Volunteering Service
Student Survey 2020–21

During July of 2021, the Volunteering Service conducted an online survey of
- subscribers to our newsletter, and:
- students who had enquired about volunteering through our online directory.

We received 454 completed responses;
- 183 had volunteered on one of our projects (representing 19% of our volunteers);
- 54 had volunteered elsewhere;
- 217 had not volunteered at all.

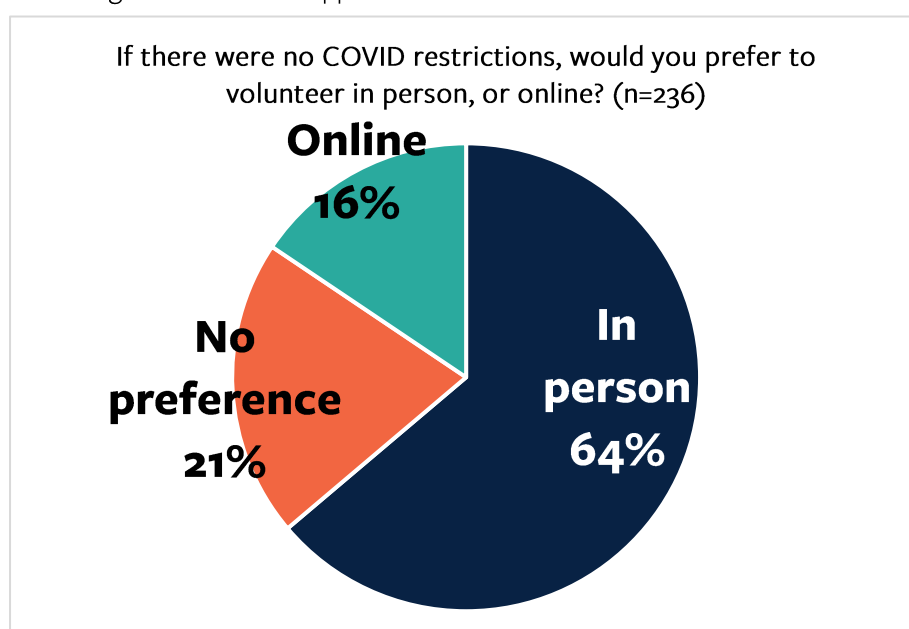The survey was incentivised with a prize draw and students received several personalised reminders to take part.

The move to online volunteering

72% of our volunteers did all of their volunteering online, with a further 16% doing a mix of online and in-person. Only 13% volunteered entirely in-person.

This represents a significant shift in patterns of volunteering – prior to COVID, very little of the activities we offered were online. During 20-21, many of our partners suspended their volunteering programmes and students were reluctant to engage with in-person volunteering.

The survey also showed a big appetite for the return to face-to-face volunteering – 64% of students said that, if there were no COVID restrictions, they'd prefer in-person activities, with only 16% preferring online – a 4-to-1 split in favour of in person volunteering.

It's unsurprising then that volunteering participation dropped last year, given a strong preference for in-person volunteering and the lack of opportunities to do so.

If there were no COVID restrictions, would you prefer to volunteer in person, or online? (n=236)
- Online 16%
- No preference 21%
- In person 64%

Impact

For this year's survey, we asked a few questions about how volunteering had impacted on students' connectedness and ability to cope with lockdowns:

Because of my volunteering …% agreeing or agreeing strongly, n=174, VS volunteers only.
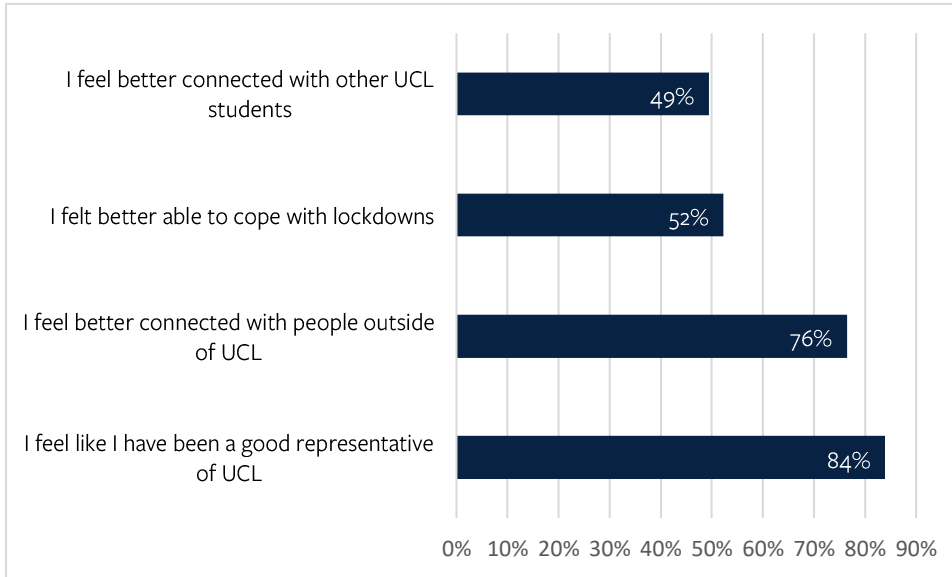
Unsurprisingly, those who'd organised their own volunteering were less likely to feel better connected with other UCL students (25%) or that they'd been a good representative of UCL (69%), though they were just as likely to agree with the other statements (n=52).

The results were not significantly different for those who'd just volunteered online, contrary to expectations. It seems that students are making meaningful connections through their online volunteering.

We also asked students if they felt they'd made a difference, and in what way.

Through my volunteering, I helped to improve…, % agreeing or agreeing strongly, n=174, VS volunteers only.

Connections within a community	78%
People's mental health and well-being	73%
Under 18's access to good quality education	49%
People's access to digital services	47%
People's political power, voice and influence	44%
Access to arts, culture and heritage	38%
Adults' access to lifelong learning	33%
People's physical health	26%
The physical environment	21%
People's financial security	16%
Access to sport	6%

In total, 95% of students felt they'd made a difference in at least one way through their volunteering.

Enhancement of volunteering

To test out some ideas we'd gathered during the consultation on our Community Volunteering Strategy, we asked volunteers if they'd be interested in any activities or services to help enhance their volunteering:

Would you be interested in any of the following? % selecting option, all volunteers, n=237

Advice on using your volunteering experience in job applications and interviews	65%
Suggestions for new volunteering that could build upon your previous experiences	57%
A chance to network with other UCL student volunteers	49%
Information on careers in the charity sector	46%
Longer online training, giving you skills relevant to your volunteering	35%
Talks and panel discussions about issues relevant to your volunteering	25%
Short 2 minute films about issues relevant to your volunteering	21%
Blogs about inspirational stories of other students' volunteering	19%
I'm not interested in any of these	5%

Non-Volunteers

217 respondents hadn't volunteered during the year – a relatively high number for our annual survey. We asked them why they hadn't taken part:

Why didn't you volunteer? % selecting option, Non-volunteers, n=207

I've been too busy with my studies to volunteer	79%
I didn't know how to get involved with volunteering	25%
I've been too busy with paid work to volunteer	24%
I applied for volunteering but the organisation was too slow to respond	19%
I've been too busy with other extra-curricular activities (e.g. clubs and societies) to volunteer	16%
I haven't seen much publicity about volunteering	14%
I applied for volunteering but was turned down	11%
I don't feel ready to volunteer	10%
None of my friends volunteer	7%
I've been too busy with caring responsibilities to volunteer	5%
Volunteering isn't relevant to my interests	4%

We also asked students if there were any other reasons for not volunteering. 59 gave additional answers. By far the largest number (26) related to COVID – either not wanting to volunteer in person, or their specific project having to close during lockdowns. Four students cited their own poor mental health as a reason for not volunteering, and three said they were studying remotely and couldn't find anything close to where they lived.

To put the 'too busy' responses into context, we asked students if they had a part-time job during term time and if they were on a committee of a UCL society or sports club. Volunteers were just as likely to have a part-time job as non-volunteers (32% vs 31%), and were much more likely to say they were on a committee (31% vs 22%).

We asked non-volunteers if there was anything the Volunteering Service could have done to help them volunteer:

What could we have done to help you volunteer? % selecting option, Non-volunteers, n=202.

More volunteering with flexible time commitment	50%
More volunteering connected with my academic subject	44%
A better range of volunteering opportunities	39%
More online volunteering	32%
Better information about opportunities on the website	26%
More in-person volunteering	22%
Better publicity about volunteering	20%
Improve the application process	16%
More personal support	12%
Better response to my emails	12%
Improve the website	7%
Nothing – I don't want to volunteer	1%

As noted above, respondents preferred in-person volunteering by a ratio of four-to-one. However, this still leaves a significant minority who want online volunteering, and this shows up in the data above.

In order to better understand how to communicate volunteering opportunities to students, we asked all respondents how they found out opportunities at UCL.

If you wanted to find out about activities, services or events at UCL in general where would you look?, % selecting option, all respondents, n=419

Students' Union UCL's weekly email	62%
Students' Union UCL website	59%
Emails from my department	55%
Messages from a club or society	31%
The Week@UCL (UCL's weekly email)	27%
UCL's social media	25%
Students' Union UCL's social media	24%
Department / Course Whatsapp groups	19%
Messages on Moodle	14%
My department's social media	11%

Respondents could choose more than one option. Interestingly, non-volunteers selected fewer (with a mean 2.7 options) compared to volunteers (with a mean 3.6 options). For instance, whilst the SU weekly email was the most popular option for both groups, 69% of volunteers used it compared to 57% of non-volunteers. This suggests that the more media students look at generally, the more likely they are to get involved – it would be interesting to see if this applies to other forms of student engagement.

We also asked which social media students used – Instagram was the clear favourite of the three options we gave.

Which social media do you use to find out what's happening at UCL?, % selecting option, All respondents, n=158
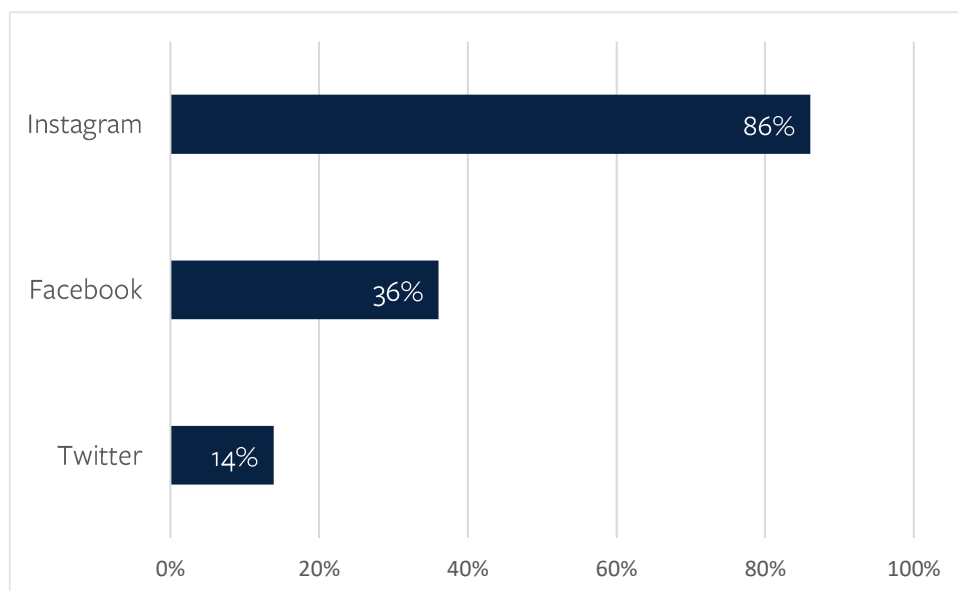
Students' Union UCL Volunteering Service
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