

# Laidlaw Scholars – Extracurricular School Programme

Title Recruitment, Retention, and Barriers: Understanding Student Volunteering at the University of Oxford

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Aim To identify and evaluate the methods that are most effective for volunteer recruitment and retention at Oxford University as well as the barriers that currently prevent students from volunteering.

SDGs Our project shall positively impact 4 goals:

- SDG3: good health and wellbeing
- SDG4: quality education
- SDG10: reduced inequalities
- SDG11: sustainable communities and cities

SDG4 shall be impacted as by evaluating volunteer recruitment efforts, we shall be able to increase the number of students who can volunteer towards extracurriculars which improve educational outcomes. This, in turn, shall work to deliver SDG3 and SDG10, whereby, increasing the quality of education and engaging in extracurriculars shall improve the health and wellbeing of pupils and volunteers, and providing a better educational system shall secure that current inequalities between schools in different areas are not exacerbated. Lastly, by establishing a link between the university and the schools SDG11 should be met, for we ensure that a larger number of students in Oxfordshire have access to better life outcomes securing a sustainable community and city

## Research Question:

Which methods are most effective for volunteer recruitment and retention at the University of Oxford, and what barriers currently prevent students from volunteering?

## Objectives (List Three)

Our research shall specifically:

### 1: Identify and evaluate current volunteering efforts

- A) Mapping and integrating the current avenues of student volunteering in Oxford.
- B) Identifying specific stakeholders/interview targets within the map: society leaders, access officers
- C) Designing and conducting interviews with them facilitate this and provide clarity on the current student volunteering initiatives or the potential avenues for volunteering.

### 2: Identify those barriers which affect student volunteering

- 1. Researching the conditions for effective volunteer recruitment and engagement:
- 2. Identifying barriers to volunteer motivation

### 3: Evaluate potential solutions for these impediments

- a) Supporting and improving (+launching new) volunteering opportunities for Oxford undergraduates. (including: making impact felt, creating safe + fulfilling volunteer community)
- b) Communicating with societies to see what they would be willing to offer: student body, specific services, time commitments, etc
- c) Recommending solutions to mitigate these barriers

## Rationale (250-500 words)

The project seeks to understand and address the challenges preventing Oxford university students from volunteering. This is particularly pertinent given the context of the Town and Gown divide, a systemic difficulty regarding the integration of university services with the needs of the local community. The student body's efforts to address this issue seem limited by time management, distance, pressure, and a lack of centralized framework. Meanwhile, schools within Oxfordshire remain limited by insufficient funds and educational disparities between sectors, unable to benefit from the university's wealth and

educational resources. Due to the inability to reconcile these two bodies, a number of potentially impactful avenues of volunteer interventions cannot emerge, leaving the town's needs unmet.

A gap currently exists in our knowledge regarding what exactly it is that impels students to volunteer. Moreover, even for those students who are enthusiastic about volunteering, we do not know what barriers are in place that prevent their enthusiasm from being instantiated.

There is also a lack of a centralised system that informs students of the different volunteering initiatives available to them, preventing those volunteering initiatives that do exist, to have as far an outreach as they might otherwise.

### Significance and Evidence (References in Bibliography)

This research is significant due to the stark inequality between the University of Oxford and the state school communities that surround it. In Oxfordshire, only 21.4% of Free School Meal (FSM) students move onto higher education, compared to a national average of 29%, and just 48% of their non-FSM peers in the county—emblematising both local and national disparities.<sup>1</sup> At high-tariff universities like Oxford, the gap is even wider: only 4.6% of FSM students progress, compared to 15.6% of non-FSM students.<sup>1</sup>

These inequities are entrenched within early education. Among 12 state schools in Oxfordshire, just 37.6% of children are expected to reach sufficient attainment in their Key Stage 2 exams. This underachievement has long-term effects—only 8% of students who don't meet this early benchmark go on to pass both GCSE English and Maths, key qualifications for university progression.<sup>2</sup>

Social and emotional factors further aggrandise these barriers. 10% of working-age adults in Oxfordshire report symptoms of mental health issues, and nationally, 1 in 5 individuals aged 8–25 were likely to have a mental health problem in 2023—a 12% increase since 2016.<sup>3</sup> Mental health challenges are deeply connected to educational outcomes, affecting sleep, school readiness, attendance, and academic performance. These effects are disproportionately felt by students from lower-income households,

who are four times more likely to experience mental health problems than their more affluent peers.<sup>3</sup>

The impact extends beyond the classroom: a quarter of children aged 8 to 16 with mental health issues have a parent unable to afford out-of-school activities—limiting access to vital co-curricular enrichment.<sup>4</sup>

Together, these findings evince a striking “town and gown” divide. While Oxford University propels many students up the socioeconomic ladder, local students face compounding structural disadvantages tethering their potential. Such divide underscores the urgent need for deeper collaboration between the University and local state schools, rendering it imperative to mobilise university resources to uplift broader Oxfordshire.

### Contribution.

Our research shall specifically:

1. Identify and evaluate current volunteering efforts
2. Identify those barriers which affect student volunteering
3. Evaluate potential solutions for these impediments

Through (1) we both render it possible to establish some form of centralised system to increase the accessibility of volunteering whilst also assessing what *types* of efforts students are most drawn to. (2) and (3) shall work in tandem to identify how exactly we might call upon more students to assist with volunteer programme efforts for schools throughout Oxford, subsequently increasing the educational outcomes and reducing the town and gown divide within Oxfordshire.

### Bibliography for evidence:

1. Department for Education (2024). *Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2022/23*. [online] Service.gov.uk. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23>. [Accessed: 03/07/2025]

2. Oxford (2023). Oxford Hub. [online] Oxford Hub. Available at: <https://www.oxfordhub.org/schools-plus-twinning> [Accessed 3 Jul. 2025].

3. Children and Young People's Mental Health A stitch in time: Supporting the mental wellbeing of young people today to improve their prospects for tomorrow. (n.d.). Available at: [https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s75728/CC20250401R09%20Director%20of%20Public%20Health%20Report%202024\\_2025.pdf](https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s75728/CC20250401R09%20Director%20of%20Public%20Health%20Report%202024_2025.pdf). [Accessed 10/07/2025]

4. Gilyeat, D. (2025). Children's mental health 'worse in deprived Oxfordshire areas'. BBC News. [online] 2 Apr. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c7vn6821e6eo>. [Accessed 03/07/2025]

## Stakeholder Mapping:

Identify at least three key stakeholders for your research. Stakeholders are people/groups who are affected by your topic or can help with your research.

Stakeholder	Why they're relevant to your topic	How you'll engage them	What you need from them
University Society leaders	Potential for volunteer engagement + awareness of barriers	Interviews + proposals to help them alleviate barriers We shall contact through email and/or connections we have with any society. We shall also leverage the student union.	Knowledge/response + being open to our proposals next year

<p><b>University Society members</b></p>	<p>Potential avenue for volunteer recruitment</p>	<p>We can actively engage members of various societies by inviting them to volunteer and contribute to our co-curricular initiatives, leveraging their specific areas of expertise.</p>	<p>By mapping these societies into distinct categories (such as Sports, Culture, Drama, etc.), we can strategically mobilize them to support and enrich our programs within their respective fields. This targeted approach will not only enhance the quality of our initiatives.</p>
<p><b>College and University Access directors/bodies</b></p>	<p>Experience in outreach and volunteer engagement/retention</p>	<p>Interviews, surveys, what data do they have, how do they work with their linked schools</p>	<p>Key learnings from their experience - what works, what doesn't work (by engaging with successful and not so successful colleges)</p>
<p><b>Primary school pupils</b></p>	<p>The individuals who we wish to engage and assist by our extracurriculars.</p>	<p>Shall engage with them indirectly through students and quantitative tracking of results.</p>	<p>Not much for our specific question. Mainly possible time commitments and also methods of extracurriculars that work well (so we can effectively mobilise student body)</p>
<p><b>University Admissions Office</b></p>	<p>-example of a centralised system of access/volunteering within the university that is successful</p>	<p>-Interviews -(potential) proposal for more engagement</p>	<p>-possibly their own lit reviews/published papers they may have on this issue -advice and experience with increasing student engagement in the wider community</p>

	-understand the barriers involved	within the community -	-good contact for possible funding/ legislation change within the university -maybe how they've developed
<b>Potential donors/funders</b> <b>Note: For future years</b>	Could potentially remove financial/time barriers for students seeking to volunteer	In the long term -> Once research has been established about specific boundaries, we or future cohorts shall be able to reach out to funds directly with propositions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monetary resources</li> <li>2. Resources and connections to broaden engagement with the wider community</li> </ol>
<b>University leadership</b>	Knowledge of the broader disparate opportunities in the university; could help advertise a unified volunteering system next year; could help fund/remove barriers	Initial contact Case by case proposals	Depends on our conclusions/recommendations. Potentially: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Vouching for our proposals / advertising them</li> </ul>
<b>Alexander Betts (Pro-Vice Chancellor for External Engagement)</b>	As Pro-Vice-Chancellor, he is responsible for the University's global, national, and local engagement, and its sport strategy.	Should be willing to work with us since he supports the Lab. Shall aim to email from Ruby-Anne.	Synthesis of information about the university's current outreach efforts, to be included in the map of volunteer initiatives

# Research Methods:

Our qualitative and quantitative split is:

## Quantitative

### Survey of University Students

- Timing: Distributed by Week 3
- Distribution Channels: College JCRs, mailing lists, societies
- Content:
  - Demographics and background
  - Previous volunteer experience
  - Identified barriers (e.g., time, awareness, access)
  - Responses to potential solutions (e.g., incentives, structural changes)

### Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics (frequency of barriers)
- Cross-tabulations by demographic factors
- Comparisons between volunteers and non-volunteers
- Shall triangulate data (survey, interviews, literature, and institutional data from societies and colleges) to increase accuracy.

## Qualitative

- Semi-structured Interviews with key stakeholders, including:
  - Volunteering Organizations (e.g., Oxford Hub, student societies)
  - College Representatives from both:
    - Colleges with strong access and volunteer engagement (e.g., Jesus, Brasenose)
    - Colleges with weaker access records (e.g., New, Hugh's)
  - Students (both volunteers and non-volunteers; pre/post involvement)
  - Academics researching volunteer motivation and retention
  - Note: A purposive sampling strategy will be used to select stakeholders based on relevance to student volunteering, while survey sampling will aim for representation across college types and demographic groups
- Timing: Conducted throughout Weeks 2–5
- Recruitment: Via personal contacts, JCRs, and systematic outreach
- Output: Thematic analysis to identify recurring insights and barriers
- Literature Review:
  - Focus areas:
    - Volunteer retention frameworks
    - Motivational psychology in student volunteering
    - Evaluated interventions from similar university contexts

In detail for each outcome – **outcomes in red:**

**1. Identify and evaluate current volunteering efforts**

Method: listing personal contacts + systematically searching university websites for relevant contacts (college JCRs, Society Heads, Volunteering Organisers)

Compiling an excel document with these various contacts and reaching out to individuals of interest (those who have access to volunteers and the wider university community) to either send surveys or be called in for interviews regarding their current efforts – also asking society leaders for metrics (how many people have volunteered, etc).

**2. Identify those barriers which affect student volunteering**

**a) Researching the conditions for effective volunteer recruitment and engagement:**

- Step 1: Evaluating the accounts of volunteer motivation through a literature review of existing frameworks
- Step 2: Understanding the characteristics of student volunteers and non-volunteers through interviews with leaders of societies and access officers from colleges
- Step 3: Testing the insights empirically by sending out a broad survey through the college JCRs

**b) Identifying barriers to volunteer motivation**

- Step 1: identifying potential barriers through the interviews
- Step 2: Comparing/weighing their significance through a section of the survey sent out by the JCRs

**3. Evaluate potential solutions for these impediments**

Do an analysis of programs with higher participation rates to identify whether they have some shared features other programs are missing.

In interviews and surveys ask which of our proposals would help them volunteer (example: free transportation, reduced time commitment etc)

Use data from number 2 to identify what issues most need to be solved and structure solutions around that – researching into literature designed to circumvent these issues.

Time Management:

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University Engagement

Project start: **Tue, 7/1/2025**  
 Display week: **1**

