Student Volunteering: 
UCL’s Commitment

Volunteering is a valuable part of the student experience at University College London. We know that it connects students with the wider community, providing them with opportunities to learn and develop. Volunteering can help students settle into university life and within London, broaden their horizons and provide opportunities for leadership and skills development.

Volunteering can be challenging and difficult, and involves the taking on of new responsibilities. It is therefore important that student volunteers are well supported and that their achievements are recognised and celebrated. Volunteering should also be accessible to all. Different students become involved for different reasons and therefore our provision should encompass a wide variety of opportunities and types of activity.

The Volunteering Services Unit (VSU) – established in 2002 – acts as a central hub for UCL’s students and staff and as a point of contact for community organisations. It is worth noting, however, that student volunteering is promoted and supported in many different ways across the University – as part of the Public Engagement Unit’s work, through academic departments, through UCL’s museums, as part of UCL Outreach’s tutoring and mentoring programme, and in connection with other support services. In addition,
many UCL students organise their own volunteering.

UCL’s commitment to student volunteering embodies its founding ethos of accessibility and community engagement. Student volunteering also connects with many current priorities, including Global Citizenship, Public Engagement, the Grand Challenges, Social Entrepreneurship, Widening Participation and the Key Skills agenda.

Funded by UCL, the VSU is based within UCLU, the representative body for University College London students. UCLU provides in-kind support for the Unit, in recognition of the role that volunteering has to play in UCLU’s mission to enhance students’ experience of university life.

It is important that students have a say in the shape of student volunteering at UCL. To this end, student volunteers will sit on the VSU’s Steering Committee, and will have an input into the VSU’s annual plan through the UCLU Volunteering Society, through UCLU’s democratic structures, and through regular consultation.

We are proud that student volunteering has become a part of the fabric of UCL, with participation rates increasing each year. Nonetheless, we will always seek ways to improve upon what we do. The VSU draws up an annual plan to drive this work forward (available at www.uclu.org/volunteers/annual-plan) with key points embedded within UCL’s Corporate Planning Statement and UCLU’s Strategic Plan. UCL is committed to seeing further increases in student participation rates in volunteering and to continued investment in an infrastructure to support this.

The Volunteering Services Unit Steering Committee will review this commitment on a bi-annual basis and, if necessary, make recommendations for any amendments.

For more information about how both UCL and UCLU support student volunteering, visit www.uclu.org/volunteers/commitment
Appendix: How the commitment was drawn up

The commitment is intended as a statement of how student volunteering fits in with UCL and UCLU’s strategic direction, and of why it is important to us. We have drawn it up in collaboration with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, and have consulted with students and staff within UCL and with local community organisations.

It should be noted that the document relates to volunteering that connects students with the wider (non-student) population. Nonetheless, student community volunteering should also be seen as part of a wider family of activities which are supported within UCL: staff engagement with the public; student involvement with the private sector; and activity which primarily benefits other students (such as involvement in UCLU’s clubs or societies or with departmental committees).

Evidence
The Volunteering Services Unit has conducted numerous surveys of students since 2002, indicating that they develop skills, become more employable and feel a greater sense of belonging to UCL and to London. In 2010, a cross-London survey of student volunteers corroborated these findings (www.wiscv.org/monitoring-and-evaluation), as did the NCCPE’s 2010 report Bursting the Bubble (www.publicengagement.ac.uk/
The NCCPE’s research suggested that student volunteers experience greater benefits where they are supported by their university. These students also regard their volunteering as being better managed. The London research discovered that the biggest challenges faced by student volunteers are around time management and adapting to new environments.

All of these pieces of research found that students get involved for many different reasons, and so flexibility in provision is important. In addition, the NCCPE found that there was a benefit for community organisations in having a central point of contact within a university, as many struggle to find the right people to talk to within large institutions.

**UCL and student volunteering**
Volunteering is already well integrated into UCL’s strategies and plans. Primarily, the VSU contributes to UCL’s Global Citizenship Agenda (www.ucl.ac.uk/global_citizenship) which enables students to become:
- critical and creative thinkers.
- ambitious, idealistic and committed to ethical and socially responsible behaviour.
- sensitive to cultural difference and able to appreciate its value in intellectual and social contexts.
- entrepreneurs with the ability to innovate.
- prepared to assume leadership roles: in the family, the community and the workplace.
- highly employable and ready to embrace professional mobility.

UCL’s funding of the VSU enables the Unit to:
- Provide a range of volunteering opportunities appropriate to the needs, interests and skills of the UCL student body.
- Provide financial support and practical guidance to students wishing to establish their own volunteering projects.
- Monitor and report on the numbers of students volunteering directly through the VSU to UCL, and work to meet targets for recruitment set annually by the Vice-Provost (Education).
- Promote volunteering as a core element of the UCL student experience, including through volunteering activity organised independently of UCL, and monitor trends in the numbers of students volunteering in any capacity.
- Provide advice and data on volunteering to the Vice-Provost (Education) in support of UCL’s Global Citizenship activities.
- Develop strong working relationships with relevant charities, NGOs and other organisations in Camden and across London.
- Work with academic departments and the Careers Service to promote the skills development dimension to volunteering.
- Provide advice and contacts to departments operating placement schemes in collaboration with organisations in the voluntary or charitable sectors.
The VSU’s work also supports:

- UCL’s Institutional Learning & Teaching Strategy, through enhancing student employability and the development of key skills, as well as enabling students to engage with London, ‘an important element of the UCL student experience.’ (www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/staff/policy/UCL_ILTS_2010-15.pdf).
- UCL’s Public Engagement Strategy, through fostering relationships with community partners across London, and by promoting an understanding of good quality public engagement amongst students.
- UCL’s Outreach Strategy, through its work with external educational charities such as IntoUniversity, and through its support of student–led projects within schools (www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/widening-participation/wp-strategy/).
- UCL’s Grand Challenges by enabling UCL students to connect their studies and research with charities in the fields of Global Health, Sustainable Cities, Intercultural Interaction, and Human Wellbeing. (www.ucl.ac.uk/grand-challenges/).

It should be remembered, though, that the VSU is not the only part of UCL that supports student volunteering. For example:

- UCL Outreach run a tutor and mentoring scheme within London schools.
- The Public Engagement Unit fund and support student–led community activities.
- Academic departments involve students as volunteers within their own outreach activities.
- UCL Museums provide opportunities for students to volunteer.
- UCL Advances runs the ‘Citrus Saturdays’ enterprise education project with student volunteers.

The VSU and UCLU

The VSU is based within UCLU, which provides office space and access to the UCLU’s infrastructure. This includes line management, support from finance and marketing departments, meeting room space, as well as a link to UCLU’s democratic structures. In addition, connections with student–run clubs and societies and with the Post-Graduate Association have enabled the VSU to involve new groups of students.

UCLU empowers students to support each other in many different ways, for example by running clubs and societies, campaigning on issues of mutual interest, or representing their fellow students within their departments, halls of residence or within UCLU’s democratic structure as a whole.

The VSU contributes to UCLU’s strategic priorities in the following ways:

**Representation and Campaigning**

The VSU connects students to campaigning organisations such as Camden Federation of Private Tenants or The Campaign Against Climate Change. The VSU’s Innovations Programme has provided a platform for students to develop community projects that connect with campaigns (such as Fair Trade, biodiversity or human rights).
Support
Research by the VSU and others suggests that volunteering doesn’t just improve employability, but can help students feel more settled at university and in London. A review by Volunteering England found that volunteering can reduce the incidence of depression, stress and psychological distress, amongst other health benefits. Case studies of UCL student volunteers confirm that they find volunteering a fulfilling experience.

Fun, Recreation and Community
An evaluation of the VSU’s Innovations Programme showed that student–led volunteering helped students broaden their friendship groups within UCL. Also, the VSU can help students get involved in non–competitive sport through volunteering projects.

Skills and Employability
As mentioned above, the benefits to employability and skill development from volunteering are well–evidenced. The VSU aims to make the most of these by offering additional training and providing materials to help students identify the skills they have gained.

The VSU adds to UCLU’s range of services and brings new students into contact with the organisation, as well as generally adding to the capacity of the organisation as a whole.

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