OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)
14 - 16 July 2017

VOLUNTEERING RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The CEC is asked to:-

i) **approve** the research proposal outlined in this paper.

1. **Background**

1.1 The Students Association currently has over 400 volunteers in a variety of roles; their work is supporting a vibrant student community and taking students’ interests forward within the University. The Association’s Student Volunteering Team is building on these strengths by improving training and support for volunteers, and this research project aims to consolidate these efforts by systematically exploring different aspects of volunteering.

1.2 The findings from this research project will offer an insight into what motivates volunteers, the kind of activities students are interested in as part of their volunteering with the Association, and how they can benefit from such opportunities. These findings will help the Association identify ways in which it can match volunteering opportunities with students’ interests, and offer the best possible resources and support to volunteers.

1.3 This research will enable the Volunteer Team to review their current offering to students by developing roles which reflect what students are looking for, which will include the development of more local or home-based opportunities. The findings will inform the team about the kind of opportunities students are interested in, and will feed into the possibility of future partnership working with external charitable organisations.

1.4 The impact of this research will be to take forward the Association’s strategic objectives of raising awareness and highlighting the impact of the Association’s activities, in particular “to create a vibrant student community with volunteering opportunities, societies and the engagement of students” (*Strategy document*, p.11) and “run an audit of current involvement and volunteer roles” (*Strategy document*, p.12).
2. **Objectives and Outcomes**

2.1 This research is conceived of as a project running between August 2017 and April 2018, with its primary focus on the Association’s current volunteers. The key areas it will explore are as follows:

- **Motivations**: Exploring the key motivations behind volunteering, such as making a positive contribution to the student community, ensuring students’ concerns are taken forward within the University, or gaining new skills through volunteering.

- **Information and communication channels**: Identifying which communication channels students use to find out about volunteering opportunities, and how useful they find the information provided (such as what the volunteer role entails, time commitments, and support available).

- **Skills**: Assessing whether students who volunteer with the Association are aware of the transferable skills they can build in different volunteering roles, whether gaining such skills is a motivation for them, and how the Association can support volunteers to develop in their role and acquire new skills.

- **Recognition**: Asking student volunteers how they would like their contribution to be recognised, such as through volunteer recognition events and highlighting the impact of volunteers’ work.

- **Barriers**: Exploring some of the barriers to volunteering and the reasons for volunteers withdrawing from their role, such as lack of time, feeling that one doesn’t have the necessary skills for a role, or volunteering opportunities not being local to students.

2.2 **Outcomes** - The findings from this research will inform the ways in which:

- the Association can enable students to identify volunteering opportunities that match their interests, and thus involve more students in volunteering opportunities

- improve the information and support offered to volunteers, together with addressing the perceived barriers to volunteering

- develop different kinds of volunteering opportunities, such as Community Volunteering as part of implementing the Grassroots Project recommendations

- develop benchmarks to review/monitor the impact of student volunteering.

3. **Methodology and Timeline**

3.1 The project will run between August 2017 and April 2018, with different stages of the research tied in with key Association events such as volunteer celebration events [preliminary findings will be shared at the Student Volunteering Week in February 2018]. The research will use a mixed methods
approach, including qualitative feedback invited through focus groups and interviews, and quantitative data collected through surveys:

- The literature review will focus on research on student volunteering in the UK, carried out by organisations such as The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and other UK Higher Education Institutions. This will help identify current practice within the sector and areas of student volunteering that have been explored in the past.

- For surveys, data will be collected on volunteers’ length of study with the OU, level of study, broad subject area, geographical location and age group. The statistical analysis will explore relationships between where volunteers are in their student journey, the kind of volunteering opportunities they are interested in, and their motivations for volunteering.

- The thematic analysis of qualitative feedback will offer further insight into these data trends. It will also draw on the Students Association’s consultation on the University’s student consultative forum, which invited students’ views on topics such as community volunteering and interest in volunteering opportunities more local to them or connected to their OU studies. Further to this, a session during the Volunteers Event on 15 July 2017 will explore some of these themes, together with the key motivations for, and barriers to, volunteering.

3.2 A workshop with volunteers will launch the project, offering the opportunity to explore emergent themes from the literature review in more detail, as well as refining research questions (such as preliminary drafts of survey questions) in collaboration with student volunteers and Association staff members. This will be followed by focus groups and interviews with volunteers to explore different kinds of volunteering roles (community building, academic representation or peer support, for example).

3.3 The research focus for this project will allow for an in-depth study of current volunteering with the Association, and lay the groundwork for exploring student volunteering outside of the Association (such as community volunteering and volunteering with different charities). Feedback from students who do not currently volunteer with the Association can potentially be gathered, such as through inviting views on social media or opening the Students Research Forum; however, this will be informed by the research focus and timescales for the project.

3.4 Awareness of the research project will be raised through the Association’s social media presence, blog posts on the Association website, and news articles in the OU Students Magazine. The findings will be shared with the CEC as regular updates, with the final report published on the Students Association website. Depending on expression of interest, the Volunteer Steering Group will be invited to be involved in an advisory capacity.

3.5 The timeline for the project is as follows:
August-September 2017
- Literature review
- The research project launched with a workshop with student volunteers
- News of the new project shared in the autumn edition of the Students Magazine.

October 2017
- Update at the CEC meeting.

November 2017
- Survey for current volunteers
- The Association’s Student Research Forum opened
- News from the volunteer workshop shared in the winter edition of the Students Magazine.

December 2017 – January 2018
- Focus groups exploring different kinds of volunteering roles (e.g., community building, academic representation), which can be held at different locations in the UK and be tied in with student meet-ups and other events.
- Interviews with Spotlight Sunday winners (volunteers nominated by fellow students in recognition of their contribution)
- Update at the CEC meeting.

February-March 2018
- Preliminary findings shared during the Student Volunteer Week
- Analysis work continues.

April 2018
- Findings shared with the CEC.

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