

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN STUDENTS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

EXPLORING THE VALUE OF CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT FOR STUDENTS,
LOCAL PEOPLE, AND PLACE

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National Civic
Impact Accelerator

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1 Background

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) is an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities across England with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme is funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It aims to drive collaboration and policy and practice innovation, involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector to inform place-based transformations.

The Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation is carrying out primary and secondary research activities to generate an evidence base supporting the NCIA programme. This research focuses on the role of universities in delivering impact in their places, considering the perspectives of a range of organisations, actors and communities, to develop a holistic understanding of the impact of university activities and strategies.

The evidence generation process of the Institute is guided by four co-commissioning panels, which represent a range of stakeholder perspectives. This research responds to the direct input of the Social and Cultural Contribution Panel, made up of representatives from universities across England and third sector organisations with a stake in the issue.

The panel prioritised three lines of enquiry around universities' social and cultural contribution, which the Institute team developed into research questions. The aim is to ensure the evidence produced is as meaningful and useful to a range of stakeholders as possible, within the natural constraints of the project.

2 Introduction

Student community engagement is widespread in the UK and increasingly recognised as an integral part of universities' responsibilities to collaborate with and add value to their local places. Providing this experiential learning is also considered essential for universities to foster socially responsible, civic-minded graduates. Student community engagement encompasses a multitude of activities which can be curriculum-based or voluntary, with more common practices including student volunteering and service learning (Owens-Crossman, 2025).

Despite a demand for student community engagement within universities, its social impact is not well evidenced. This is in part due to a focus on academic attainment and employability as measures of student 'success', as well as wider challenges in measuring the value of civic and community engaged work. Most importantly, there is little evidence to date to demonstrate if, and how, this engagement work truly benefits local communities and places, with community perspectives significantly lacking. What communities and students themselves consider to be meaningful and valuable engagement is not well-known, and yet is essential if universities are to properly realise their civic purpose.

This report asks what *meaningful* student community engagement looks like, particularly from student and community perspectives. To answer this, five case studies share varied examples of student community engagement practices across England. Crosscutting analysis identifies factors that help to make engagement meaningful and impactful for both student and communities: namely, connection and relationships, shaping student identity, creating tangible change, and amplifying local provision. Additionally, this report highlights enablers, challenges and tensions involved in the delivery of meaningful student community engagement.

In showcasing good practice and insights from the case study selection, this report aims to facilitate learning and support the proliferation of meaningful student-community engagement practices, while also recognising that individuals, places, and institutions must adapt these learnings to their own unique contexts.

3

Methodology

Rapid review

This research follows the rapid evidence review *Civic universities and their neighbours: exploring sites and practices of meaningful engagement between students and local communities* (Owens-Crossman, 2025). The evidence review explores what is known about existing sites and practices of student-community engagement and how these may be considered meaningful for different actors. It identifies gaps that this primary research seeks to address, primarily:

- Community perspectives on student engagement are significantly lacking
- What makes for meaningful and impactful practice from both student and community perspectives is not well-evidenced
- Greater exploration of a broad range of engagement practices is needed, including less ‘traditional’ practices and those led by students and communities.

This research seeks to address these gaps and explore the impacts, enablers and challenges of meaningful student-community engagement through a series of good practice examples.

Call for case studies

In March 2025, the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation launched a public call for case studies requesting examples of ‘what is working’ when it comes to meaningful engagement between university students and local communities. This invited examples from a diversity of places and voices beyond those already known to the NCIA programme. Some 34 submissions were received, covering projects across England, Wales and Belgium. From these, five case studies were selected to participate in the primary research described in the next section. The selection process considered the extent to which submissions provided less traditional examples of civic engagement, along with strong community perspectives. Additionally, the selection sought to represent a varied range of sites and practices, geographies, and types of universities, students and communities.

The call for case studies led to the following final selection:

Figure 1: Overview of case study selection

| Case study name | Location | Lead organisers | Team type | Partners | Sites |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ladybarn Community Curry Night | Ladybarn, Manchester | Manchester Student Homes | Pastoral | Local residents, local council | Community location |
| South London Living Wage Action Group | Camberwell, London | Camberwell College of Arts and Citizens UK | Community engagement and community organisation | Local community organisations | Campus and community locations |
| Hands On Bristol | Bristol | University of the West of England | Academic | Local community organisations | Community locations and online |
| Warwick STAR | Warwick and Coventry | STAR and University of Warwick | Student | Local council, local community organisations | Campus and community locations |
| Undisciplined Spaces | London | King's College London | Research and knowledge exchange | Local community organisations, The Young Foundation | Campus and community locations |

Primary evidence

For each of the five case studies, the authors undertook semi-structured interviews with a selection of university staff, students, and community practitioners or individuals who were involved in the project. A total of 39 interviews were completed in June and July 2025, in-person and online, which form the basis of the findings in this report.

Limitations and learnings

Lead organisers for each case study assisted with sampling and recruitment by recommending and contacting suitable participants who they held direct relationships with. This approach, along with the focus on successful projects to build good practice examples, brings selection bias in recruiting students and community members who were highly engaged and had largely positive experiences. The approach also limited the ability to prioritise diversity in the sampling, instead providing some insight into who is, and is not, involved in student community engagement projects. Student participants generally represented a range of backgrounds in relation to ethnicity, religion and disability, as well as a spread between undergraduate, postgraduate, international and UK-based students. However, representation was significantly lacking from students who did not identify as female, who had caring responsibilities, and who were from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds. While our small sample cannot be taken as representative, this does reflect commonly underrepresented groups in student volunteering (Kerrigan and Manktelow, 2021). In future research on this topic, prioritising the recruitment of students who are often underrepresented in community engagement would provide valuable insight into lesser-known perspectives.

Recruiting community practitioners and members proved challenging across many case studies, despite the offer of flexible options for participation, and incentives to compensate for participant time. This reflects ongoing challenges for community organisations who are commonly over-stretched for time and capacity (as is highlighted later in this report), as well as organisational safeguarding concerns around providing access to community members for research. The community participants that engaged in this research tended to be involved through their paid roles within community organisations, rather than as individual community members, though this was not true of all case studies.

It is likely that limited community capacity also shaped the number and content of responses to the call for case studies. This is reflected in the low number of submissions that were received directly from community organisations, with the majority submitted by higher education institutions. The reach of the call for case studies was also limited to the networks of the individuals and institutions who disseminated it. The call for case studies was kept open as long as possible, offering flexibility and designing a simple submission process. However, the timelines and submission processes may not have worked for all eligible projects, and greater consideration should be given to better-reaching community audiences in future approaches.

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Case studies

This section contains a description of the five case study projects involved in this research

LADYBARN COMMUNITY CURRY NIGHT

An event seeking to foster community connection between students and local residents in Manchester



Figure 2: Ladybarn Community Hub

Project description

Fallowfield, Ladybarn and Withington are Manchester neighbourhoods with high student populations living alongside long-term local residents. Residents describe seeing their local neighbourhood change significantly over the years, as more properties have been turned into private student accommodation, affecting their everyday lives and sense of local community. Students and long-term residents rarely interact, and when they do it can often be over negative issues such as noise complaints, anti-social behaviour and waste management. This creates tensions between the two groups: *“It’s very separate, you know, I don’t think there’s much overlap or understanding [between students and long-term residents]”* - Manchester resident

At the suggestion of two long-term residents, [Manchester Student Homes](#) and a group of active community members planned a pilot event to bring students and long-term community members together. A University of Manchester student said: *“The curry night was kind of the first attempt to sort of get students and long-term residents together in one space”*. A community curry night was held at [Ladybarn Community Hub](#), a well-established community space in the area, with food provided by local restaurant Sanskruti. The event welcomed university students to the neighbourhood, and provided a rare opportunity for residents and students to build connections and foster positive relationships at the beginning of the academic year. A local councillor said: *“It was a chance for students and long-term members of the community to come together to actually get to know each other and to sort of find what they have in common”*. It was well attended by approximately 50 people, made up of students from the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University, long-term residents, and a local councillor.

Resourcing and approach

Manchester Student Homes secured one-off funding for the event from the Manchester Student Strategy Partnership, a collaboration between Manchester City Council, The University of Manchester, and Manchester Metropolitan University, aimed at ensuring students are welcomed, integrated, and supported as vital members of the city.

Though a collaborative effort, Manchester Student Homes staff were largely responsible for resourcing and organising the event, applying for funding and arranging logistical aspects such as the space and food. They employed Student Ambassadors to promote the event to fellow students. Long-term residents helped organise, and recruited residents to attend.

The event being simple and low-cost was considered key to its success, showing that effective student community engagement does not always require lots of financial resourcing. Organisers also stressed the importance of creating space to sit and interact, with sharing food seen as a valuable and meaningful activity for people to connect over: a member of Manchester Student Homes staff said: *“what we really want to encourage is kind of, people to stay and linger and talk to each other”*. Also essential was the positive framing of the event as enjoyable and light-hearted. A local councillor said: *“It was just kind of getting to know people and chatting rather than there being some sort of other context or pretext for the conversation”*.

Long-term vision

Manchester Student Homes hope to make the community curry night a regular event at the beginning of each academic year, and to organise other events and opportunities supporting students and local residents to continue to build their relationships. They have recently secured funding to hold two meals in the coming 2025-26 academic year.

What's special?

- **Focus on relationship-building** Unlike many other student-community engagement practices, which expect students to build employability skills or develop work experience, the focus in this case was solely on social connection and building good relationships with community members.
- **Simple, local format** This was key to the project's success, both for meaningful and hyperlocal impact, and to keep it low-cost and manageable in terms of resourcing.
- **Manchester Student Homes** Staff are embedded in the local neighbourhood and have a deep understanding of local tensions and community mistrust of the universities. They hold established relationships with local residents and are trusted to run an event that responds to community needs. *“Part of Manchester Student Homes' work is that we have a stake in the community too” - Manchester Student Homes staff*
- **Student Ambassadors** Responsible for promoting the event to fellow students, their relatability was considered key to successful student recruitment.
- **Voluntary commitment of local residents** A number of active and motivated residents continue to give their time and resource to develop and sustain student-community engagement efforts. This demands a willingness to repeatedly ‘start afresh’ with new student neighbours each year.

SOUTH LONDON LIVING WAGE ACTION GROUP

A collaborative campaign resulting in more than 1,000 uplifts in pay for London residents working on the Southbank



Figure 3: The Living Wage Action Group assembles outside the National Theatre, London Southbank, 2024 *Camberwell College of Arts*

Project description

The Southbank Living Wage campaign grew out of a partnership between Camberwell College of Arts and [Citizens UK](#). From June 2023, Camberwell students and staff worked alongside Citizens UK community organisations [English For Action](#), [Empoderando Familias](#), and [Parent Action](#), to campaign for cultural institutions along the Southbank to become Living Wage employers. The campaign was coordinated by Camberwell College of Arts' Community Engagement Team and Citizens UK, with students playing a central role in the campaign through their involvement in the South London Living Wage Action Group.

"I had my own experience but at the same time I was interested in seeing and knowing the other people from different organisations that had their own specific experiences, and how we could do something together" - Camberwell College of Arts student

Students hosted a banner and set-making workshop and created a zine providing information about the campaign. Their involvement culminated in 40 community members assembling at the National Theatre in May 2024, demanding a meeting with the management to discuss accreditation as a Living Wage and Living Hours employer. As a result of this action and students' involvement in other aspects of the South London Living Wage campaign, several institutions including Tate Modern and Globe Theatre have since become accredited Living Wage employers.

"We know the impact of all the work that Citizens UK have done on that across that year has impacted, you know, 1000 plus uplifts in pay. So it's been amazing to be part of that" - Camberwell College of Arts staff

Resourcing and approach

The project emerged from a strategic partnership between University of the Arts London (UAL) and Citizens UK, reflecting UAL's commitment to strengthening its social purpose. Camberwell College of Arts was selected as a pilot site for community organising work with the local Citizens UK branch, Southwark and Peckham (S&P) Citizens. UAL supported the initiative by allocating membership funding, and the college provided additional resource via their Community Engagement Team, enabling staff to dedicate time to the collaboration and funding to support students' time for their creative contributions.

Students and staff participated in Citizens UK training and engaged in its five-stage Cycle of Action: Organise, Listen, Plan, Act, Negotiate.

"We were part of this community where there are quite a few [Citizens UK] members in our vicinity and we started building a core team of staff and students who would then be trained in community organising" - Camberwell College of Arts staff

Monthly internal meetings at Camberwell helped coordinate activities, in addition to the Community Engagement team participating in S&P Citizens' bi-monthly leadership meetings. Campaign teams, made up of students, a community engagement team member, and a Citizens UK organiser, met more frequently as needed to plan events or actions.

Long-term vision

Due to changes in senior leadership and a shift in UAL's approach to community involvement, the university paused its membership with Citizens UK. It has appointed a Researcher for Storytelling and Advocacy in Creative Education who is reviewing several existing models of student-community engagement to determine appropriate ways to support this work, including Camberwell Citizens as a case study.

What's special?

- **Led by community need** The Living Wage campaign was an already established campaign emerging from the needs of London residents, with many member organisations collaborating on the project. *"It's a long-standing campaign, like I've been involved for 20 years, it emerged from people's issues and we developed the solution with the community"* - Camberwell College of Arts community partner
- **A tried and tested approach to community engagement** Through their involvement in the campaign and Citizens UK training, students developed foundational community organising skills using Citizens UK's well-established model.
- **Long-term impact** The campaign had a significant and long-term impact on the local community, contributing to wage increases for more than 1,000 staff in local cultural institutions. *"I think this is like, engagement with something that's real"* - Camberwell College of Arts community partner
- **Student incentives** Camberwell College of Arts compensated students involved in key creative outputs to recognise the time and skill they contributed, paid at least London Living Wage.

HANDS ON BRISTOL

Architecture students co-creating diverse projects with community partners in Bristol



Figure 4: Students share their projects with community partners at a Live Project Studio Ideas Share event, 2019 UWE

Project description

[Hands On Bristol](#) is a collaboration between the Bristol School of Architecture at UWE and the local community. The programme is delivered within the teaching curriculum to undergraduates and Masters students, via placements or as part of the 'Live Project Studio' module. Students undertake lectures on participatory design, before choosing a community project to work on in teams. Each project has a community facilitator who links the students with a partnering community organisation. Since 2023, this work has been complemented by a summer architectural Project Office where students act as paid interns to provide pro bono consultancy to particular community clients.

"It takes a really good facilitator for this to work. And I think the team at Local Learning with how passionate they were and also all the connections that they have I think is what made this a real success and it meant that we got so much out of it as well" - UWE student

Hands On Bristol projects vary widely in scope and format. Some are desk-based and run largely remotely, while others involve direct, long-term engagement with the local community. Examples include Project Office interns working with [BS3 Community](#) to conduct a carbon-saving analysis for proposed solar shading, and a project with [Local Learning](#) that saw Live Project Studio postgraduate student co-create an [exhibition](#) with primary school pupils. These collaborations offer students opportunities to expand their experience through real-world community projects, with greater autonomy than traditional architectural placements, while providing community partners with students' technical skills, perspectives, and time commitment.

"Right the way through they've been told what to do. And now in live projects they're being asked or invited to co-design and co-create with somebody which is very different to being in an office" - UWE staff

Resourcing and approach

Hands On Bristol is coordinated by academic staff within the School of Architecture at UWE who run the programme within their day-to-day roles. Before the start of the academic year, staff and community organisations write project briefs for students to choose from. Staff members have built long-standing relationships with local community partners, having worked with some on multiple projects.

“It’s just really lovely to be working with like-minded people where everybody’s just excited about ideas and opportunities and possibilities” - UWE community partner

Hands On does not receive specific funding to operate, rather UWE’s financial investment is understood through staff and student time given to the initiative. Between 2012 and 2023, coordinators estimate that UWE’s allocation of staff time and expertise into community-engaged architectural work equates to £1.05m (See [Live Projects Impact Review](#) for more detailed breakdowns and further information). Community partners are not directly funded for their involvement in Live Projects, with students and the skills they offer seen as an asset to community partners’ projects.

“There are some sort of pots of community funding that the university has, but a lot of it is also goodwill and people doing things because they want to see them through” - UWE staff

Long-term vision

Hands On Bristol is a well-established programme that UWE staff will continue to run into the future. The ‘Live Project Studio’ module is currently being redeveloped and refined by academic staff at UWE. In the 2025-26 academic year it will become part of an optional specialist pathway in Socially Engaged Practice.

What's special?

- **Established and long-term** Hands On Bristol is a long-running initiative with a strong network of community partners, dedicated facilitators and an evolving structure. Over the past 12 years, Hands On Bristol has connected architecture students with 107 community-based clients, delivering 195 projects across the city. *"We've covered a lot of ground and we're collaborating with many, many people. But this is a legacy of the past of doing it for many, many years and building up to it" - UWE staff*
- **Valuable community resource** Community organisations are equal partners in designing projects that meet their specific needs. Students provide architectural skills and services at no cost, a valuable resource that community groups would otherwise be unable to afford to make their projects viable.
- **Flexible and varied project design** Flexible project formats help students to fit their engagement within university term times. While some students may continue outside of term time or even beyond their graduation, adaptability of projects is important to avoid placing unrealistic expectations on long-term student commitment.
- **Co-creation** The projects strike a balance between offering students' practical experience for their future architectural practice and achieving meaningful community collaboration.

"The people involved are really passionate about the project and I think that really helped because when people really care and everybody's only doing it for, not for any personal gain, it's all sort of for community" - UWE student

WARWICK STAR

A student-led group providing support to refugees and asylum-seekers in Warwick and Coventry



Figure 5: Participants attend a university open day organised by Warwick STAR

Project description

[STAR](#) is a national charity founded by university students. It comprises a network of student groups in colleges and universities across the UK who support refugees and asylum-seekers in their local area. Warwick STAR is a student group based at the University of Warwick, working in the Warwick and Coventry areas, home to approximately 1,500 asylum-seekers. The group is entirely run and led by student volunteers, including undergraduates and postgraduates from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds.

“Essentially our aim is to make sure that refugees and asylum seekers are welcomed, especially within the Warwick and Coventry community [...] And to also try and negate like, the often negative discourse that surrounds asylum seekers and refugees” - University of Warwick student

Warwick STAR runs successful volunteering, outreach and campaigning activities with a key focus on English language teaching and support with access to higher education. The group runs two weekly English conversation clubs for asylum-seekers housed in local hotels in partnership with Coventry Council, and a weekly youth club for teenagers with refugee status with [Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre](#). These provide welcoming spaces for participants to meet others in the wider community and build their skills and confidence in English.

They also hold university open days in collaboration with the Widening Participation team to promote equal access to education for those with sanctuary-seeking backgrounds.

“The atmosphere was filled with warmth and the friendly smiles of the students added an extremely positive touch to the event. It was a fantastic day that allowed me to reflect on my future plans and enriched my perspective on the available options” - Open day participant

They recently launched a one-to-one mentoring programme where current students have successfully supported a number of people with sanctuary-seeking backgrounds to secure scholarships and university places.

Resourcing and approach

Warwick STAR is led by a committee of 14 students who are responsible for the organisation, direction, and day-to-day logistics of the group's activities. This includes recruiting and training new student volunteers, coordinating and delivering the regular sessions and open days, communicating and collaborating with local partners and university staff, and organising events and fundraising activities.

"We have amazing presidents, they are so good, they're so on it, and they're so dedicated and without them STAR wouldn't run. And yeah, I think it's the willingness to go above and beyond" - University of Warwick student

Warwick STAR is a student society and receives funding from the University of Warwick Student Union. It also works closely with, and receives support from, other areas of the university such as Warwick Volunteers and the Widening Participation team. Warwick STAR have well-established partnerships with Coventry Council, and Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre, who help coordinate the conversation clubs and youth club. Coventry Council provide some training and resources to students, and until recently, funded transport for students to travel to local hotels – something the group are now trying to fundraise and find new funding sources for. They also receive support and resources from STAR national.

"It's been quite easy to work with STAR and the benefit to the service users is immense"
- Warwick STAR community partner

Long-term vision

Warwick STAR is a well-established student group that continues to grow and develop each year, with new intakes of students seen as a positive and exciting part of this development. Their continued success relies on funding from the University of Warwick, as well as now sourcing alternative funds to cover student transport to deliver their weekly sessions in the local community.

What's special?

- **Student-led** Warwick STAR is an excellent example of students' ability to lead their own effective and meaningful community engagement. The group's success is testament to dedicated, proactive and organised student volunteers who sustain their activities and partnerships each year alongside their academic commitments.
- **Student motivation and collaboration** Students are strongly motivated by a shared passion and commitment to supporting refugees and asylum-seekers and making them feel welcomed and valued in the UK. Students say the highly supportive and collaborative nature of the group is key to its success. *"Like genuine passion, like genuineness. Like, I think that's what makes it work" - University of Warwick student*
- **External coordination** STAR offers a different model for student-community engagement that is not led by the university. As a national charity, STAR provides well-established infrastructure for students to set up and lead their own groups without the need for day-to-day coordination by university staff.
- **Tailored to community need** Warwick STAR works proactively to be informed and driven by the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in their local area. For example, they deliver much-needed English language provision directly in hotels and make their sessions inclusive and flexible to suit people of all ages and abilities of English.

UNDISCIPLINED SPACES

A programme for postgraduate researchers to develop and deliver collaborative community engagement activities in London



Figure 6: Participants display a collaborative collage produced during the Diasporic Syrian Heritage in London event, 2023 KCL

Project description

[Undisciplined Spaces](#) is an optional (co-curricular) programme for postgraduate research students from a range of disciplines, rooted in arts and humanities research. It seeks to provide a hands-on, supported learning experience for students to develop their skills and knowledge outside of academia and to deliver impactful, community-based engagement activities. It is jointly delivered by the Impact and Knowledge Exchange team in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at King's College London (KCL), and [The Young Foundation](#), and is now in its third year of delivery.

"It seemed like an opportunity for me to do something that combines the two aspects of my work life, which is academia on the one hand, and on the other hand something that serves communities" - KCL student

Students take part in a taught programme before working in groups to co-design a project in collaboration with an assigned local community partner. Each group receives a budget of up to £1,500 to spend on project activities as well as up to £1,125 to pay for their community partner's time. The programme particularly seeks to engage with smaller, local community organisations who may not have historically had opportunities to engage with universities: *"We wanted to serve those groups that were commonly underserved by the academy" - KCL staff*

Examples of student-community projects include:

- A partnership between a student group, [Da'aro Youth Project](#) and the [South London Refugee Association](#) to deliver a [photography workshop](#) for young people with refugee and migrant backgrounds.
- Students worked with advocacy group [Decrim Now](#) to create and deliver an [interactive 'fun-fair' exhibition](#) to spread information and awareness about the challenges and issues that sex workers face in the UK.
- A collaboration with [Arts Network](#) to develop and deliver [workshops using an AI art tool for adults](#) with ongoing mental health support needs. The workshops culminated in exhibitions to display service users' artwork.
- [A collaborative workshop](#) on Syrian cultural heritage and identity with [Hikayenta -Our Story](#) and hosted by the [Levant Book Café](#) to engage with the diasporic Syrian community in London.

Resourcing and approach

Undisciplined Spaces is currently funded as part of an Impact Acceleration Account awarded to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at KCL by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This year's programme (2025-26) is the last to be funded by this award and organisers have secured internal funding to continue the programme.

Each year, organisers have built on learnings and feedback to evolve and develop the programme. Changes include more exercises for students to connect and reflect on their skills outside of their academic discipline, student interviews during recruitment, and, in 2025-26, community partners being pre-selected for students.

"The project has always been iterative, because as we've done it, especially with postgraduate researchers, which is a very different constituency than undergraduates, there's had to be different changes to make it more effective" - KCL staff

Long-term vision

Having successfully developed and delivered the programme over four years, the organisers have been able to evidence impact to successfully secure internal funding to run a version of the programme in coming academic years.

What's special?

- **Collaborative delivery model** The partnership between KCL and The Young Foundation is viewed as important to the success of the programme, with The Young Foundation providing external expertise in community engagement and facilitation.
- **'Critical friends'** key component of the programme is the involvement of 'Critical friends', who are experienced community practitioners acting as a constructive sounding board for students' project ideas.
- **Prioritising community need** In both the framing and delivery of Undisciplined Spaces, priority is placed on leveraging university resources for community benefit. Students are encouraged to centre community priorities to ensure their projects deliver something impactful and meaningful for a range of communities in London. *"People seeing that maybe the university can be a crowbar in a different sort of way than just than just exploiting and using the world outside the academy as their laboratory" - KCL staff*
- **Valuable community resource** The programme provides valuable financial resource to community groups with few parameters and no application requirements. Additionally, students offer valuable skills, time and capacity, supporting community partners to realise projects that may otherwise not be possible.
- **Voluntary and small format** Staff and students stressed the importance that this is a voluntary module for a small number of students who require the necessary passion and commitment to complete the programme. *"The reason why it works is because it's a very small programme for people that have self-selected themselves" - KCL staff*

5

Cross-cutting findings

This section analyses what the case studies collectively tell us about meaningful student community engagement. The first two subsections have a particular focus on student and community perspectives, first discussing physical sites of engagement, then identifying key areas that made engagement meaningful and impactful for students and communities. The third section draws more greatly on staff perspectives to explore tensions that can present both enablers and challenges for delivering meaningful student community engagement.

SITES OF MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Engagement in the five case study projects took place in a number of different sites: on campus, in community organisation premises or another local space, and online. Most case studies used a combination of sites to suit the needs of their activities. While some projects in Bristol were successfully run remotely, participants across our case studies highlighted the importance of students and communities coming together in-person to enable creativity, support relationship-building, and enhance learning. Where students and communities reciprocally invited each other into their spaces, this promoted equity and established a fluid guest-host relationship between students and communities: *“They open the world up to us and we open the world up to them” - University of Warwick student*

When using community spaces, student and community participants emphasised the value in students leaving their familiar university space and witnessing other aspects of their local area, sometimes ones that they had negative preconceptions about:

“We had the first meeting [...] and I remember thinking, oh my God, like, is this one of the areas that people say to avoid. But I have to go there. I have to walk through it and I have to go into the community centre as well. So even just walking through those areas makes you kind of realise, oh, actually this place is fine and you learn about a place just by being there” - UWE student

Similarly, students from Warwick STAR felt going to the hotels housing asylum-seekers gave an important insight into day-to-day lived realities and helped to remove stigma:

“By us going to into their space, we’re all at the end of the day, just like, human beings. And we are so similar to them” - University of Warwick student

Many participants also stressed the practical importance of using community spaces, which were familiar and accessible for community members, so made engagement easier.

University spaces, on the other hand, were often described as seeming inaccessible or unwelcoming to local communities, at times representing historically difficult relationships between universities and communities. In Manchester, using a local community hub away from the university campus importantly provided a ‘neutral’ space for residents, and introduced students to a local community environment that could be seen as theirs too. On the other hand, students involved in Undisciplined Spaces were surprised when community groups specifically sought to use university spaces, which held value in enhancing their reach and audience, such as in policymaking spaces, while also giving community members the opportunity to make use of spaces and facilities that are otherwise inaccessible.

"We are at King's. But like, we don't have to do any of the workshops at King's. We don't have to use any of King's spaces. We can completely stay away from King's. And one of the first things the community partner said to us was like, 'we want to infiltrate the space'" - KCL student

Participants from Camberwell College of Arts spoke about the importance of using their public-facing gallery, Camberwell Space, which provides students and community members with an accessible place to come together:

"When a university doesn't have a community space, I feel like it misses so much. That same place can host talks and conversations" - Camberwell College of Arts student

Warwick STAR also successfully use their university campus to run open days for refugees and asylum-seekers to provide support for accessing higher education. Aware that the university campus feels isolated and separate from local community life, students noted the importance of welcoming community members into their space and generating a sense of physical and symbolic belonging: *"So we're not this far-off reaching thing that they see as inaccessible and unachievable" - University of Warwick student*

However, some students felt that wider university processes presented barriers to truly opening university spaces to local communities. For instance, despite hosting an open day, rigid university admissions processes may limit refugee and asylum-seekers' access to higher education. Universities' strict processes and protocols, for example around campus security and the inaccessibility of some of their spaces, created additional barriers and limited community groups' ability to access university spaces:

"There's literally physical barriers stopping communities from using the university space when there's quite a big demand" - KCL student

While utilising university spaces and resources can deliver great value for community groups, universities should ensure they are ready and willing to properly meet community needs through their wider ways of working.

WHAT MAKES STUDENT-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEANINGFUL?

Connection and building relationships

Across case studies, both students and community members highly valued the opportunity to build connections, and to share and understand each other's perspectives. The engagement projects were often seen as unique in bringing together students and communities who otherwise would not have met. In some cases, these connections became longer-lasting relationships that went beyond the scope of a project.

"I think it was a friendship and also that we could show up for each other. And I think that is part of what community is like. We're not just going to, like, do a project and leave, like we have actually built extended connections" - KCL student

Students gained opportunities to meet others outside of the university space, often with very different backgrounds and experiences to their own:

"It's really good to have a different, like a set of different people, that you speak to in your life and not just be interacting with students. Otherwise, you end up in quite a tight echo chamber about what life is like" - University of Manchester student

Similarly, community members and organisations valued opportunities to connect with students from different backgrounds to their own. In Ladybarn, where the relationship between the local community and students had been fractured, the curry night helped residents to see students as individuals and overcome perceptions of them as a homogeneous and often problematic group. One resident commented that after the event:

"...you don't say student. It was Gary or Tom or Tim that lived at number 73. You know, it put a name on the person" - Manchester resident

Building these social connections contributed to participants' wellbeing and sense of community. Students in Warwick STAR described the significance of creating community with their participants, fostering a sense of belonging for refugees and asylum-seekers who are otherwise often excluded:

"People feeling part of something and listened to and appreciated and understood and not on their own" - University of Warwick student

Additionally, many students saw significant value in being able to form connections with like-minded students across disciplines or course content:

"I think it was also a community thing of like getting to know more people at the university, PhDs can be quite isolating. So that was definitely an important aspect of it too" - KCL student

Participants stressed the importance of these connections producing fun and enjoyable experiences, which significantly contributed to their wellbeing. Although not often discussed as a motivation or justification for student-community engagement, creating spaces of connection and joy were essential for viewing projects as successful and satisfying.

Though often considered an important outcome in existing literature (Tansey and Gallo, 2018; Walsh and Santharuban, 2023), evidence of students gaining a connection to their local place through community engagement was mixed in this research. For some students, exposure to new areas and groups helped them gain a deeper understanding of the local area and the communities within it:

“Warwick is a very like isolated campus like it’s very closed off. I would rarely leave campus like, everything I needed was there. And yeah, now I feel like a lot more like, I know more about the community of Coventry” - University of Warwick student

A small number of students did reflect on feeling more connected to their place through their engagement, as well as becoming aware of their role as students in a place:

“I think that it’s made me feel a lot greater sense of responsibility as an international student studying in London and just thinking about, like, how impactful the way that I engage with community centres and community organisations can be” - KCL student

However, for most, while the experience of community engagement was highly valued, less importance was placed on the local context it happened within: *“I don’t know if that feels like, London-specific. It just feels more like the experience in general” - KCL student*

From student perspectives, connecting to place was not considered key for meaningful engagement experiences, which is perhaps to be expected given the often isolated, short-term nature of most student engagement practices. Instead, an opportunity to develop connections with specific individuals and organisations was essential to creating meaning.

Shaping student identity

Civic engagement tends to be promoted by universities as an opportunity for students to develop skills for work, and to improve employability and graduate outcomes (Owens-Crossman, 2025). Staff participants in this research somewhat echoed this, describing community engagement as valuable for providing students with opportunities to build new skillsets and learn in different ways, often to benefit them in future employment. However, while important, skills-building and employability were not central to making engagement valuable and meaningful for students, nor were they key motivations. Instead, student and community participants were often critical of universities framing community engagement as a CV-building exercise, which they felt does not fully recognise the wider benefits or purpose of civic engagement, and limits student involvement.

More significantly than building skills for work, community engagement was found to make an important contribution in shaping students’ identities and values as adults in wider society. Students across case studies greatly appreciated doing something outside their academic course and the often rigid and assessment-driven academic system, which one University of Warwick student said provided *“a completely different dimension to student life”*. This valuable learning beyond academia – for example, being exposed to the lived realities of others – was often described as an eye-opening experience, which raised students’ awareness of social inequalities. In one Hands On Bristol project, for instance, working with disability activists gave architecture students greater understanding of building safety risks for people with disabilities: *“I think the reason for working with them was just to introduce, like, this level of awareness and tolerance that a lot of people wouldn’t have unless it’s their own problem” - UWE student*

In many cases, engagement experiences shaped student perspectives on their own place in society, and either developed or reinforced a strong desire to continue community-engaged work in both their personal and professional lives: *“It’s sort of planted a seed; how do I implement that into my career going forward?”* - UWE student

For some, this fostered an everyday politicisation in the way students think about and act on inequalities in their day-to-day lives. In this way, meaningful engagement motivates students to become active citizens who seek to make change happen through participation in social and political life, particularly acting in solidarity with marginalised groups (Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Jacoby, 2017; Tansey and Gallo, 2018; Body, 2024):

“It’s made me more sort of driven to be a part of the change, especially against like, the negative discourse about refugees and asylum-seekers” - University of Warwick student

However, the case studies show students finding and defining their own versions of what ‘good’ citizenship looks like in collaboration with communities, beyond framings that are traditionally promoted by universities (Owens-Crossman 2025). For example, students spoke about the centrality of care and reducing harm, seeing beyond themselves and recognising their responsibility to others in their community; and finding ways to advocate for and action systemic change. This demonstrates the transformational potential of student-community engagement that goes far beyond increasing student employability and academic attainment, toward shaping their identities in more meaningful ways.

Tangible change

For participants across case studies, seeing a tangible benefit for community members was crucial to making engagement projects meaningful and worthwhile. For example, in Warwick STAR, both students and community partners spoke about seeing participants build their confidence and ability in English language, as well as people being offered university places from their mentoring scheme.

In one Undisciplined Spaces project, both students and community practitioners described witnessing the positive impact that exhibiting community members artwork had for individuals:

“I was like, ok, this is why I care about this work. One of the members who was exhibiting artwork had like a little family reunion at the exhibition [...] And you could tell that she was really proud of the artwork that she made and some of her friends came as well. That was really nice. Just creating opportunities for people to be proud” - KCL student

In Camberwell, students described seeing how their individual input contributed to large-scale change, with the Living Wage Campaign achieving over 1,000 pay uplifts for local workers:

“It’s just like looking at the timeline and seeing how one thing leads to the other, but also how one more person adding to the to support actually does help” - Camberwell College of Arts student

Some students were careful not to claim transformative impacts from their engagement initiative, aware that one-off or short-term projects can be limited in scope. However, they spoke about generating small changes that made their engagement feel worthwhile: *“It feels like it’s this one like, small, nice, positive focused thing which hopefully has this effect of a little bit of behaviour change”* - University of Manchester student

This helped to further build students' identities as 'active citizens' by promoting agency and belief in their ability to have an impact on the world around them. While community engagement was politicising for some students, many had strong political identities to start with, and, for these students, challenging wider systemic inequalities was both a motivating factor and a measure of meaningful impact. In both cases, community engagement experiences helped students to realise practical ways they could have tangible impact through small, localised acts that contribute to a wider cause.

Enhancing local provision

Several community organisations in the case studies described everyday pressures around time, resource and capacity. Engagement with students and universities was therefore seen as impactful when it adds to and enhances community offerings, instead of taking resource from organisations. For projects where students worked with community organisations, practitioners highly valued that students brought new perspectives, skills and ideas to their organisation. Students often added a diversity of backgrounds and expertise, which enabled new, collaborative projects that community organisations would otherwise not have been able to undertake:

"it's really nice working with university students that have come with so many interesting ideas and backgrounds" - Undisciplined Spaces community partner

A community partner for Warwick STAR was impressed by the students and *"just how organised they are and just how professional they are"*. This contrasts with previous studies, where community organisations felt students were underprepared for community engagement and required additional support and training (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012; Millican and Bourner, 2014). Similarly, other community organisations noted students' skills that extend beyond the university curriculum as valuable, such as language, facilitation and communication skills. This highlights the important role of universities in training students in both academic and 'softer' skills to implement in community engagement, and ultimately the value of these skills in wider society.

While students' ability to contribute was flagged as important for both students and community partners, it was also highlighted by university staff that community partners should see students' engagement as a learning experience, rather than as pro-bono work. This could lead to disappointment about some students not yet being fully equipped to deliver professional work.

Students meaningfully bringing their skills and capacity to local organisations is beneficial for expanding the local offer and service provision for communities in a place. This was the case for a community organisation in Undisciplined Spaces, where having skilled students add to their capacity, as well as the programme funding, enabled them to offer new resources and opportunities to their members:

"These are things that are obviously beyond the remit of what we can provide in our everyday kind of like service. So just to have that was really brilliant and it felt like a real treat"
- Undisciplined Spaces community partner

In Coventry, Warwick STAR adds to the existing local service provision for asylum seekers in the area, particularly providing much-needed services directly in hotels. A partner from the local council reflected that working successfully with Warwick STAR has created new models for expanding the somewhat stretched local service provision: *“It’s made me realise that there is a space for students to exist within delivering services for local communities”* - Warwick STAR community partner

From community perspectives in particular, student engagement holds great value and potential in helping to expand and improve community offerings. By centring this, universities can deliver engagement projects which build community capacity and perceptibly benefit local places and people.

ENABLERS AND CHALLENGES

Responding to community need

University staff, students and community members in this research were keenly aware of historical practices of university engagement that felt extractive and tokenistic for communities and failed to produce change. Case studies were generally careful to avoid replicating this harm in their engagement practices, and an enabler of their success was seeking to be responsive to community need from the outset:

"I think it's important that it's not just the university putting on an event, that it has, kind of, community input. And yes, ownership of it as well" - Manchester Student Homes staff

The Camberwell Community Engagement Team started their work by reflecting on what ethical student community practice could look like for a university, noting a need to properly prepare students who may be from privileged backgrounds with limited understanding of the issues that communities around them face. As a university staff member explained:

"We've had lots of conversations with the student journey team in terms of, like, some students have never seen homelessness [for example, so there is a risk that they bring] a voyeuristic sort of, inappropriate kind of stance on it in their projects and like, well, how do we have that conversation? But to support [them] to think ethically about how they do that work and support communities" - Camberwell College of Arts staff

Similarly in Bristol, staff and community partners highlighted the importance of students not treating the 'Live Project' as a commercial client project, but instead listening to the community and embracing a truly collaborative approach:

"That attitude is quite important to go in there and understand that the community you're working with are the experts and that you are collectively, you know, working together to achieve something that it's not a kind of token gesture" - UWE community partner

In keeping with this, community members valued university staff and students' genuine commitment to listening to (and responding to) community need as a key enabler to meaningful engagement. In some projects, community partners emphasised the importance of students being led by the needs of the community members they were working with. For example, a community partner valued Warwick STAR's inclusive and more informal approach to their ESOL sessions, and *"the way that it's service-user orientated"* - Warwick STAR community partner

Similarly, for students in Undisciplined Spaces, being led by the needs of the community partners and their members was crucial to making projects meaningful. Students were often uncomfortable representing an academic institution and saw their role as subverting the conventional power dynamics of university-community partnerships. They used their roles to leverage university resources to maximise community benefit:

"In many ways, rather than being researchers or whatever we do here at King's, we were more like enablers of good things happening. Those good things were shaped by the members themselves" - KCL student

Across case studies, participants emphasised the importance of approaches that enabled this collaborative and non-extractive working. Equity across roles was essential to remove hierarchies and enable co-creation: *“It felt quite equitable, I guess in terms of like the roles that we had and the and how they encouraged people to play to their strengths within that”* - Camberwell College of Arts staff

Also crucial were clear communication and transparency from the outset of projects, particularly in ensuring all partners understood expectations of their roles and the scope of the project: *“there was a sense of, like, gratitude, I think reciprocally, because we were both really invested and clear about sort of, what the partnership was”* - KCL student

Participants also spoke about the need to be flexible to community ways of working, and to leave space for uncertainty and agility as projects developed, though acknowledged that this can sometimes be at odds with more rigid university ways of working (Gifford et al, 2024).

Being able to listen to community needs and work collaboratively was seen as a crucial learning curve for many students, and in some cases proved particularly challenging. Staff noted that students sometimes failed to put aside their own visions, or approached projects in a one-sided manner, which compromised the project aims:

“We always kept saying like it's not about you, it's about giving the money to a group of people that really deserve it [...] And then still having people just not being willing to budge, it's been really challenging” - KCL staff

Conversely, some participants also mentioned challenges when engagement solely focuses on community need. For example, community organisations may forget that engagement should be of reciprocal value to students, and community priorities and approaches being pre-determined may limit the extent to which students feel able to meaningfully engage and contribute.

Longevity vs the short-term nature of student involvement

Sustainability and longevity are crucial enablers in making engagement meaningful for communities. This somewhat clashes with the nature of student engagement, which is, inevitably, time-limited and often short-term. This has been shown to limit impact for communities (Millican and Bournier, 2014). Many community participants stressed the importance of longevity in their engagement work with students and universities, and case studies showcase various ways in which this can be realised.

One way of achieving longevity is through directing funding and resources to build community capacity without the need for continued student or university engagement (Harney and Morrison, 2022). For example, in Undisciplined Spaces, students provided organisations with equipment and resources for use beyond the programme. As one student explained: *“the impact of this is that these materials can be used without us”* - KCL student

Longer-term partnerships or engagement with the university were also seen as a method to achieve some stability and longevity for communities despite that fact that the students involved may change. At UWE, individual staff members maintain long-term relationships with community organisations. While student involvement typically lasts only a few months on projects, staff and community organisations work together to allow students to complete a short-term project or enable a handover model, where one student group can pick up where

another left off. When managed effectively, some students and community partners saw value in student turnover, with a University of Warwick student saying it providing “*new passionate people*”, with different ideas and backgrounds to contribute.

Longevity is a particular challenge in Manchester, where student turnover poses a barrier to students and local residents forming long-term relationships:

“It’s always cyclical. And this is one of my main concerns. So the students who attended them, perhaps they’ll be around for another year and then they’re gone. So it’s a constantly renewing effort of initiative” - Manchester resident

While the community curry night was successful in forging positive relationships, as a one-off event its potential for long-term impact was seen as limited. However, residents saw it holding greater continuing value when viewed as one of many initiatives to tackle issues between students and local residents. One said: “*It’s not kind of hugely impactful just alone, but it’s kind of part of something bigger*”. In this case, residents hoped for an ongoing commitment from the local universities to produce long-term change in their neighbourhoods. Manchester Student Homes were seen to be one arm of the universities successfully doing this, with residents already mentioning positive results of their work and trusting staff to continue to hold effective engagement initiatives.

Longevity is an important and yet sometimes challenging dimension of meaning for engagement projects. The case studies highlight several ways that communities may continue to benefit from student-community engagement while recognising the inevitably short-term nature of student involvement.

Voluntary vs compulsory student engagement

Within civic literature, there is debate over whether student-community engagement should be compulsory or voluntary (Owens-Crossman, 2025). Most community, students and staff participants in this research strongly favoured voluntary participation, believing it brings genuine commitment and passion, which were fundamental enablers of successful and meaningful engagement:

“It didn’t feel like it was part of their curriculum, like it didn’t feel like they were doing it because they were obligated. They were doing it because they really cared” - Undisciplined Spaces community partner

Students additionally enjoyed meeting and working alongside students, staff and community partners who shared their values. Genuine passion for the project was often seen as necessary for student retention and more equitable and enjoyable student group work:

“There’s never any like disagreements or anything because like everyone’s got the same common goal that they’re working towards” - University of Warwick student

However, interviews with Hands On Bristol and Ladybarn participants complicated this view. At UWE, students become involved in Hands On Bristol through a teaching module. Staff and community partners raised concerns that by making the module optional in the coming academic year, those who could benefit might opt out:

“One concern that we have is whether some students might not choose it because, you know, they they’ve got other options and sort of miss that opportunity of quite a transformative learning experience” - UWE staff

This concern reflects a broader issue: voluntary models may only attract students already inclined toward community engagement, which was the case for the majority of student participants we interviewed in voluntary projects. This potentially excludes those students who could significantly benefit from the transformative impacts of engagement. Yet, while mandatory models may increase benefits for some students, they risk making engagement extractive and less meaningful for communities (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). However, in Manchester, residents were concerned that community events would not attract students who may act the least responsibly to their neighbours, and want universities to incentivise or make mandatory other forms of student civic participation to have greater impact on cohesion in the local area.

The suggestion of incentives raises another question: whether students should be compensated for their engagement with the community. While many participants saw intrinsic motivation as key, others argued that when students provide significant and skilled contributions, the lines between work and volunteerism become blurred:

“You know, if [students] were running a workshop, if they’re doing a specific thing, then we should be paying them for their time, actually. And especially if we’re talking about the living wage in the cultural sector and the creative industries” - Camberwell College of Arts staff

Relying on unpaid engagement can also exacerbate class inequalities by excluding students who rely on paid work:

“One of my friends, he missed one or two sessions because he had work, and he would feel he felt so horrible every single time” - UWE student

Voluntary engagement can privilege those with fewer economic constraints, or may pressurise students to try to manage both paid and voluntary work alongside academic study. To mitigate this, Camberwell College of Arts compensated students involved in key creative outputs for the Living Wage campaign. This is a particularly pertinent consideration when high numbers of students are currently struggling to get by financially, facing high living costs that maintenance loans fail to cover (Brown, 2024), which makes voluntary engagement inaccessible for many students.

Resourcing

Adequate resourcing is crucial to making meaningful engagement projects successful for all partners involved, and yet this is commonly acknowledged as a challenge in civic work (Civic University Network and NCCPE, 2022 and Dobson and Owolade, 2025). As Dobson and Owolade (2025) highlight, resources go beyond financial input and also include time, skills, emotional labour and long-held relationships for university staff, but also students and community partners.

Case studies in the research were resourced in a multitude of ways, with no ‘one size fits all’ approach. In terms of funding, some projects received this directly from the university, some secured external grants, and others a combination of university and external sources. In almost all case studies, sustainability was a concern, with staff - and, in the case of Warwick

STAR, students - trying to find funding sources both within and outside of the university to continue their activities into the future.

In some case studies, staff participants noted that senior buy-in and a university wide strategy is needed to enable and sustain meaningful engagement work. For example, Camberwell's partnership with Citizens UK was reliant on funding aligned to UAL's strategic priorities, which have since shifted. On the other hand, some staff participants did not feel that senior civic agendas always matched up to what was happening 'on the ground' with their student-community engagement work. They highlighted benefits of running small-scale projects within their own teams, who held the knowledge and relationships to ensure the engagement was meaningful. In Ladybarn, for example, it was essential that the community curry night was run by Manchester Student Homes staff, who hold trusted relationships with residents, instead of a wider civic or social responsibility team who were viewed more negatively in the local community: *"the things that made it work really were the links with the long term residents"* - Manchester Student Homes staff

In most cases, the student-community engagement projects came into existence thanks to the passion and willingness of university staff, students and community partners to go beyond their day-to-day role. They highlighted the need for staff to have sufficient time and capacity dedicated to engagement work built into their roles, which is rarely the case:

"It's also thinking about our time as a team, our capacity, you know, [staff member] has put a lot of unpaid time into this, like beyond their role" - Camberwell College of Arts staff

Similarly, students and community partners are required to give significant time and capacity to engagement projects which requires careful management. This was recognised by a community partner in Undisciplined Spaces, who as a 'micro charity' have limited time for additional projects:

"The hardest thing is time, like timing things in and finding times to put in projects, like purely just because we're a very busy organisation" - Undisciplined Spaces community partner

When not carefully managed and resourced, the demands of engagement projects can lead to overworking and burnout. Students spoke about tensions in balancing academic and engagement commitments, occasionally feeling that too much was expected of them as volunteers. Some students in Undisciplined Spaces reflected on feeling overstretched, sometimes overcommitting themselves due to their passion for the project and other times because group work fell to one or two individuals to complete:

"Some of us have had to push back research deadlines and we kind of all just needed to vanish for a month afterwards because it was just so tiring" - KCL student

On the other hand, some participants saw students as a unique, and sometimes underutilised, resource with capacity to give to community projects. For example, undergraduate students involved in Warwick STAR spoke about having lots of free time, which they were glad to use for community benefit:

"I just felt like the role of a student is actually quite crucial, because we have that free time that working people don't have. But we also have the freedom that younger people don't have, so we need to be really utilised. We need to do as much as we can" - University of Warwick student

In addition, Warwick STAR is completely student-led, providing an example of students' ability to coordinate and manage their own community engagement practices in ways that are meaningful and yet do not overburden them.

Across projects, participants emphasised the importance of students having autonomy, and that while staff may provide vital support, engagement was most meaningful when they were not overinvolved. For Warwick STAR, this enabled students to design engagement activities in ways that are focused, impactful, and manageable alongside other commitments:

"I do think that one of the reasons why we've been as Warwick STAR have been so effective at [...] doing all the things that we have done was because we had so much autonomy"

- University of Warwick student

Relatedly, one University of Manchester student reflected on the success of working as a Student Ambassador, and suggested developing a student civic body for students to play a greater role in shaping their own meaningful engagement work and promoting it to other students. This demonstrates that students can, and want, to be trusted as key actors and resource in civic work.

With sufficient resourcing essential to enabling meaningful student-community engagement practice, the case studies help to illustrate a variety of approaches and considerations that may help to achieve this in what is often a challenging environment.

6

Conclusions and recommendations

This research demonstrates the vast potential of university student community engagement practices to produce impact and value for individuals, communities, and places. The five case studies explored help to increase understanding of what students and communities themselves find meaningful beyond university metrics, and therefore what should be the greater focus when designing and measuring engagement practices going forward. This includes joyful connection and interpersonal relationships; building students' sense of identity as active citizens who can effect change; producing direct, tangible benefits for communities, and enhancing local community provision. Additionally, the case studies help to identify tensions that can be present both enablers and challenges for delivering successful student-community engagement. While recognising that there is no single 'good' approach, these findings offer key considerations and inspiration to drive more student community engagement initiatives that truly deliver meaningful outcomes for people and place.

The following opportunities emerge for institutions, students and communities to better support meaningful student-community engagement:

- **Give students greater autonomy and choice** Trust students as important civic actors who can shape and lead meaningful community engagement initiatives which match their own interests and passions.
- **Respond to local community need** It is crucial that engagement is driven by genuine community need and takes a non-extractive approach. Universities and students should listen to local needs, and ensure that engagement practices amplify and extend local community provision.
- **Seek tangible change and longevity for communities** Design projects with actionable outcomes that will produce tangible benefits for local place and people, even if at a very small scale. Consider how to leverage university resource to achieve longevity for communities despite the short-term nature of engagement, eg, through allocation of resources, long-term partnerships or investment, and community capacity building.
- **Invest in sustainable resourcing** Recognise what is required to make student-community engagement successful from all actors involved. This may include long-term funding, financially compensating community partners and students, as well as ensuring that staff and partners have adequate time and support to deliver engagement projects.
- **Remove university barriers to community engagement** Ensure that university processes are appropriate for enabling and supporting student community engagement in a holistic way. Consider how procedures such as financial processes and accessibility of university spaces can be adapted to meet community needs.
- **Shift the priorities of student civic engagement** Move away from framing and measuring student civic engagement as primarily a skills-focused, employability exercise for students. Instead, demonstrate and champion the wider benefits and social purpose of student-community engagement for both students and local communities.

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