums).

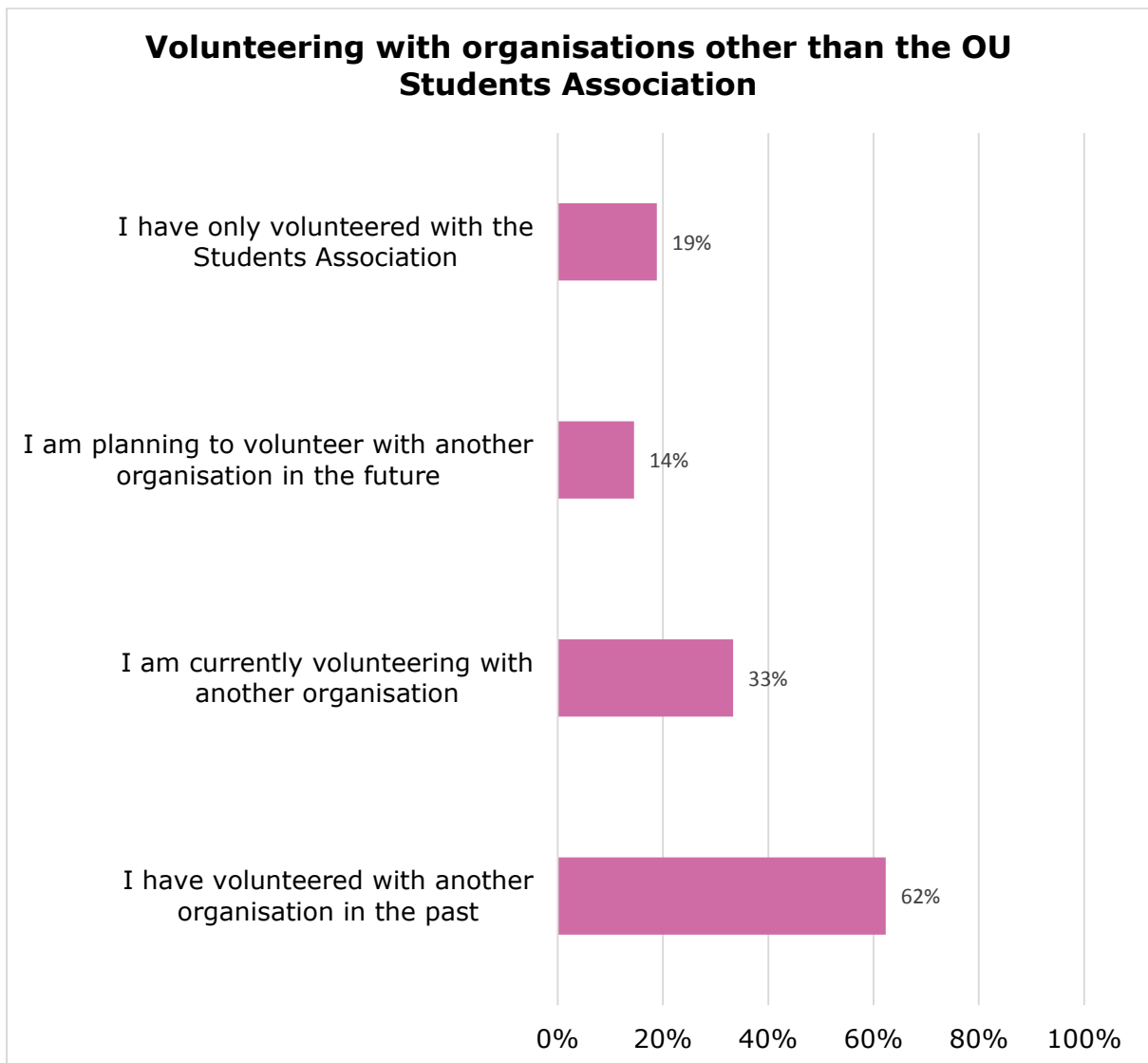
*"I would love the opportunity to volunteer in a role relating to my study, and give something back to the OU, and to students like myself."*

– Survey respondent

- *'I am more likely to volunteer for a role that helps me gain professional skills'*: 16% chose 'strongly agree' and 26% chose 'agree' for this statement, while 25% chose 'neither agree nor disagree'. More information is needed about the kind of professional skills that OU students might wish to gain from volunteering; as discussed earlier, while the feedback gathered during this project does mention personal development and gaining transferable skills, very few examples of specific career-related skills were mentioned.

*"I feel that any volunteer role should not only benefit the university, but also benefit the volunteer themselves. Whether that's a boost in confidence or learning new skills."*

– Survey respondent



**Chart 14.** Online survey: Respondents indicate their experience of, and plans for, volunteering with charities and organisations other than the OU Students Association.

### **Feedback from the focus groups**

The focus group participants had also had past experience of volunteering with other organisations and charities, where they helped with organising events and supporting different community groups. Examples included attending kids' reading sessions, working in a charity shop, and volunteering as an Olympics Game Maker.

*“So when I was about 19 I was part of a Rotaract club. So it was a junior version of a rotary club and we did volunteer and I was a charity organiser. I organised different things that our members could go and do to raise money, and community work, so around Christmas time we went to a home with disabled children, or like a school, or a home where there's elderly people, and make a Christmas party.”*

– Participant comment, focus group 1

In both the face-to-face focus groups, the question of community-based volunteering was explored in some detail. Participants were asked for their first impressions when hearing the phrase 'community-based volunteering', and whether they thought of this community as the OU students' community, or residents within a particular locality. In focus group 1 all participants agreed that community-based volunteering was needed to reach out to the student community, encourage a sense of belonging, and offer support. At first, participants thought of 'community' in terms of the community of OU students:

*“Participant 1: OU students' community because it's too far...locations, it's a widespread community.*

*Participant 3: Demographics*

*Participant 2: So the definition of a campus, the dictionary definition of a campus is a gathering place of education or something like that, I can't remember the exact wording, but for the OU, it's online, it's global. And that is a community, that campus is the community, linked through social media or whatever else it might be.”*

- Participant discussion, focus group 1

When asked to think about community in different terms, such as residents within a locality, participants were concerned about the number of students who would be able to invest time in a community-based project. This led to a related concern about potential reputational risks for the Association if volunteers failed to show up for an external event. In their study of student volunteering, Brewis et al. (2010) also detail potential problems relating to the availability of students, such as “ensuring a regular supply of volunteers across the academic year” for volunteer-involving organisations and “ensuring consistency of student leadership” for student-led projects (p.61).

*“Participant 2: the Association is obviously, I mean if you are doing that you would be advertising this sort of thing. But if it was me looking for a volunteering opportunity, external to the Association, I wouldn’t naturally feel the Association was the place to go to find it. So other volunteering roles I’ve had, I found them through other means. If I wanted to volunteer to do a coastal project, my first thought wouldn’t be, I’ll go to the Association website to see if I can find something to do with that.*

*Participant 1: I would also be worried ...the Association putting a lot of time and resources into something like this, and expectation from the organisations, the promise of trying to get volunteers onto it. It’d be like a game of roulette to get the right person to do the right role and you’re picking a volunteer that you don’t know from Adam. You don’t know any of us until you meet us, but to do just something external, it would reflect on the Association if it doesn’t go too well, and if it isn’t the right type of person. So although in theory it’s a really good idea, it would need to be handled by the organisation more, so they can do their own vetting.”*

- Participant discussion, focus group 1

The concern about students not connecting the Students Association to community-based projects was also echoed in the interviews. ‘Community’ continued to be interpreted very differently as OU students all over the world, OU students within a locality, or simply residents within a locality. The feedback also touched on how the Association would make such projects relevant and meaningful for students, especially with a geographically dispersed student body.

*“The difficulty is that a lot of these things vary according to the different communities, and you wouldn’t know of any of them unless you lived in that community. I mean you could spend ages researching an area and thinking...apart from national organisations that might have a distributed presence across the country, a lot of things are very much particular to the particular community that they’re involved in.”*

– Interview participant

Some of the concerns about how committed student volunteers might be to a community-based project stemmed from volunteers’ past experiences with students not showing up for events. Another concern raised was about distinguishing volunteers’ contribution to a community-based project from paid work. Participants also pointed out that students are often unsure whether they are undertaking a volunteer role with the Association or with the OU.

*“Participant 1: What is the line between a volunteering opportunity and a paid job? If it’s something that should be paid for – I’m happy to volunteer, I wouldn’t expect money for it – but at the end of the day you can’t expect a student...”*

*Participant 3: I think it should be as much student led as possible, with help from the Association...they say people doing voluntary jobs can be less reliable than people doing paid jobs*

*Facilitator: And would you perceive volunteering opportunities any differently if they came from the Association, or the university, or from another charitable body?*

*Participant 1: If I want to be honest with you, I think about 95% of the students are not aware of the difference between the OU and OUSA anyway. It’s irrelevant, most people, when I first came to student support with the OU, I was already volunteering for OUSA and I had no idea what the difference was. And I was a volunteer for you!”*

– Participant discussion, focus group 2

Participants were asked to think about the essential features that they would wish to see in a student-led community project. Efficient management of the project, staff support, a focus on accessibility and inclusivity, and regular assessment of impact and outcomes were some of the key features highlighted by participants (see word cloud below). This is similar to the feedback received through the earlier university consultation on the subject, where students had listed ‘well-planned’, ‘an opportunity to work with people with shared goals’, and ‘an opportunity to develop new skills and gain experience’ as features that would draw them towards such a project (OU Consultation on Student Volunteering).





Regarding the kind of messaging accompanying the promotion of a hypothetical community-led project, we asked participants to think about potential pitfalls that might make students less inclined to get involved. The following were highlighted by participants:

- Being either too vague or too specific
- Making the volunteer role sound like a job, or as a participant commented, “*being used as unpaid labour*”
- Targeting the wrong audience and using the wrong platforms
- Lack of clarity about the impact of the project
- Lack of follow-up communication
- Any group of people left disappointed because volunteers failed to show
- Student left disappointed if there are too many applications for just a few opportunities

Clear expectations, support in terms of how students could put their skills to use, clear lines of communication, and well-defined outcomes were then listed as ways to make a community-based project more appealing for students. The Association’s new initiative of Student-Led Projects, where students can suggest project ideas to benefit their local communities, explains each of the steps involved in launching a project. The [support guidance](#) includes setting objectives, running a project, and examples of other community-based projects. Further work would involve learning from the sector about how to evaluate the impact of such student-led projects (EUSA Volunteering Evaluation Report, 2014-2015).

## Recommendations

The recommendations below take up key themes in the volunteer feedback discussed in this report, and are designed to encourage further dialogue between staff teams and to progress our volunteering-related initiatives.

- To offer volunteers more guidance around how much time they are expected to invest in their role, and have additional support for volunteers who might be struggling to juggle work, family responsibilities and studies while volunteering with the Association. Time management support (such as 'How To' documents) could be included on the Volunteer Zone.
- To monitor the number of roles being undertaken by individual students: this is important not only for potential time management issues that volunteers may face, but also to ensure that these roles can attract as wide a range of student representation as possible.
- To hold 'follow-up' discussions after volunteer events, especially events organised and/or facilitated by volunteers. This could include identifying what went well or needs to be improved, how volunteers can build on their work, and how they can feed back to the student community. These follow-ups, such as through regular online chats with volunteers, could also prove useful for assessing the reach and impact of student volunteering.
- To identify clear lines of communication between volunteers and the staff team at the Association, as well as between different groups of volunteers. To improve awareness of the tailored training and support that is currently offered for different volunteer roles.
- To identify the different beneficiaries of student volunteering with the Association, such as student groups or local communities helped through the newly introduced Student-Led Projects, and to assess the 'reach' of different activities currently undertaken by student volunteers. To articulate distinct outcomes of student volunteering to feed into the Association's Annual Reports, such as under academic representation and student community.
- To develop methods for longitudinal monitoring of volunteer demographics to gain insight into areas such as diversity/inclusivity, trends in terms of students' motivation for volunteering with the Association, and shifts in the overall make-up of our volunteers.

- To review the volunteer application forms, role descriptions and adverts to ensure all possible barriers are removed by being transparent and open about commitments to the role (in terms of location, time, expenses, skills required etc.).
- To explore bringing Meet up hosts into the 'volunteer' umbrella as currently they sit outside of it, but it is clear that meet up hosts would benefit from being included for training, induction, support and recognition of their efforts.

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