

# ReGenerational Commitment: A Town-Gown Partnership

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*This paper aims to explore how extracurricular activities run by students might be developed and implemented to meet the needs of stakeholders in disadvantaged communities in Oxford. Additionally, it will explore how effective community engagement could inspire a future longitudinal study and be used to foster a wider positive commitment by the University of Oxford to its surrounding areas.*

*This project is important due to the dearth of research into Oxford communities' views and needs regarding extracurricular activities. Similarly, there is a lack of clear evidence on how the University of Oxford could resource and provide an extracurricular activity programme that serves the local community and fosters long-term buy-in. Effective community engagement is particularly crucial in the local south-east Oxford context, where, historically, the University has failed to sustain long-term engagement.*

*Informed by a rapid review of existing literature covering perceptions of the importance of extracurriculars, pre-existing work on community engagement approaches for researchers, and the specific Oxford context, the study consists of thematic analysis of five semi-structured interviews with a variety of community leaders, educational professionals, and extracurricular providers. These focused on stakeholders' interpretations and lived experiences regarding extracurricular activities and the University.*

*The broader community perspectives and needs gathered in this study will be used to form the foundations for a longer-term longitudinal study, covering a programme of extracurricular interventions delivered by Oxford University students in local state schools. Any future study is recommended to build upon this preliminary research by expanding engagement with stakeholders, most notably to include direct research engagement with local students. It is hoped that through this ongoing community engagement taking place during the study, a 'generational commitment' can be built by University of Oxford students to the regeneration of the local Oxford community.*

### **Introduction**

Addressing the highly unequal wealth distribution present in a worldwide context is a foremost priority for sustainable development, and at a macro level often focuses on the disequilibrium between the Global North and Global South. However, inequality is also a salient issue in local contexts within the UK, especially that of Oxford, the UK's second most unequal city (Centre for Cities, 2018). Here, the resources and world-leading research of the University of Oxford stand in contrast with the high poverty incidence and below-average educational attainment in areas of lower socio-economic status within the city (Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, 2019). Building connections between areas of higher and lower socioeconomic status gives an opportunity to address and rebalance the inequalities between them, both on a micro and macro scale. Considering this, developing a closer partnership between the University and local communities could be a mutually beneficial endeavour which supports the progression towards greater socioeconomic equality, in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

The aim of this chapter is to establish whether delivery of extracurricular activities (extracurriculars) within schools in less socioeconomically advantaged areas of the city of Oxford by students of Oxford University would be a suitable method of fostering civic integration and, if so, how these activities could be effectively co-designed in consideration of diverse community needs. These findings will inform our recommendations for the provisionally planned long-term extracurricular intervention and partner study in Oxford schools. In light of this, the objectives of this research are threefold:

- 1. To uncover the perceptions of different extracurriculars held by various stakeholders in south-east Oxford, namely community leaders, teachers and caregivers.*
- 2. To determine the perceived needs of the local community regarding extracurriculars, in terms of desired long-term outcomes and required assistance to overcome any barriers to uptake.*
- 3. To lay the foundations for effective university-community collaboration over an expanded longitudinal study through considered and ethical community engagement.*

### **Rationale**

The Oxford population has a considerable incidence of deprivation, with 26% of its children living below the poverty line (Oxford City Council, 2021). Furthermore, the socioeconomic distribution across the city is strikingly unequal - Oxford's most disadvantaged LSOEs<sup>1</sup> have child poverty incidences nearly 10 times higher than in its most advantaged communities (Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, 2019). Perhaps most shocking is the area's differential access to youth education and training given the presence of a world-leading institute of higher education in the city: despite containing some of the country's most prestigious schools, over one eighth of Oxford's local communities rank in the lowest 10% nationally for youth educational attainment (Ibid).

Extracurriculars are a key area of lower provision in state schools in less socioeconomically advantaged areas, including many communities in south-east Oxford, (Burtonshaw, Dorrel, and Yates, 2023). Funding and staffing are identified as barriers to provision (Briggs and Somons, discussed in Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019, p. 24). By contrast, the University of Oxford possesses a considerable financial endowment, extensive academic and sporting facilities, and a large network of students and scholars of various disciplines, whose time and expertise could be hugely beneficial in supporting local schools.

Thus, a possible way to match the resources of the University to the needs of local students is to design a programme of after-school activities to be delivered in south-east Oxford schools by university students. Beginning with a pilot intervention, the ambition would be to expand into a long-term, large-scale partnership. Extracurricular activity programmes have been highlighted as a potentially beneficial and feasible form of University-community engagement in the long-term: there are recorded positive impacts of similar extracurricular interventions for young people, both in a wider context (Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019) and from previous smaller-scale projects in Oxford (Sports Impact Lab, 2024;); additionally, the time commitment it requires of student facilitators is flexible and manageable.

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<sup>1</sup> Lower layer Super Output Areas, census terminology identifying neighbourhoods/ communities as units of analysis. Oxford City is comprised of 83 LSOEs (Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, 2019)

Our group's delivery output was a pilot extracurricular programme focusing on storytelling, poetry, and drama in two Oxford schools, whilst concurrently undertaking research in the community to uncover the needs and perceptions of different local stakeholder groups regarding extracurriculars. This direct community engagement aims to establish community priorities and ensure that any future expanded programme prioritises these within its design and delivery; furthermore, these early beginnings of community engagement are part of foundation-building of trust and collaboration between community members and the university.

### **Literature review**

The positive impacts of extracurriculars on young people's academic attainment and social wellbeing have been widely researched in the UK (as seen in Robinson's 2024 report for the Education Policy Institute) and internationally, most extensively in the USA and with growing scholarship focusing on the European context (reviews of international sources from 1980s-2010s found in Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019; Fischer, Adisch, and Schüpbach, 2014). However, despite a history of extracurricular programmes of varying degrees of longevity and success being delivered in Oxford, there has been a relative lack of research into their outcomes in this local context. A rapid review process was adopted for this study to fit the time constraints. The first part of this chapter's literature review focused on examining perceptions held regarding extracurriculars from specific Oxfordshire stakeholders - namely, teachers, community members, and young people themselves. Secondly, this research tool was used to look for existing examples and frameworks for positive community engagement. The third key focus of the review was to understand the dynamics of current extracurricular provision within the Oxford context.

#### ***Identified perceptions and needs from extracurriculars***

UK studies have identified lower levels of participation in extracurriculars by young people from less socioeconomically privileged backgrounds, compared to their more privileged peers, evidencing a significant disparity in access (Holloway and Pimslott-Wilson, 2014; Robinson, 2024). This was evident from the conception of the project - indeed, a key aim of the long-term

project is to attempt to bridge this gap. More surprising was the finding by the Social Mobility Commission's 2019 report on extracurriculars, which demonstrates that schools located across areas of differing socio-economic status have relatively similar levels of extracurricular provision across a range of activities (Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019, p. 32). Admittedly, this evidence does not reflect the quality or extent of this provision, but it may suggest other reasons than a lack of provision for lower engagement by certain socioeconomic groups. The report goes on to suggest that the observed participation gap is likely due to financial barriers - an argument echoed elsewhere in the UK literature (Holloway and Pimslott-Wilson, 2014). An interesting additional dimension is that a greater proportion of students from families of lower household-income lack the self-confidence to participate in extracurriculars; which is a more nuanced and multi-layered problem that merits careful consideration in future programme design.

The literature also revealed some potential desired outcomes from extracurriculars from different stakeholder groups and demographics, to be localised to the south-east Oxford context. Commonly, the texts suggested that teachers, caregivers, and students across UK valued extracurriculars in their capacity as “safe places” for young people outside the home and school-time contexts (Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019, p. 48; Hall, Williams, and Daniel, 2010, p. 13).

In their study of Midlands parents, Holloway and Pimslott-Wilson (2014) found that over 80% of parents supported greater in-school extracurricular provision. This is an indication that the long-term plan to deliver these interventions in schools may be popular with caregivers. However, this study aimed to uncover the analogue perceptions in south-east Oxford, especially given the existence of established extracurricular programmes already available in the area outside the school environment (discussed later in this section), and whether local caregivers would prefer provision in a non-school environment to provision within the school setting.

Key to future programme design is establishing a thorough understanding of the session content desired by community stakeholders. The studies often focused on sporting activities, which are recorded as the most popular kind of after-school enrichment in the UK (Robinson, 2024);

conversely, none of the five Laidlaw pilot programmes delivered this year were sports-based. It therefore seemed important to establish the programmes preferred by various stakeholder groups and their rationales for these preferences: relatedly, it would be relevant to establish the extent to which it was viewed as desirable to tailor contents to these stakeholders, in balance with the desires of the pupils themselves. In any case, the need for co-creation in the programmes, facilitated by effective community engagement, was paramount.

### *Universities and community engagement*

In the pursuit to understand this local context and continually assess whether or not needs of local stakeholders are being met necessitates consistent, effective, community engagement. In this scoping stage, existing case studies and established frameworks were sought out to inform the recommended approach to this process. Jarvis, Berkeley and Broughton's (2012) analysis of the extensive implementation of community consultation by the local authority in Canley, Coventry highlighted, in general terms, the importance of giving community members real choice and agency when designing and implementing regeneration projects.

There is also a sizeable literature discussing community engagement specifically in a university context. From Boyer's 'engaged scholarship' to Barnett's 'ecological university' (both discussed in Mbah, 2018) to the 'civic university' put forward by the University Partnerships Program Foundation (2019), there is a notion that universities have a responsibility to serve the priorities of local residents, acting as 'anchor institutions' (Ibid) for local communities. This relationship benefits both parties most if it is reciprocal. Mbah (2018) effectively argues this point through the use of a case study from southwest Cameroon of a local tomato farmer contributing to a practical farming session at the local State-run university. Mbah shows how local community members' highly useful local knowledge systems could be mutually exchanged with the university's scientific knowledge systems through community engagement for reciprocal benefit.

Admittedly, the Cameroonian case study is from a very different demographic context to the UK-based communities of south-east Oxford, however the value of its conclusions are corroborated in a UK-focused report by the Institute for Community Studies (2022). Here, discussions with over fifty representatives from local communities yielded a common theme that community members felt that they held useful knowledge that was not valued by research

institutions (Institute for Community Studies, 2022). In order to minimise such alienation, it is vital to ensure Oxford community members are treated with respect while nurturing collaborative partnership with the University throughout this intervention.

Several community engagement frameworks have been developed conceptualising how research might achieve this aim of positive collaboration in community development settings. One of these frameworks is Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR), which aims to ensure that research involving local communities is primarily useful for those communities, rather than using them merely as a lab (Barry and Carter, 2023). This involves mitigating the power imbalances behind ordinary research by approaching community members as equal partners, not as passive subjects. This reconceptualisation towards a longer-term cycle of ‘enquiry, intervention and evaluation’ places emphasis on ensuring research delivers useful action for local communities (Silver discussed in Barry and Carter, 2023).

The ideal for effective community engagement within research also involves giving local communities the power to determine which topics are researched and which projects are allocated funding (Gilchrist discussed in Barry and Carter, 2023). The importance of this power over research funding and topics to community members is also stressed in the aforementioned Institute for Community Studies report (2022). Additionally, universities would ideally share ownership and usage of knowledge produced by research with local communities, giving them control over the intellectual property outputs of the research (Gilchrist discussed in Barry and Carter, 2023). In the context of this intervention, this consists of founding both future extracurricular programmes and any further research on the community’s preferences uncovered in this preliminary study, and maintaining this collaborative partnership in the longer-term.

### ***Oxford local community***

Establishing the presence and scope of existing extracurricular initiatives in south-east Oxford was vital to understanding if and how university-led provision could serve these communities. Two key community initiatives were identified, Blackbird Leys Adventure Playground (BLAP) and Leys Community Development Initiative, providing afterschool and holiday clubs to young people in the areas and for the corresponding age groups to this programme’s delivery (Blackbird

Leys Adventure Playground, 2024; Wheeler, 2023), constituting banks of highly relevant local knowledge. Furthermore, there have been a number of sports-focused initiatives for young people in the area, such as Active Oxfordshire's initiatives for young people (Active Oxfordshire, 2020) and the programmes delivered by the Sports Impact Lab (Sports Impact Lab, 2024), under the umbrella of the wider SDG Impact Lab. This priority is reflected in Oxford City Council's 2018 Children & Young People's Strategy, which emphasises the importance of physical exercise and improving sport facilities (Oxford City Council, 2018), a focus likely to have been further boosted by the health impacts of the COVID pandemic. However, the strategy's lack of commitment to non-sport extracurriculars arguably fails to meet the full range of perceived needs in the community.

The desk research findings indicated that lower levels of engagement with extracurriculars in south-east Oxford likely stems from a combination of reasons, which include low provision and participation levels. Previous university initiatives via 'Oxford for Oxford' have generally not been long-term interventions (University of Oxford, 2024), which this project aims to be. Ofsted assessments indicate that funding issues may be a reason for lower school-based provision in the area. However, these reports also indicate that participation in extracurriculars amongst secondary school pupils is low even where there are considerable levels of provision, reflecting the national trend of low extracurricular uptake in less economically advantaged areas observed in the 2019 Social Mobility Commission report. This, too, is particularly striking and concerning in the face of the Oxford City Council reports that vulnerable young people are increasingly at risk of exploitation (Oxford City Council, 2018), which may be expected to increase community demand for supervised spaces for young people. Investigating some of the primary barriers to extracurricular participation in south-east Oxford communities was therefore a key focus, for informing future programme design and seeking to minimise the impact of these constraints whilst maximising accessibility.

## **Methodology**

### ***Approach***

This research project was designed to operate in tandem with the pilot phase of University-led extracurricular delivery in south-east Oxford. Within the five-chapter research structure, the thematic focus is community engagement and how it supports the social and educational benefits of extracurriculars. This research's aims are to uncover the existing perceptions of extracurriculars in the area (as opposed to the Global and Local Mapping chapter's greater focus on existing provisions).

Given this, paramount to our research approach was determining local stakeholder groups and gaining insight and opinions from the most appropriate groupings. A cross-sectional mapping exercise, followed by Stakeholder influence interest matrix, narrowed down the most relevant populations to engage in research: students, caregivers, teachers and schools' senior leadership teams, local businesses, the University, charitable groups delivering extracurriculars, local councillors and bodies allocating extracurricular funding, community service providers (such as the police and social services), and community leaders were all identified. Of these groups, the policy chapter authors took the lead in engaging with council members. The stakeholder selection criteria for this chapter was informed by the lack of ethical approval to engage those under the age of 18 as research subjects at this stage, so seeking their opinions on extracurriculars directly was not an option. This was a significant drawback given that the students were the primary recipients of the intervention. To overcome this limitation, stakeholders who would be well placed to feed back children's experiences regarding extracurricular activities and who would have expertise regarding those children's needs were prioritised for engagement: i.e. caregivers, teachers, social services personnel, community leaders and local extracurricular providers.

The plan of strategy for engagement and data collection followed the identification of the key stakeholders. Initial planning suggested a mixed-methods analysis that combined a small pool of qualitative data collected in-person with quantitative data collected via surveys to be ideal. However, following discussions with experienced members of the SDG Impact Lab, a purely qualitative approach was selected, reflecting the time and funding limitations of the pilot project.

Any results collected at this stage were bound to give only a snapshot of stakeholders' attitudes and perceptions: in light of this, the decision was made to focus on collecting and considering fewer, more in-depth testimonials over attempting to draw broad conclusions from low-n survey data.

Therefore, individual members of most of the relevant stakeholder groupings were identified and invited to interview; attempts were also made to set up caregiver focus groups via partner schools to collect in-person testimonials from a range of students' guardians.

### **Research Methods**

*Following the methods outlined above, interviews were planned with twelve stakeholders of various categories and enquiries were made regarding the feasibility of focus group discussions. Ultimately, we conducted eight interviews using tailored topic guides yielding five transcripts appropriate for qualitative thematic analysis, including perspectives of two school-based and three community-based stakeholders. Though the extent of stakeholder engagement was limited by time constraints, the frameworks used provide a foundation for further extension of this study in future research.*

Two similar but distinct five-question semi-structured interview templates were designed, for community-based and school-based stakeholders respectively, with adapted versions to fit the specific activity providers. The questions in each template were mapped to one of the three research objectives<sup>2</sup>, in a bid to comprehensively uncover knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding extracurriculars and University engagement in the area. Permission was obtained from interviewees to record and transcribe these discussions for ease of reference and thematic

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<sup>2</sup> (1) To uncover the perceptions of different extracurriculars held by various stakeholders in south-east Oxford, namely community leaders, teachers and caregivers.

(2) To determine the perceived needs of the local community regarding extracurriculars, in terms of desired long-term outcomes and required assistance to overcome any barriers to uptake.

(3) To lay the foundations for effective university-community collaboration over an expanded longitudinal study through considered and ethical community engagement.

analysis. Following the interview stage, commonly mentioned themes were identified from across transcripts and used to group key findings.

### ***Ethics***

Ensuring that community engagement was as ethical as possible was of central importance in this and all stages of research. The research was conducted within the University's ethical guidelines<sup>3</sup> and strictly observed the agreed parameters, such as not engaging our students as research subjects. Ethical procedure was central to the interview process: data storage plans were clearly presented in the informed consent sheet distributed to and signed by all interviewees, and interview data was, as agreed, always stored on password-protected devices and anonymised by removing names and identifying personal information from the report. The ultimate aim was to establish the ethical considerations that stakeholders most wanted to have worked into future projects, building probes for potential concerns around the programme into the interview templates.

When engaging with community members, every effort was made to be flexible and accommodating with interview timings and locations. The centrality of their contributions to the project was made clear, and time was reserved at the end of each session for the interviewee to contribute any opinions or suggestions for the project, with the final report to be shared with participants.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Combining the interview findings with the review of secondary literature has yielded deeper insight into the role of extracurriculars in the specific south-east Oxford context. These findings broadly map to the research objectives of uncovering perceptions of extracurriculars, determining needs from and barriers to their provision, and establishing how to build a foundation of long-term community engagement through extracurricular interventions.

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<sup>3</sup> CUREC: ODID CIC\_24\_002

*Perceptions of extracurriculars*

The first area of enquiry centres on the perceptions of extracurriculars by local stakeholders in southeast Oxford, mapping directly to the first research objective. There were common themes in the responses by stakeholders to our interview questions regarding the perceived value of extracurriculars as a whole and the perceived value of specific extracurriculars.

It is notable that all five interviewees, across each stakeholder grouping, had a positive perception of extracurriculars, and expressed support for the expansion of student-led provision in future. It is possible that this has been skewed by response bias, with pro-extracurricular community members perhaps more likely to give their time to the study: indeed, attempts to contact and interview community leaders who had expressed some scepticism towards the programme were unsuccessful at this stage. However, the relative unanimous approval from interviewees is encouraging, suggesting that the hypothesised suitability of the programme in the local context may in fact be effective in practice.

The perceived value of extracurriculars in general was widely reported with reference to their social function; their educational functions; and their role as a 'safe space'.

The social benefits discussed covered interactions with peers and adults, developing a range of social skills. School-based stakeholders and the activity provider interviewed in particular highlighted their importance in building students' 'ability to interact'. One educator noted that this is doubly important in the contemporary context, where children are spending more time with their electronic devices and less time with their peers, and have missed formative years of in-person interaction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, the significance of extracurriculars as providing children with opportunities to interact with non-teacher and non-parent adults of different ages was often highlighted as relatively unique, contributing not only to students' social development but to broader community-building in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. It was expressed that such interactions could build confidence for children, enriching their social understanding and preparing them for the transition to adult society.

Meanwhile, extracurriculars were perceived as serving various educational functions, from broadening useful subject-specific and soft skills to supporting the learning of students who may struggle in a traditional classroom environment. Research showed that extracurriculars were valued as a space for children to engage in exploration and learning, curriculum-linked or otherwise, in an informal environment without the pressures of academic grades. This was believed to foster creativity, intellectual curiosity, and a willingness to take risks, which could ultimately feed into higher-level work and engagement in the classroom: this is a potential causal explanation for the higher academic attainment associated with extracurricular participation highlighted by the Social Mobility Commission (Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019). Additionally, extracurriculars were perceived by stakeholders across groupings as a positive space for students struggling with traditional academics and school environments to build confidence, echoing the Beynton's case study illustrating how extracurricular writing workshops helped to develop the confidence of 'invisible pupils' (Beynton in Dymoke, 2015). Community-based stakeholders also expressed that accommodating young people who are anxious around attending school in extracurricular activities, whilst benefiting them, can also provide a break for their caregivers, contributing to wider positive effects for the community.

However, regarding specific extracurriculars, though some activities were touched on as potentially beneficial in specific contexts, most stakeholders placed more emphasis on the importance of student ownership and input into the contents of sessions. Though some activities, (variously, sports, drama, and online gaming) were touched on as potentially building useful skills in students, interviewees primarily stressed the importance of student co-creation in club content. For example, at the successful, long-running Leys Community Development Initiative and BLAP in the south-east Oxford community, a variety of activities and choices are offered to participating young people (Blackbird Leys Adventure Playground, 2024; Wheeler, 2023). A community leader explained that this was more likely to produce long-term buy-in and commitment, leading to higher participation and retention. This clearly parallels the importance of co-creation in a broader community engagement capacity, as emphasised in the literature by Jarvis, Berkeley and Broughton (2012), and suggests that the desires of the students themselves should be foremost in the design of future programmes. Many interviewees highlighted that the

clubs, as optional endeavours, would have to be exciting and appealing to students in order to succeed, and co-creation and choice has shown itself to be an important aspect of this.

Finally, stakeholders' emphasis on extracurriculars providing a safe environment for young people corroborated the findings of the desk review. Community- based stakeholders in particular expressed that extracurriculars provide a safe space that outside home and school-time for children to meet with their friends, with one arguing that this was uniquely important to southeast Oxford where in some public spaces they believed 'it would be very easy to meet people who might want to exploit you [as a young person]'. This reflects and localises the findings of studies outlined above that emphasise the capacity of extracurriculars to be safe 'third spaces' for children in the UK and the US (Donnelly, Lažetić and Sandoval-Hernandez, 2019, Holloway and Pimslott-Wilson, 2014), and emphasises their capacity to act as a positive diversionary activity for young people.

### ***Needs from, and barriers to, extracurricular provision and participation***

The reported needs from extracurriculars uncovered in the interview process were varied, but broadly linked back to interviewees' perceptions of their purpose and value.

It was stressed that extracurriculars need to appeal to students as a fun activity preferable to alternative pastimes, if they are to succeed in the long-term. One community-based activity provider stated that it is essential to give children an "element of choice", potentially through setting up a variety of different activities, and allowing children to choose which ones to partake in. Others expressed that activities should be made interactive and engaging, and one participant affirmed that one should build relationships and a sense of enthusiasm amongst young people participating, before asking them to take part in more challenging activities. Alongside this, one interviewee felt that it was not always possible to cater to everyone's need when providing an extracurricular initiative, as often different types of extracurriculars would naturally attract certain demographics; this would imply that initiatives should perhaps be tailored to appeal to different target groups. In general, related to reported perceptions, cultivating student engagement and enthusiasm was widely seen as necessary to any successful intervention.

Similarly, interviewees expressed that extracurriculars needed to have sufficient safeguarding provisions for young people with most emphasising the importance of thorough safeguarding checks for the providers, in the form of training and enhanced DBS checks. One participant stated that teachers were the ideal group to provide extracurriculars, given their high level of safeguarding training, and the fact that interacting with teachers outside of the school day may help students who have struggled in class to build more positive associations with learning. However, this approach was recognised as constituting a potential barrier to provision.

A lack of funding, staffing, and space were reported as key logistical barriers to providing extracurriculars. Several interviewees expressed that it is unfair and unrealistic to expect teachers to take on the additional unpaid responsibilities of running an extracurricular club alongside their heavy workload and limited free time. One participant revealed that it can be particularly difficult for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) requiring a one-to-one teaching assistant, as there is currently no funding for these teaching assistants to stay on for additional hours. Supporting children with more complex needs would require a higher level of training for providers. Furthermore, finding appropriate, accessible locations for out-of-school extracurricular provision was stated as a challenge, especially given that taking children to traditional locations such as scout huts can be infeasible for caregivers at work during the daytime or who do not drive. However, it was noted that the student-led, in-school programme being trialled sidestepped many of these logistical issues, with ‘the space to do it and the people to do it with’ already provided.

Financial barriers were less directly communicated by interviewees, but did come through, in line with the findings of the secondary literature. For example, caregivers’ not owning a car or being unable to afford public transport fares may limit their capacity to take their children to activities; furthermore, many after-school clubs are paid-for, which is another financial obstacle for less economically advantaged households. A school-based stakeholder observed of this that “those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (...) they're not off to swimming club in the evening, or to necessarily to, you know, the athletics club or the drama Stagecoach at the weekend”. This ties in with Holloway and Pimslott-Wilson (2014)’s findings that financial factors are the greatest barriers to extracurricular participation in the UK. The somewhat less pronounced focus on financial factors in the interviews is perhaps because caregivers’

perspectives were only represented indirectly in this analysis, compared to their direct engagement by Holloway and Pimslott-Wilson. This particularly suggests the importance of expanding free-to-access, school-based extracurricular provision, such as student-led initiatives.

Finally, cultural barriers were seen as having a considerable impact on extracurricular participation. A school-based stakeholder noted that clubs only found success if they reached a ‘critical mass’ of participation, implying that norms around extracurriculars in peer groups were vital in determining whether interventions would be sustainable. This relates to the observation by several participants that encouraging uptake may be more difficult at a secondary-school level if there are no pre-existing ‘habits’ of taking part in extracurriculars, as older students may be more reluctant to try new activities due to higher self-consciousness and cynicism. The research also highlighted the need for sensitivity to the home cultures of students in encouraging participation. Firstly, caregivers may be reticent to sign their children up for extracurricular activities if they themselves did not engage with them at school; in addition, there may be difficulties accessing caregivers, due to language barriers and/or if they rarely visit the school and hence do not interact with providers (e.g., if their child walks home independently). In response to this, one participant suggested that it is worth engaging with parents, both in-person and via digital messaging, in order to enhance participation and build better relationships with the young people attending.

### ***Role of the University***

The majority of participants believed that University initiatives in the local area had the potential to be ‘highly beneficial’ for students. Several mentioned that the institution’s sizeable wealth could be used for initiatives supporting local state schools, which are often financially overstretched. In addition, several schemes for students to access the University were suggested, from expanding access to college tours (currently offered via the Oxford for Oxford outreach scheme (University of Oxford, 2024)) to introducing contextual offers, whereby lowered entry-grade requirements to study at the University are offered to local students from less economically advantaged backgrounds. Such a scheme is not currently in place at the University, but it has been recommended as a widening participation measure by the University Partnerships Program Foundation (2019). There was also support for the idea of university students spending more time in south-east Oxford communities, to broaden mutual understanding and partnership

between the University and its local surroundings. However, it is worth mentioning that one community leader who could not be reached for a full interview claimed to be “sceptical” of the idea that the University could have a positive impact, which could be reflective of the opinions of a sizeable proportion of the population who may not have been sampled due to non-response bias.

However, there was a clear emphasis on ensuring that any commitment from the University was high-quality and long-term. There was considerable concern from participants at the potential for ‘fly in, fly out’ interventions, which can cause locals to lose faith in institutional commitment to their communities, and may well contribute to sceptical attitudes such as those held by the community leader mentioned above. The possibility of this problem was acutely evident given the short-term nature of the initial pilot project, with an emphasis that any meaningful extension of the programme would have to focus on building trust with schools, students, and the community as a whole. A school-based stakeholder summarised this in stressing that developing the partnership must be a “generational kind of commitment”.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This six-week pilot study sought to uncover the perceptions and needs around extracurricular activities and university-community engagement more broadly, in the south-east Oxford context, in preparation for a potential longer-term intervention. Analysis of five structured interviews with local stakeholders, combined with a rapid desk review of related secondary literature, has highlighted some key preliminary findings on the stated objectives:

- 1) *Perceptions of extracurricular activities reported by a range of stakeholders in south-east Oxford were widely positive. To varying degrees, participants considered extracurriculars to be a place for young people to develop their social skills, learn new things in a low-pressure environment, and play safely.*
- 2) *Stakeholders believed that extracurricular activities need to be exciting for young people to encourage voluntary engagement. It is also key that they are supported by facilitators*

*with sufficient safeguarding training. Logistical, financial, and cultural factors were all identified as potential barriers to engagement.*

- 3) *Interviewees communicated that they feel the University of Oxford has a duty to engage with its community, and to use its financial and academic resources to uplift local students from less economically advantaged areas. This commitment should be long-term, and informed by engaged civic partnership between the University and its surrounding area.*

Hence, from these initial findings, there appears to be an evidence basis to consider the expansion of the pilot scheme extracurricular provision to be a longer-term commitment. For any further cohorts expanding the initiative, we have four key recommendations:

**1) *Expand research engagement to a wider range of stakeholders***

The limited resources and time scale of this project limited successful engagement with some key stakeholder groups. Most notably, ethical approval did not cover research engagement with students at this stage, logistical issues meant that there was no direct consultation with local caregivers, and non-response bias may have been introduced by failure to interview some more sceptical community leaders. Hence, future studies should seek a fuller range of stakeholder opinions to more accurately inform conclusions and decisions.

**2) *Ensure provision is consistent, co-created, and high quality***

There is real and understandable concern in the community that interventions will be short-term, ‘fly in, fly out’ schemes, which do not deliver long-term observable benefits for local students. Hence, any further commitment must include planning and infrastructure for long-term implementation, with commitment to safeguarding and SEND training for facilitators to ensure high-quality provision. Furthermore, interviewees suggested that co-creation of the clubs with students is the most likely way to promote engagement and retention.

**3) *Prioritise delivery in primary schools***

To promote the early formation of norms and habits of participation, interview data suggests that targeting delivery to primary schools over secondary schools may be the most effective allocation of resources.

**4) *Separate the research and delivery elements of the programme***

From our personal experience of the pilot programme, we believe that the combined workload of research and the design and delivery of extracurricular sessions may be a salient barrier to University of Oxford students' engagement with the scheme, especially during term times. This barrier may be overcome by changing the study's approach such that one group of students focuses on the research, whilst another group of students consistently provides activities in local schools throughout each term.

We hope that this study will lay the foundation for a long-term collaboration between the University of Oxford and local schools to deliver extracurricular activities for local students, and that this may aid the broader strengthening of the partnership between the University and the community.

## Appendices

### *a) Information Sheet*

We are undergraduate students at the University of Oxford. This month, we have been working with the University's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Impact Lab to learn more about how the University can play a role in engaging with the local community and, in particular, local schools.

As part of this initiative, we have been delivering after-school clubs for children in primary and secondary schools in south-east Oxford. We want to learn about how after-school clubs can have a positive impact on children, improving their long-term outcomes. The intended aim is to create a long-lasting partnership between Oxford University and local schools, part of which will be the ongoing delivery of extracurricular activities for local pupils by Oxford University students.

You have been invited to participate in our research study, which has been reviewed and approved by the SDG Impact Lab. We are looking to hear from you to better understand the impact of after-school clubs. We will be asking questions in the form of interviews regarding your perceptions of the importance of extracurriculars. With your permission, we would transcribe the discussion and use anonymised quotes to inform our findings. We will bring an informed consent form to our interview if this is in-person, or send a digital copy through online before an online interview. We hope that this will allow us to learn from you, and develop a clearer picture of what is wanted by the local community in terms of afterschool clubs.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about our research project.

**b) Informed Consent Form**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our Laidlaw Scholars research project on extracurricular activities, in partnership with the Oxford SDG Impact Lab!

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you decide to discontinue participation or decline to answer any specific part of the study, you can do so at any time.

Please be assured that your responses will be anonymous.

All data collected within this study is held securely and anonymously according to the Data Protection Act of 2018.

Should you have any further questions about this study, please feel free to contact the study's Academic Research Supervisor: Sophia Stone (email - [sophia.stone@tss.ox.ac.uk](mailto:sophia.stone@tss.ox.ac.uk)). If you have any questions about the informed consent process of this research study or your rights as a subject, please contact Ruby-Anne, Programme Coordinator of the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme (email - [ruby-anne.birin@sjc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ruby-anne.birin@sjc.ox.ac.uk)).

CONSENT STATEMENT: I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby give my consent to participate in the research study entitled "How Might Extra-Curricular Activities Improve Educational and Social Outcomes." I have read the above information and am happy to proceed on this basis. I understand that my participation is on a voluntary, unpaid basis, and I may withdraw from this research project at any time without penalty. I also understand that I am free to ask questions about the research that will be undertaken.

I will sign and return this consent form and receive a copy of the form in case I need to refer back to it.

Finally, I understand that my views and perspectives gathered over the course of the study will be kept anonymous and cannot be traced back to me.

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's signature (18+ years of age)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

*c) Community-based stakeholders Interview: Topic Guide*

**Interview and Stakeholder Information:**

Stakeholder Type:	Location of interview:	Date and time:	Interviewers/ Note-takers
<b>About Stakeholder</b>			

**Topic Guide Questions - semi-structured**

<p><u>Section 1</u></p>	<p><u>Perceptions of Extra-curricular Activities</u></p> <p>Q1 - Do you think that extracurricular activities are valuable for the children you work with? Why in particular? Or why not in particular?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are they valuable for members of the community other than the children themselves? How so?</li> <li>- Nature of value - soft skills? Third space? Hard skills? (reading, maths, subject-specific)</li> </ul> <p>Q2 - What positive and negative experiences with extracurriculars have you and the children you've worked with had? What's worked well, and what's worked badly?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why? or Why not?</li> </ul>	<p>Objective 1 - <b>'Uncover perceptions of different extracurricular activities</b> held by various stakeholders in South East Oxford, namely community leaders, teachers and caregivers.'</p>
	<p>Note-taker notes/observations/ key quotes</p>	
<p><u>Section 2</u></p>	<p><u>Needs regarding Extra-curricular Activities</u></p>	<p>Objective 2 - <b>'Determine the perceived needs of</b></p>

	<p>Q3 - Which kinds of extracurricular activities are most important for children in the area, in your opinion?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why is that kind of activity important?</li> <li>- Is it the new skills they learn? The opportunity to have fun? Opportunity to socialise? Safe place to stay?</li> </ul> <p>Q4 - Do you think there are enough opportunities for local children to join extracurriculars? If so, what are the main obstacles to those children attending those activities?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Where do children usually attend extracurricular activities?</li> <li>- We came across a lack of sign-ups for some clubs (e.g. a story club). A teacher mentioned that if we ran a football club, we would have got more sign-ups.</li> <li>- How do social factors affect whether children attend extracurricular activities?</li> </ul>	<p><b>the local community</b> regarding extracurricular activities, in terms of desired long-term outcomes and required assistance to overcome barriers to uptake.'</p>
	<p>Note-taker notes/observations/ key quotes</p>	
<p><u>Section 3</u></p>	<p><u>University-Community Collaboration</u></p> <p>Q5 - What role, if any, could you see the University having in supporting you in the work you do and in ensuring that local children have access to the best opportunities and outcomes possible?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why or why not?</li> <li>- How would that look in practice?</li> <li>- Would you welcome a greater involvement by the University?</li> <li>- Role of Oxford University students</li> <li>- Perceptions of Oxford University in the community</li> </ul>	<p>Objective 3 - <b>'Lay the foundations for effective university-community collaboration</b> over an expanded longitudinal study through considered and ethical community engagement.'</p>
	<p>Note-taker notes/observations/ key quotes</p>	

d) *School-based stakeholders Interview: Topic Guide*

Stakeholder Type:	Location of interview:	Date and time:	Interviewers/ Note-takers
<b>About Stakeholder</b>			

**Topic Guide Questions - semi-structured**

<u>Section 1</u>	<p><u>Perceptions of Extra-curricular Activities</u></p> <p>Q1 - Do you think that extracurricular activities are valuable for students? Why in particular? Or why not in particular?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Valuable - soft skills? Hard skills (reading, maths, subject-specific)? For caregivers/ the community?</li> </ul>	Objective 1 - <b>‘Uncover perceptions of different extracurricular activities</b> held by various stakeholders in South East Oxford, namely community leaders, teachers and caregivers.’
	Note-taker notes/observations/key quotes	
<u>Section 2</u>	<p><u>Needs regarding Extra-curricular Activities</u></p> <p>Q2 - In an ideal world, which skills or tools would you like extracurricular activities to develop?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Which kinds of extracurricular activities are most important?</li> <li>- Why?</li> </ul> <p>Q3 - What prevents students currently from taking part in extracurriculars both in and out of school? Is it a lack of provision, or something else?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of resources/ financial barriers?</li> <li>- Time constraints, for caregivers especially?</li> <li>- Why do those barriers exist?</li> <li>- We came across a lack of sign-ups for some club activities like debating or a</li> </ul>	Objective 2 - <b>‘Determine the perceived needs of the local community</b> regarding extracurricular activities, in terms of desired long-term outcomes and required assistance to overcome barriers to uptake.’

	<p>story club. A teacher mentioned if we ran a football club, we would have many more students turning up.</p> <p>Q4 - 'Currently, many extracurricular activities taking place in schools are run by teachers volunteering their time. Where would you ideally like to see extracurricular activities take place, and who ideally would you like to see running those activities?'</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What extracurriculars are offered at the school currently? Who runs them?</li> <li>- Teachers - pay/ incentives? (Or too little time?)</li> <li>- Oxford University students in schools - opportunities? Concerns?</li> <li>- Outside provision - BLAP/ Leys CDI?</li> <li>- Specific challenges associated with clubs outside of schools? How to mitigate these?</li> <li>- Schools partnering with external providers?</li> </ul>	
	<p>Note-taker notes/observations/key quotes</p>	
<p><u>Section 3</u></p>	<p><u>University-Community Collaboration</u></p> <p>Q5 - What role would you like to see the University playing to help you to ensure that students receive the best education and enrichment opportunities possible?</p> <p><i>Probes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why or why not?</li> <li>- How would that look in practice?</li> <li>- Role of Oxford University students in schools</li> <li>- Perceptions of Oxford University in schools and communities</li> </ul>	<p>Objective 3 - <b>'Lay the foundations for effective university-community collaboration over an expanded longitudinal study through considered and ethical community engagement.'</b></p>
	<p>Note-taker notes/observations/key quotes</p>	

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