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

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Abstract:

This research investigates the relationship between student volunteering at the University of Oxford and educational inequality in the local state school system. While existing literature has explored the theoretical value of university civic engagement and established its ability to meaningfully contribute to addressing disadvantage, few studies have examined exactly how to impel volunteering within a local context. The current landscape of student volunteering in Oxford is decentralised, with limited coordination, evaluation, or strategic alignment with the needs of local schools. This project addresses this gap by systematically mapping existing efforts, identifying barriers to student participation, and assessing viable interventions to enhance both the scale and impact of volunteering. Bridging this gap is crucial for satisfying the United Nations SDG Goals: primarily, SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities), and furthermore SDG11 (sustainable communities and cities) by alleviating the friction between the University and broader Oxfordshire and SDG3(good health and wellbeing) for volunteering increases the wellbeing of both program participants and volunteers themselves. Through surveys, interviews with access directors, and focus groups with students, we employ a mixed methods approach to understand how university resources might be more effectively mobilised to support educational equity. Our findings aim to inform the development of a more accessible and coordinated volunteering infrastructure within Oxford University, thereby contributing to both academic scholarship on student volunteering and practical efforts to reduce local inequalities.

Introduction:

Oxford is frequently regarded as a symbol of educational excellence, yet the city simultaneously exemplifies one of the UK's starkest socioeconomic divides (Oxford City Council, 2023). In Oxfordshire, only 21.4% of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) progress to higher education, in contrast to 48% of their non-FSM peers and a national FSM average of 29% (DfE, 2024). Access to elite universities reveals an even wider divide: just 4.6% of FSM students in Oxfordshire enter institutions like Oxford, compared to 15.6% of non-FSM students (DfE, 2024). These disparities raise pressing questions about the role and responsibility of elite universities in addressing local deprivation (Marginson, 2011). This is particularly relevant to universities which occupy a dominant position within their civic context and possess both material resources and talented human capital who may be willing to address this issue.

Beyond academic metrics, health and wellbeing, and household income are key dimensions of educational inequality, with mental health challenges and financial barriers compounding disadvantage in Oxfordshire (Oxfordshire County Council, 2024). Financial precarity also restricts participation in co-curricular enrichment: 25% of children with mental health challenges live in households unable to afford out-of-school activities (BBC News, 2025). These intersecting challenges of educational underachievement, mental health strain, and material deprivation create significant disadvantage.

Despite this, Oxford University's engagement remains fragmented, with a limited relationship between the university's students and surrounding state school communities. The University of Oxford is composed of colleges, permanent private halls (PPHs), and a few societies. These are semi-autonomous units each with their own governing bodies, traditions, accommodation, and community. (Oxford University, 2025). Students become members of a particular college (or hall) in addition to being members of the University as a whole. The college provides much of the pastoral care, accommodation, and plays a significant role in teaching undergraduates through tutorials. Lectures, laboratories, examinations, and many departmental functions are organised at the University level. (Oxford University, 2025). The University has approximately 26,000 students in total. As of December 2024, there were about 12,375 undergraduate students and 13,650 postgraduate students. (Oxford University, 2025) The University comprises 39 colleges and 4 permanent private halls (Oxford University, 2018). The colleges are responsible for admitting students (especially undergraduates) and are bound by a common admissions framework to ensure fairness across colleges.

While some individual students and societies engage in volunteer efforts such as tutoring, mentoring, or enrichment activities, a lack of coordination and institutional support constrains both the scale and sustainability of these initiatives. Literature on student volunteering confirms similar dynamics in other elite university contexts, where prestige-driven governance and decentralised structures often deprioritise local civic engagement (Holdsworth, 2010; Macmillan, 2011). Research by Francis (2011), and more recently by Arnon et al. (2022), suggests that structural support is essential for broadening participation, shifting the focus away from individual motivations. Brewis et al. (2010) similarly argues that without institutional incentives or infrastructure, volunteering remains limited to a motivated minority. Yet, most existing studies tend to focus either on the individual benefits of volunteering or on external outcomes, such as improved educational attainment among recipients (Handy et al., 2010; Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014), neglecting the process of an agent successfully being recruited to volunteer and remaining engaged with their program.

There is a societal trend to treat student volunteering as a discrete, individualised activity, rather than analysing it as a function of institutional culture, governance, and priorities. In the case of Oxford, these issues are compounded by the collegiate structure, which fragments responsibility and creates significant variation in the opportunities and support available to students across colleges. This project addresses that gap by investigating both the current landscape of student-led educational volunteering in Oxford and the structural, normative, and logistical barriers that limit broader engagement through a mixed methods approach. Specifically, we seek to answer the

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

This research thus pursues three specific objectives. First, to identify and evaluate existing volunteering efforts connecting Oxford students to local schools. This includes mapping the range, frequency, and perceived efficacy of these activities. Second, to investigate the barriers that restrict student participation: ranging from a lack of time and information to insufficient institutional support. Third, to assess and suggest potential solutions to these barriers, including the development of a centralised platform or system designed to coordinate and facilitate volunteering opportunities. By synthesising survey data from over 200 students, interviews with local access professionals and charity leaders, and focus groups, this research seeks to inform practical recommendations for scaling up student volunteering in a sustainable and equitable manner. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the improvement of local educational outcomes while addressing the structural inequality between the University and the wider Oxfordshire community. By focusing on Oxford, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how elite universities can move beyond symbolic engagement towards structured, sustained civic action that addresses local inequality.

Methods:

This research employed mixed methods to investigate current student engagement in college access and outreach programmes, such as student tours, open days and school visits; as well as understanding the barriers that both colleges and students may face in being involved within the local co-curricular programmes in state schools. This work engaged two different stakeholders, first access directors and secondly Oxford University students across all divisions and degrees. We designed stakeholder specific online surveys through a snowball sampling methodology. This included sending informal messages student societies we are part of as well as emailing 42 colleges – including their respective graduate Middle common rooms (MCRs) and undergraduate Junior Common Rooms (JCRs). We engaged access directors through a similar method by contacting an access director to share through their network as well as following up via email specifically to colleges who haven't answered- allowing us to get results from both college access directors and faculties. Through the student survey and access directors – we followed up on the respondents who indicated they'd be willing to participate in focus groups and semi-structed interviews respectively. This resulted in two focus groups of two students and 4 semi-structured interviews with access directors.

1.1 Online surveys

In the online survey, we used a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. We created a robust guide for respondents using closed-ended questions, allowing for easy analyses and to reduce cognitive load (McLafferty et.al 2023). These form of questions fall into a limited set of answers that we have created, this allows for easier analysis of the quantitative data which can be used for statistical analysis (Fink,2013). Despite the limited nature of close-ended questions we included an "Other" option that allowed us to gather more expansive responses (McLafferty et.al 2023). The open-ended questions allowed respondents to go more in depth in specific topics (Table 1). The respondents weren't constrained by a set of answers, in comparison to closed questions, and were given the space to represent their true opinions on the questions asked. This also generated qualitative data that could be analysed with qualitative methodologies such as thematic analysis (McLafferty et.al 2023). Overall, utilising online surveys were useful as they allowed for us to access a more broad and diverse sample group efficiently, using minimal time and to no cost.

Table 1: Survey topic identification (refer to Appendix B and Appendix A for the surveys)

Topic	Stakeholders	Open questions	Closed questions
Barriers	Students	Section 5: 2	Section 3: 4 Section 4: 1
	Access directors	Section 3: 5	Section 1: 5
Demographics of student population	Students		Section 1: 1,2,3,4
	Access directors		Section 1: 1,2,3,4
Volunteering efforts and retention	Students	Section 3: 1 Section 5: 1	Section 2: 1,2 Section 3: 2,3
	Access directors		Section 1: 2,3 Section 4: 1,3
Solutions to barriers/ effectiveness	Students		Section 3 : 2
	Access	Section 2 Section 3 Section 4:3	Section 4: 1,2

1.2 Semi-structured interviews & Focus group

To further explore the barriers and potential solutions to volunteering we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups. For the focus groups, we followed up on students who indicated they'd be willing to participate resulting in two focus groups of two students. For the semi-structured interviews we followed up on access directors who had interesting answers that we wanted to further explore from those who indicated as well. While in the focus group we kept our questions consistent, we tailored our questions for the access directors as to get further insight. The use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews offered a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing for a more relaxed conversation with the interviewer steering the conversation back to the research question (Dunn,2021). The interviews were all conducted online, as this allowed us to overcome the logistical spatial, temporal and social barriers that would affect the ability of respondents to do face-to-face interviews (Dunn, 2021, pg177). This was especially important as most students have left Oxford, during the long summer break , so we used online focus groups as a way to bring geographically dispersed students together (Cameron, 2021). In the interview we also assured anonymity where asked, and ensured the data was only handled within the research group.

1.3 Coding

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews, surveys, and focus groups were coded to allow analysis and reduction of data (Cope, 2021). A combination of inductive and deductive approaches was used: inductive analysis was applied to the access director interviews transcripts, while deductive analysis was used for all the qualitative data. One researcher conducted the inductive thematic analysis manually, developing a codebook through an iterative process of identifying patterns and themes within the data. This involved iteratively reviewing the data to find emerging themes and codes.

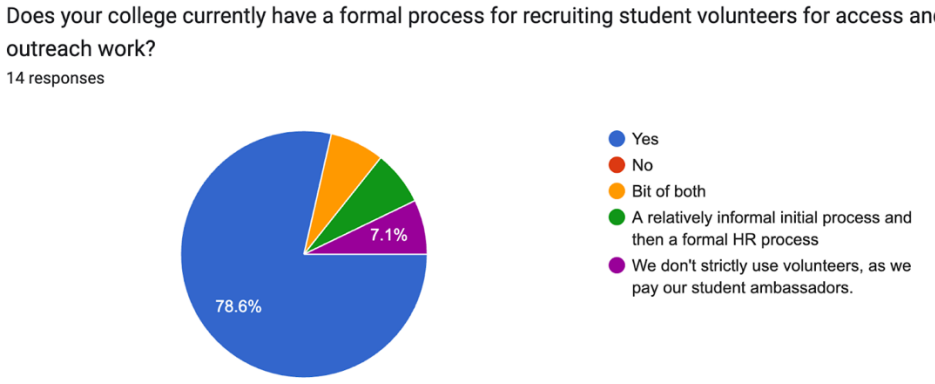
For the deductive analysis, another researcher used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to search for themes within the data that we had previously identified - with NVivo being chosen for its efficiency and consistency in handling large amounts of data (Cope, 2021). The qualitative analysis software was used to produce word-maps and verify themes. Manual coding was also utilized to allow for more deeper understanding of the data and to enable the researcher to create themes and codes. The use of both these methods and having two researchers code independently increases reliability as there's a common interpretation of data present this reduces the chance of confirmation bias (Cope, 2021)

Results:

Quantitative Results: Access Director Survey

Fourteen access directors from thirteen colleges and one faculty responded to a separate survey, representing approximately 30% of all Oxford colleges. Most access directors recruit student volunteers through formal channels (85.7%), with one indicating reliance on paid ambassadors instead of volunteers.

Aggregate responses to question 2 of the Access Director Survey



Email outreach was the most commonly used recruitment strategy (78.6%), followed by JCR/MCR promotion (64.3%), physical media (50.0%), and word-of-mouth (42.9%). Social media, Freshers' Fairs, and internal college platforms were also used to a lesser extent.

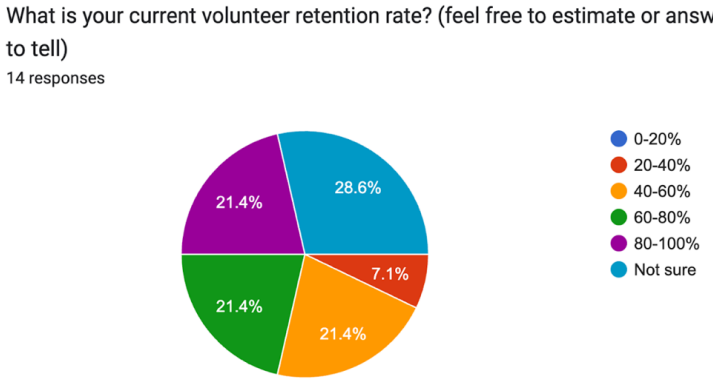
10 respondents identified trends in volunteer engagement: students from comprehensive schools are the most likely to volunteer (71.4%), followed by grammar school and first-generation students (50.0%). Independent school (21.4%) and international students (7.1%) were seen as less represented. This data reflects the experiences of access directors, though they do not usually collect it formally.

In line with student responses, access directors overwhelmingly cited time constraints (92.9%) as the primary barrier to student engagement. Other barriers included lack of incentives (42.9%),

confidence or experience (28.6%), limited awareness (21.4%), and logistical or scheduling difficulties (14.3%).

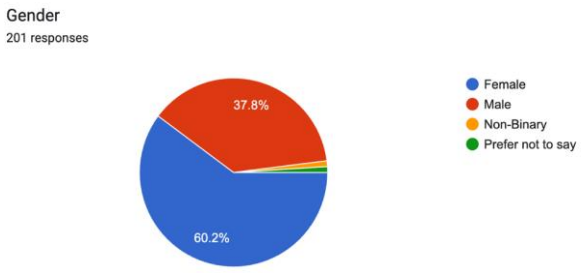
To promote retention, 92.9% of directors offer paid opportunities, while 78.6% use flexible scheduling and forms of recognition. Certificates, social elements, and celebratory events (e.g., dinners, gift packs) were also noted. While a few directors were unsure about exact retention rates, most estimated them between 40–100%. Only 1 responder considered their volunteer system "not very effective."'

Aggregate responses to one question 12 of the Access Director Survey

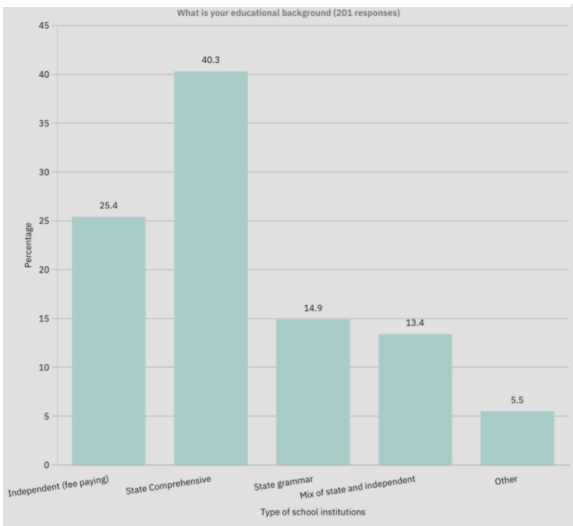


Quantitative Results: Student Survey

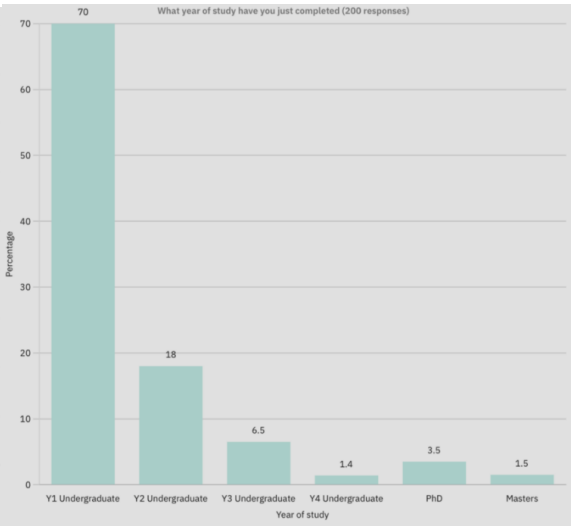
A total of 201 students from 23 Oxford colleges responded to the survey. The sample was broadly representative in terms of educational background and gender, with the majority of respondents in their first year of study.



Gender distribution among student survey respondents



Educational background of respondents

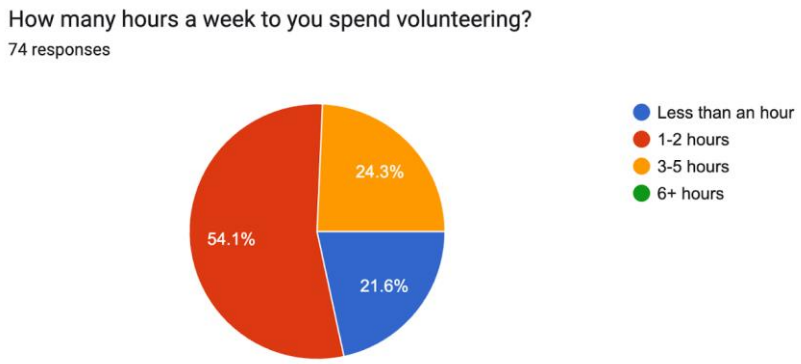


Year of study of respondents

Of the total respondents, 91.0% reported having volunteered prior to university, whereas only 36.8% continued volunteering while at Oxford. Among current volunteers, 66.2% identified as having attended state schools exclusively.

The primary barrier to volunteering, as identified by both volunteers and non-volunteers, was academic workload or lack of time: reported by 92.9% and 94.6% of respondents, respectively. The second most cited barrier among non-volunteers was a lack of awareness of available opportunities (65.9%), followed by logistical challenges such as transport (26.2%) and financial constraints (23.8%). Other barriers included concerns over impact (14.3%), low confidence (11.1%), and disinterest (11.1%).

Among students who had volunteered, secondary barriers included lack of awareness (35.1%), transport difficulties (32.4%), costs (31.1%), and a lack of continuity or structural clarity in opportunities (1.4%). Notably, 0% of respondents indicated volunteering more than 6 hours per week. Most students volunteered between 1–2 hours (54.1%), with 24.3% giving 3–5 hours and 21.6% contributing less than an hour weekly.



Aggregate responses to question 9 of the student survey

Motivations to volunteer were largely altruistic: 89.2% of respondents expressed a desire to "give back," followed by passion for a particular cause (64.9%). Career-related motivations such as CV development were cited by 48.6%, while 29.7% mentioned the social aspects. Additional motivations included religious obligations, skill development, and institutional bursary requirements (e.g., Crankstart).

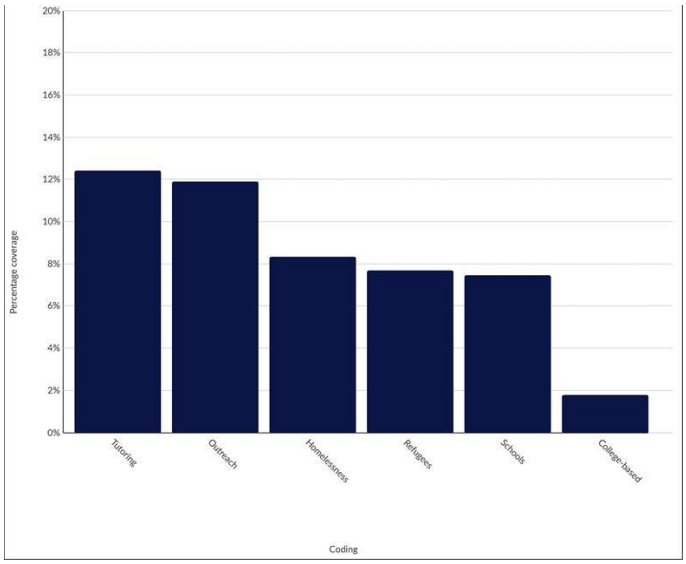
Qualitative Results: Freeform Survey Responses

Three open-ended questions provide qualitative data from 70 students. These responses provided depth on the types of volunteering students engage in, the resources they could mobilize, and general reflections on their experiences and attitudes.

1. Activities (63 responses)

Responses clustered into six broad categories, with tutoring/mentoring and college-based outreach being the most frequently cited. Students also contributed to community-oriented work, supporting refugees, addressing homelessness, or running creative sessions in local schools. Others engaged in college-based volunteering such as library support, gardening, and event organization.

Principal categories of volunteering activities for Oxford students



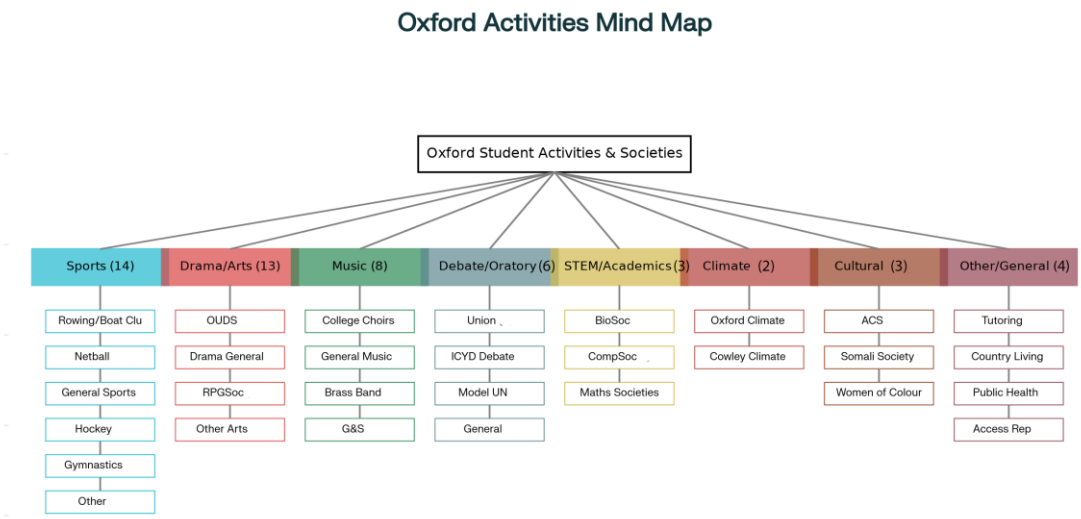
2. Common Themes

Word frequency analysis revealed dominant themes of education and institutional structures, with frequent mentions of "mentoring," "tutoring," "access," "college," and "kids." These evince both the scope of activity and students' perceived alignment of their skills with outreach to younger pupils.

3. Organizations

Three organizations appeared frequently:

- **Asylum Welcome**: A local charity supporting asylum seekers.
- **Zero Gravity**: A remote mentoring scheme for disadvantaged school students.
- **ISOC (Oxford University Islamic Society)**: Incorporates food distribution and community initiatives into its regular programming.



4. Student Skills and Resources

Students were asked whether they belonged to university or college societies that could contribute skills to community engagement (n=70). The responses included societies covering music, drama, coding, debating, sports, and tutoring, suggesting a broad and underutilised volunteer potential.

Mapping these society affiliations reveals a latent infrastructure for co-curricular engagement that could be activated to reach local schoolchildren through outreach projects

Qualitative Results: Student Reflections (n=53)

Responses to the final open-ended question provided insight into student perceptions of volunteering's challenges and possible solutions.

Barriers

Time pressure was the most common theme—described not just as workload, but as the unpredictability of Oxford's term structure. Students frequently cited their inability to make commitments in advance, especially with fluctuating academic obligations.

"My schedule is sometimes just up in the air… so I can't really book myself in." [Focus Group]

Focus group analysis revealed 16 separate mentions of time pressure, far exceeding other barriers such as awareness (4 mentions). Safety concerns, not captured in the survey, also emerged in this setting. Logistical costs and transport, frequently cited in survey data, did not arise in focus group discussions.

Lack of Awareness

Students described the volunteering ecosystem as "opaque" or overwhelming. Many relied on social cues and recommendations rather than institutional channels to find opportunities. This indicates a tight coupling between student culture and the accessibility of volunteering information.

Solutions

Focus group participants emphasized the need for flexible, low-commitment roles. Suggested solutions included better integration of volunteering into student societies and clearer communication from colleges or departments.

Discussion:

Data Source Reference Table:
To facilitate clarity in linking analysis with sources, the following abbreviation system is used throughout this discussion:

Key	Data Source
SS.NUM	Student Survey Quantitative Data (n=201)
ADS	Access Director Survey (n=14)
ADI	Access Director Interviews (n=4; College 1, College 2, College 3, Faculty 1)
SFG	Student Focus Groups (n=2 groups, 4 students)
SS.QUAL	Student Survey: Qualitative Free-Form Responses (n=70 open-ended answers)

a. Introduction to Findings

Analysis of all 5 sources reveal that student volunteering at Oxford is shaped by a complex interplay of structural constraints, motivational drivers, and institutional contexts. While the student body demonstrates high levels of enthusiasm and a strong pre-university track record of volunteering (91% reporting prior engagement compared to only 36.8% during university [SS.NUM]) we find that this civic potential remains constrained by Oxford's distinctive academic rhythms, decentralised structures, and uneven institutional practices.
The data converge on several interrelated findings:

- **Sustained altruistic commitment**: Students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, frequently articulate volunteering as an ethical responsibility or act of reciprocity [SS.NUM, SFG, SS.QUAL].
- **Persistent structural barriers**: Time scarcity, fragmented information channels, and inconsistent onboarding processes impede participation at every stage [SS.NUM, ADS, ADI, SFG, SS.QUAL].
- **Social embeddedness as an enabler**: Peer networks, friendship groups, and society affiliations strongly influence awareness and uptake [SFG, SS.QUAL].
- **Divergent institutional models**: Colleges vary significantly in their approach to recruitment, training, and support, reflecting distinct philosophies, resources, and degrees of administrative autonomy [ADS, ADI].

The following sections examine each of these domains in depth, interrogating how they shape recruitment, retention, and the lived experience of volunteering at Oxford.

b. Student Motivations and Values

In Oxfordshire, volunteering seems to be driven primarily by altruistic motives. In the student survey, 89.2% cited "giving back" as a primary reason for engaging, and 64.9% reported being passionate about a particular cause [SS.NUM]. This motivation was reinforced in focus groups, where many participants cited outreach experiences they had benefited from before attending Oxford [SFG].

> "We wouldn't be where we are without the help of so many people." [SFG] *[Focus group participant]*

These narratives were especially common among state-educated and first-generation students [SS.NUM, SFG]. Students framed volunteering not as charity, but as reciprocity; an ethic of participation rooted in social justice rather than personal benefit.

Only 48.6% mentioned career development, and just 10.9% cited course credit [SS.NUM]. This suggests that Oxford students are driven less by instrumentalism than by a genuine desire to support others. While social desirability bias may affect self-reporting[1] (Cappellari & Turati, 2004), the consistency of both quantitative and qualitative data sources strengthens the conclusion that civic responsibility is internalised across many respondents.

This contravenes the common motivational dualism posited by Handy et al. (2010) and Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen (1991), indicating that Oxford students may prioritise ethical engagement over personal gain in volunteering contexts. Interestingly, nationwide mixed-methods studies (Holdsworth, 2010) suggest that employability and skills development usually play a slightly higher role than values and service in motivating university students to volunteer. Oxford undergraduates, then, run counter the general UK trend by focusing less on developing their employability, and more on impact-oriented volunteering activities. Consequently, to recruit student volunteers in Oxfordshire, there must be a clear ethical imperative

c. Structural and Institutional Barriers

The most prominent barrier to student volunteering is time pressure, cited by 92.9% of non-volunteers and 94.6% of active volunteers [SS.NUM] and equally emphasised by 92.9% of Access Directors [ADS]. This affirms Holdsworth & Brewis (2014) and Hustinx et al. (2010) who similarly underscore time scarcity as a major obstacle to civic engagement in elite institutions.

Focus groups revealed that the issue is not merely about actual hours available and more about unpredictability and perceived inflexibility:

> "I find it quite hard to dedicate any time to anything for an extended period… I know it's going to be volatile." [SFG] *[Focus group participant]*

This distinction is critical for it reveals volunteering as not necessarily too time-consuming but rather as too rigid, with Oxford's compressed eight-week terms and intensive academic culture demanding a level of scheduling adaptability that most volunteering opportunities, as currently offered, are unable to accommodate.

This supports Arnon's (2022) model of "volunteer engageability," which outlines time, training, support, and managerial flexibility as the four key pillars of participation —on which Oxford's decentralised system performs unevenly. Students frequently described the need to navigate multiple, disconnected bodies to find roles, with no centralised portal:

> "Volunteering in Oxford is really poorly handled by the central uni (as alot of things are). I feel like there should be a portal on MyOxford about it or just something so students can access it." [SFG] *[Focus group participant]*

Lack of awareness was cited by 65.9% of non-volunteers [SS.NUM] and surfaced frequently in open responses and focus groups [SFG, SS.QUAL]. The absence of a centralised platform leads students to rely on informal communication via JCR reps or word-of-mouth, creating a fragmented information ecosystem.

> "I think they tend to get drowned out in the sea of societies available, so I don't even hear about volunteering opportunities" [SFG] *[Focus group participant]*

Administrative hurdles further compound these structural barriers. Safeguarding requirements, particularly mandatory training and DBS checks were repeatedly cited as time-intensive deterrents [ADI,SFG,SS.QUAL]. Interestingly, the relationship between bureaucracy and engagement is not

[1] See Limitations

linear. Colleges with more informal systems, like College 1, reported high volunteer numbers despite a lack of structured onboarding [ADI]. However, these models did tend to lack sustainability and clarity: volunteer drop-off rates are higher, and institutional memory is often weak. More formalised models, such as those at College 2 or College 3, introduce clearer expectations and support but can appear exclusionary or overwhelming without sufficient cultural integration [ADI].

This tension—between flexibility and formality, autonomy and consistency—is one of the central dilemmas facing volunteer coordination at Oxford. Informality can foster accessibility and spontaneity, but risks disorganization and inequality of access. Structure can enhance support and equity, but risks alienating students already preoccupied by academic commitments. A successful model must balance these dynamics: minimising administrative burden while preserving standards and ensuring inclusive access.

Moreover, these structural barriers are not evenly distributed across the student population. The costs associated with volunteering, whether financial (transport, meals) or temporal (lengthy onboarding) [SS.NUM], can disproportionately affect students from lower-income backgrounds. The fact that students from comprehensive schools and first-generation university backgrounds are among the most motivated to volunteer [ADS, SS.QUAL] raises the stakes for reform. Without attention to these structural issues, the university risks inadvertently excluding the very students most committed to civic contribution.

d. The Role of Social Infrastructure

Despite student volunteering being inhibited by structural barriers, social infrastructure offers potential to still act as an encouraging factor for participation. Focus group participants [SFG] and the survey qualitative responses [SS.QUAL] repeatedly emphasised the importance of peer networks and socially embedded routes in engaging participation:

> "I don't know someone, or I don't feel like I have a familiar base of contact to come to." [SFG]

This aligns with Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice and Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital, both of which suggest that social ties foster civic participation.

Qualitative data further revealed that successful organizations often capitalise on social embeddedness, spreading through *horizontal diffusion*. ISOC and Zero Gravity were frequently cited for their familiarity, flexibility, and peer-led structure [SS.QUAL].

However, this reliance on informal networks has limits. It privileges students with strong social embeddedness and leaves others—particularly international students, freshers, or those outside dominant social circles—vulnerable to exclusion

In institutional terms, College 3's ambassador model illustrates a hybrid approach: it leverages peer mentorship and informal familiarity but is embedded within a structured support system [ADI].

> "one of their (Senior Ambassador's) big responsibilities is promoting volunteering amongst the student body, so that's made a huge difference." [ADI]

New volunteers are paired with experienced student mentors, reducing the intimidation of first-time participation while maintaining training, oversight, and impact tracking. This example demonstrates the importance of *scaffolded sociality* - where informal peer networks are supported, but not replaced, by institutional frameworks. The most effective models appear to blend *bottom-up* social motivation with *top-down* infrastructural support.

e. Institutional Culture and Strategy

Interviews with access directors revealed a spectrum of philosophies underpinning volunteer coordination. College 1 adopts a mass-participation, low-formality model, relying on community

spirit and minimal bureaucratic requirements. This aligns with a belief that reducing administrative friction will maximise uptake, particularly among students with higher state-school representation [ADI].

By contrast, College 2 and 3 operate structured, resource-intensive programmes, incorporating paid ambassador roles, targeted recruitment, and comprehensive training. Access Director 2 (College 2) acknowledges culture as central to strategy:

> "If your theory of change doesn't include culture, you're missing 90% of the sky." [ADI]

The financial autonomy of College 3 enables direct mitigation of structural barriers through transport funding, meal provision, and stipends [ADI]. These measures address Taylor's (2004) concern that reliance on unpaid labour in elite institutions can entrench inequalities by privileging students with greater financial security.

Moreover, word-frequency analysis of student responses [SS.QUAL] underscores the influence of the collegiate environment on volunteering opportunities and uptake. Effective retention strategies may therefore require either engaging each college individually or establishing a robust central system that operates independently of college structures. In either case, sustaining volunteer commitment appears contingent on cultivating an inclusive culture in which students perceive autonomy, tangible impact, and personal safety [SFG].

f. Toward a Scalable Volunteer Ecosystem

The findings indicate the need for an **ecosystem model**—one that integrates the enabling conditions of peer-led volunteering with the stability, equity, and safeguarding of institutional oversight. This model would need to address three central tensions:

1. **Flexibility vs. Structure** – Students value ad-hoc, low-commitment opportunities, yet retention and quality often require sustained engagement.

2. **Collegiate Autonomy vs. Central Coordination** – College-led initiatives provide tailored cultural fit, but the absence of a central system fragments information and access.

3. **Intrinsic Motivation vs. Material Support** – Students are strongly values-driven, but financial and logistical incentives are essential to ensuring broad participation across socioeconomic backgrounds.

Drawing on these tensions, the following recommendations aim to realise the substantial volunteering potential of the University:

- **Centralised Infrastructure** – Establish a university-wide volunteering portal, integrated into MyOxford, with a curated list of opportunities, clear time commitments, onboarding steps, and points of contact. This would tackle the persistent awareness gap [SS.NUM, SFG, SS.QUAL].

- **Flexible Roles** – Develop "micro-volunteering" formats that allow meaningful engagement in under two hours per week, accommodating unpredictable workloads [SS.NUM, SFG].

- **Peer-Led Models with Institutional Backing** – Embed volunteering within existing student societies and JCR/MCR structures, ensuring each is paired with trained coordinators for safeguarding and support [ADI, SS.QUAL].

- **Equity-Based Support** – Provide bursaries, travel reimbursements, and meal stipends for volunteers, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds [SS.NUM, ADS, ADI].

- **Recognition and Cultural Integration** – Formalise awards, certificates, and public recognition of volunteer contributions, making volunteering part of the visible student identity [SFG, SS.QUAL].

- **Collegiate-Society Partnerships** – Leverage societies' pre-existing networks and enthusiasm—e.g., drama groups offering workshops in schools, coding clubs running sessions for local youth—to create low-barrier, skills-based outreach [SS.QUAL].

These proposals aim to create a more coherent, accessible, and socially just volunteering landscape at Oxford that matches students' values with institutional support and community impact.

Limitations:

This study is, however, subject to several limitations across its methodological design, sampling procedures, and data sources. While the triangulation of student surveys, access director responses, and qualitative interviews enhances the richness of the findings, each method introduces constraints upon both internal and external validity.

1. Sampling Constraints and Response Bias

The student survey achieved 201 responses, equivalent to less than 1% of the University of Oxford's student population (approximately 26,000), limiting generalisability and statistical power. Whilst these figures do hold some statistical significance for instance, the 36.8% of students reporting volunteering at Oxford corresponds to a 95% confidence interval of ±6.67 percentage points [30.1%–43.5%], assuming simple random sampling, there might be some systemic bias within the sample. Notably, representation varied significantly across colleges and years of study. For instance, students from smaller or postgraduate-heavy colleges were notably underrepresented, which may bias the findings toward undergraduate perspectives.

Moreover, as survey completion was neither fiscally incentivised nor mandatory, those who complete the survey are inherently engaging in an act of volunteering themselves, possibly skewing the respondent pool toward students already predisposed to civic engagement. Accounting for this self-selection bias, we estimate there is a slight inflation of the figures of prior volunteer experience (91.0%) and current volunteer engagement (36.8%). Whilst these biases do somewhat compromise the external validity of the raw data, it should be noted that this does not necessarily invalidate the broader findings as the reported levels of active volunteering remain modest despite presumable upward bias. Future research might address this by employing stratified sampling with paid or departmentally issued mandatory surveys or other randomised recruitment methods.

The access director survey (n = 14) similarly represents an incomplete set of relevant stakeholders across Oxford's 39 colleges and multiple faculties. While valuable insights were drawn, the sample size prohibits rigorous subgroup comparison (e.g., by college size or resource levels), and it cannot be determined whether the views captured are identical to broader institutional trends.

2. Instrument Design and Conceptual Ambiguities

A critical limitation lies is the definitional scope of the term "volunteering". The student survey framed engagement primarily as unpaid civic work. However, some colleges (e.g., College 2) operate paid ambassador schemes that serve similar outreach purposes. This divergence may have excluded participants involved in compensated access work or created confusion regarding eligibility, leading to underreporting or misclassification. Future instruments should explicitly distinguish between paid and unpaid forms of engagement and use more inclusive operational definitions aligned with civic participation literature.

In the access director survey, variation in terminology and administrative practice also poses issues. Terms such as "volunteer", "ambassador", or "helper" were used inconsistently across responses, potentially conflating different institutional models and undermining comparability. Follow-up interviews and structured data collection did somewhat address this semantic ambiguity, however.

3. Temporal and Longitudinal Limitations

All datasets represent a cross-sectional snapshot captured during a single term. As such, they cannot detect intra-year variability, seasonal engagement trends, or longitudinal patterns in volunteering motivation, dropout, or persistence. This limits our ability to assess the sustainability of volunteering practices or measure institutional change over time, despite interviews with long term access directors providing some information. A longitudinal panel design, or repeated cross-sectional surveys, would enable tracking of volunteer trajectories and permit causal inference about programmatic interventions.

4. Methodological Constraints in Qualitative Data

The qualitative dataset—including free-text survey responses, student focus groups, and interviews with access directors provided valuable depth, but is not without limitations. First, the focus groups and interviews involved a self-selected subset of students and access directors, limiting representativeness. Furthermore, interviewer effects, power dynamics, and the lack of verbatim participant validation may have shaped responses. Finally, while thematic analysis was conducted using established coding practices, more formal inter-rater reliability test could be applied. Qualitative methods, while appropriate for exploratory work, should be treated as indicative rather than conclusive.

Recommendations

Despite these constraints, this research offers a foundational contribution to understanding student volunteering in elite university contexts and lays the groundwork for future, more statistically rigorous investigation.

However, future work may benefit from:

- Randomised or stratified sampling procedures
- Greater inclusion of underrepresented colleges and subject areas
- Longitudinal data collection to track engagement over time
- Clarified definitions of volunteering that account for paid/unpaid roles
- Expanded interviews with a diverse array of access professionals and college administrators
- Integration of institutional data (e.g., volunteer rosters, participation records) for triangulation. Note that this would require establishing a centralised system to collect these records first.

Conclusion:

This study provides the most comprehensive account to date of the structures, cultures, and motivations shaping student volunteering at the University of Oxford. By integrating survey data from students and access directors with qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups, it identifies both the scale of latent enthusiasm for volunteering and the systemic barriers that inhibit sustained participation.

The evidence shows that Oxford students are overwhelmingly motivated by ethical and relational commitments, yet encounter structural obstacles—time pressure, fragmented information channels, and inconsistent onboarding—that limit their engagement. Where volunteering is embedded within peer networks, supported by inclusive institutional cultures, and aligned with students' skills, participation is markedly higher. However, the decentralised collegiate system produces wide variation in practice, and without central coordination, opportunities remain unevenly distributed.

The proposed interventions—centralised infrastructure, flexible role design, peer-led engagement, equity-focused support, formal recognition, and society–college partnerships—offer a scalable blueprint for converting untapped potential into sustained civic participation. While the findings are

specific to Oxford, the model developed here has broader applicability to other elite, decentralised universities seeking to reconcile academic intensity with meaningful community engagement.

Ultimately, the challenge is not a lack of will among students but a misalignment between their capacities and the structures provided. Addressing this requires a strategic shift: from treating volunteering as an optional add-on to embedding it as a valued, visible, and supported dimension of student life. If such a shift is achieved, Oxford has the opportunity not only to strengthen its local social impact but also to lead sector-wide change in how higher education nurtures civic responsibility.

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Appendix A: survey questions

Access and Outreach Volunteering Trends

This short survey is part of a research project investigating student volunteering trends
and how to expand co-curricular initiatives involving Oxford students and local state school children.

We are particularly interested in understanding how colleges currently engage students in access and outreach work (e.g. school visits, tours, mentoring), what systems support this, and what challenges or barriers exist.

Your insights will help inform a wider strategy to increase student volunteering across the University. This should take no more than 5 minutes, and responses will be used for the express research purposes of identifying broader volunteering trends and barriers and shall avoid isolating specific colleges.

1. What college are you representing?

_____

2. Does your college currently have a formal process for recruiting student volunteers for access and outreach work?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Other: _____

3. How do you typically recruit student volunteers? *(select all that apply)*

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Email callouts
- ☐ Word of mouth
- ☐ Through the JCR/MCR
- ☐ Social media / college platforms
- ☐ Physical Media (posters etc)
- ☐ Other: _____

4. Based on your experience, which groups of students are most likely to volunteer for access/ outreach work? *(Select all that apply)*

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Students from non comprehensive state school backgrounds
- [ ] Students from grammar state schools
- [ ] Students from independent schools
- [ ] First-generation university students
- [ ] International Students
- [ ] Not sure/ haven't observed a trend
- [ ] Other: _____

5. What barriers have you observed that prevent students from volunteering? *(select all that apply)*

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Academic workload/ time constraints
- [ ] Lack of awareness of opportunities
- [ ] Lack of confidence or experience
- [ ] Lack of incentives (e.g pay, recognition)
- [ ] Poor scheduling or communication
- [ ] Transport/ logistics
- [ ] Don't feel as their efforts will be impactful
- [ ] Other: _____

6. Have you found ways to overcome these barriers? (Click yes, even if not *all* barriers have been overcome)

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes *Skip to question 7*
- ◯ No *Skip to question 9*

7. Please briefly describe successful strategies that have been implemented to circumvent boundaries to student volunteers.

8. Do you have any barriers which you have been unable to find a successful solution for, or are unable to solve due to a lack of resources or other reasons (please describe what resources are lacking)

Skip to question 10

9. Are there any potential solutions that you have for these barriers?

10. How does your college encourage ongoing involvement of student volunteers in access and outreach work?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Personal recognition/thanks
- [ ] Certificates or references
- [ ] Paid opportunities
- [ ] Flexible commitment options
- [ ] Informal community or social aspect
- [ ] Other: _____

11. How effective do you feel your current approach is at maintaining a consistent pool of volunteers?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Very effective
- ◯ Moderately effective
- ◯ Not very effective
- ◯ Unsure/ varies year to year
- ◯ Other: _____

12. What is your current volunteer retention rate? (feel free to estimate or answer not sure if too difficult to tell)

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-20%
- ◯ 20-40%
- ◯ 40-60%
- ◯ 60-80%
- ◯ 80-100%
- ◯ Not sure

13. Do you have any final thoughts or suggestions for how the university or colleges can better support student volunteering?

14. Would you be interested in taking part in an interview/focus group on this topic? This can be online or in person and should not last too long.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

15. If yes, please provide your email or preferred contact details, or book a slot through the calendly link below :)

https://calendly.com/laidlawgroup5

Appendix B: survey questions

Oxford Students and Volunteering

We are conducting this survey as part of a research project exploring how we can mobilise Oxford students and the many skills they possess, to support co-curricular programmes for children in local state schools.

Your responses will help us understand current student volunteering trends, what motivates or discourages students from volunteering, and how college societies might contribute their skills.

The survey should take no more than 5 minutes, and all responses are anonymous.

Thank you for helping us shape future initiatives that benefit both the Oxford student community and local young people!

* Indicates required question

1. What college are you a member of? *

2. What year of study have you just completed?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Year 1 Undergraduate
- ◯ Year 2 Undergraduate
- ◯ Year 3 Undergraduate
- ◯ Year 4
- ◯ Masters
- ◯ DPhil

3. What is your educational background? *

Mark only one oval.

- State Comprehensive State Grammar
- Independent (fee-paying)
- State Comprehensive
- State Grammar
- Mix of state and independent
- Homeschooled_____

4. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Female
- Male
- Non-Binary
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

Volunteering

DEFINITION: Volunteering is when someone spends unpaid time doing something to benefit others.

5. Have you done any volunteering before coming to university? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

6. Have you done any volunteering during your time at Oxford? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes *(Goes to question 7)*
- ◯ No *(Skips to question 11)*

7. What did the volunteering consist of?

_____

8. What incentivised you to volunteer? *(select all that apply and feel free to add as many as you see fit)*

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Wanting to give back to the community
- ☐ Building my CV/ future career prospects
- ☐ Social aspect (meeting people)
- ☐ Passion for a particular cause
- ☐ Other: _____

9. How many hours a week to you spend volunteering?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Less than an hour
- ◯ 1-2 hours
- ◯ 3-5 hours
- ◯ 6+ hours

10. What challenges or barriers limit how much you volunteer? *(select all that apply)*

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Lack of time/academic workload
- [ ] Costs (e.g unpaid time, materials)
- [ ] Transport/location difficulties
- [ ] Not aware of opportunities
- [ ] Lack of confidence or skills
- [ ] Do not feel as volunteering will be impactful enough
- [ ] Other: _____

Skip to question 12

11. What are the main reasons you haven't volunteered? *(select all that apply)*

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Lack of time/ academic workload
- [ ] Transport/ location difficulties
- [ ] Costs (e.g unpaid time, materials)
- [ ] Not aware of opportunities
- [ ] Lack of confidence or skills
- [ ] Do not feel volunteering will be impactful enough
- [ ] Not interesting in volunteering
- [ ] Other: _____

12. Do you have any other thoughts about volunteering in Oxford?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

13. Bonus question: Are you currently part of any college or university societies (e.g. sports, music, coding, drama, debate) that could contribute skills or activities to a co-curricular programme for local children (for example mentoring, activities, workshops)? Please provide any relevant details.

14. Would you be interested in taking part in a short interview or focus group on this topic? (Can be online or in person) *This would help us enhance the volunteering opportunities in Oxford !*

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

15. If yes, please provide your email or preferred contact details