

Volunteering: enhancing the student experience

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Abstract

In 2016, HEFCE commissioned a study into the relationship between public or civic engagement and the student experience. In the resulting report, it describes this engagement as connecting the work of the university to society, and lists three key components: transmitting information to inspire and educate; receiving information through actively listening to concerns, insights or views; and collaborating with communities to solve problems with co-created or co-designed solutions. At LJMU, we can point to many examples of activity within these themes, which supports our identity as a 'pioneering modern civic university'. This paper is a reflection on civic engagement and the role of student volunteering.

Keywords

civic engagement; volunteering; student experience; extra-curricular experience; social justice

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In 2016, HEFCE commissioned a study into the relationship between public or civic engagement and the student experience. In the resulting report, it describes this engagement as connecting the work of the university to society, and lists three key components: transmitting information to inspire and educate; receiving information through actively listening to concerns, insights or views; and collaborating with communities to solve problems with co-created or co-designed solutions (Wilson et al., 2017). At LJMU, we can point to many examples of activity within these themes, including our: research and knowledge transfer projects; public debates (such as the Roscoe Lecture series); and arts and cultural partnerships, to name just a few. All of which supports our identity as a ‘pioneering modern civic university’. All in all we are at a good juncture to reflect on civic engagement and the role of student volunteering.

The Crick Report, which focused on the school sector, stated that individuals being “active, informed, critical and responsible” support good citizenship (Crick, 1998: 9). Participatory opportunities to engage in subject-related activity outside of the classroom will undoubtedly provide many developmental opportunities but are these sufficient to enable our students to enter to tackle the problems of the 21st century and

help make society more just and sustainable? This is where there is value in setting our sights on the role of student volunteering. A recent Economic and Social Impact Report for LJMU provided evidence that many students (and staff) regularly volunteer, amounting to over one million hours of time dedicated to local communities.

In November 2017, the issue of student volunteering was the focus of discussion at LJMU’s Student Engagement Panel, a consultative body comprising students and their representatives which reports to the University’s Education Committee. The reasons why students volunteer were illuminating, with a significant number focusing on employability-related outcomes, such as gaining specific skills and developing personal attributes. This may be reflective of the ‘sign of the times’, and the urge for many to find appropriate employment immediately after graduating. Another area that emerged was the desire ‘to belong’, with reasons cited as, ‘an opportunity to bridge into local communities’ or ‘to meet with likeminded people’, thus enhancing group identity.

At LJMU, this sense of belonging is present in internal activities, such as peer mentoring, course or faculty representative roles, and being part of numerous sports clubs and societies (which can be academic, artistic or cultural in nature). Students can also seek external engagement through the University Volunteer Fair, or via LJMU’s volunteering and placements web pages. However, what of the work undertaken with third sector (not-for-profit) organisations whilst on placement? These are credit bearing and, as such, fall outside the definition of volunteering (“A person who freely offers to take part in an enterprise or undertake a task” – *Oxford English Dictionary*). This type

of activity, referred to as ‘service learning’ can have the same beneficial outcomes for communities and for the students themselves.

As noted, the LJMU Student Engagement Panel highlighted skills development as a potential and major outcome for the student. Associated with this are skills related to problem solving, negotiation, team working and conflict resolution. Employer feedback frequently indicates that there is a range of skills that are frequently lacking or underdeveloped in students, such as ‘managing up’, negotiating or influencing, self-awareness, emotional intelligence and empathy. With the articulation of the UK’s industrial strategy at the end of last year (HM Government, 2017), which underlined the importance of ‘knowledge exchange’ in the university sector, volunteering could contribute to enhanced commercial awareness and business acumen among students. Picking up on the other key finding from the Panel – ‘connecting with like-minded people’ – students at LJMU are often living away from home and, through volunteering, have the opportunity to learn more about others and other communities; this has been mentioned by some of our overseas students. Those homesick or looking for company outside their living accommodation and/or programme of study frequently articulate the benefits of volunteering. Thus, volunteering can improve mental health and, in this regard, LJMU’s Student Advice and Wellbeing team have endorsed it as a ‘social prescription’ to those with anxieties, thus raising self-esteem and self-worth.

Getting into volunteering is easier for some than others and the Student Engagement Panel reflected on these barriers. For instance, securing the necessary time to commit to volunteering, and balancing this with attendance at lectures, or with

employment outside of study. Participants discussed missed earnings, the costs associated with volunteering (e.g. travel to/from places, equipment), and subscriptions to some bodies and schemes. Bureaucracy related with some forms of volunteering, such as risk assessment (including DBS [Disclosure and Barring Service] checks), can also challenge engagement. The LJMU student body is a rich and diverse community. To draw parallels with a recent Universities UK International study that focused on outward social mobility (Allinson, 2017), engagement from disadvantaged and underrepresented students (i.e. students from a low socio-economic background; students from low participation in HE neighbourhoods; BME [Black Minority Ethnic] students; students with a disability; and students who are care leavers) can be lower. Therefore, a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach should not be a panacea and we need to think creatively and to examine a range of opportunities and flexible arrangements in order to attract students of any background.

Given the investment made by students to make a difference to others and themselves, it galvanises the University to look at ways of encouraging and acknowledging this activity. The Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) could, for instance, provide a comprehensive means of evidencing student successes. Staff in pastoral roles, personal tutors as well as other student support staff, have major roles to play in promoting and encouraging engagement. (It is worth stressing that, in the same way that LJMU students do not undertake unpaid internships, we ensure that in all University-verified volunteering opportunities, which are with ‘not for profit’ organisations, they are not used as unpaid labour.)

As we forge forward towards a new academic year, we will redouble our efforts to promote specific opportunities, including with LJMU's corporate charities and key research projects where students can make a difference. In making that difference, students' achievements will be enshrined in the LJMU's new Foundation for Citizenship. These initiatives are in keeping with the current narrative, as expressed by Wrexham Glyndŵr University's Deputy-Vice-Chancellor,

Industrial and commercial partnerships for economic growth are important... universities must also look to the public and third sectors..., to support the growth and development of community and societal cohesion and wellbeing.

(Taylor, 2017)

At a time when the UK government has announced a root-and-branch review of post-18 education, enhancing the student experience with student volunteering should form a key aspect of the inquiry.

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