

# A short history of student volunteering

Celebrating ten years of Student Volunteering Week

By Georgina Brewis, Institute for Volunteering Research



**Volunteering England's Student Volunteering Week, sponsored by Santander, brings students and organisations from all sectors together to celebrate volunteering by students in Further and Higher Education.**

The first Week was held in February 2001. A decade on, we celebrate the tenth anniversary of Student Volunteering Week, along with the UN's International Year of Volunteers +10 and the European Year of Volunteering.

To mark this special year, we are taking the opportunity to explore the rich history of the Week itself, as well as the long history of student volunteering across the country.



Institute for  
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10th anniversary

Student Volunteering Week



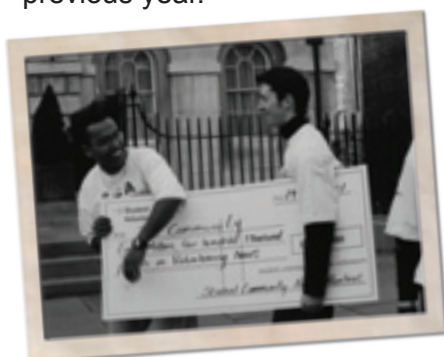
volunteering  
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# Student Volunteering Week 2001-2011

## A brief history

**The first Student Volunteering Week, in February 2001, was billed as a ‘Student Community Action Week’, as most community volunteering undertaken by students at that time was organised through Student Community Action (SCA) groups. The Week was promoted by Student Volunteering UK, an independent infrastructure charity supporting a network of 180 local groups representing 25,000 student volunteers.**

Student Volunteering Week 2001 was launched with a presentation of a mock cheque for £8.4 million to the then Minister for Young People, Paul Boateng, representing the financial value of time given by student volunteers over the previous year.



Student Volunteering Week 2001 - students prepare to make a cheque presentation

Projects, events and activities were also organised by SCA groups at around 70 universities and colleges with the aim of celebrating students’ contributions, promoting the work of volunteering groups and recruiting more volunteers.

As well as highlighting activities run by existing groups, the Week provided an important catalyst for universities, colleges and students’ unions with less well established traditions of organised student volunteering to launch new groups. Such institutions included University of Hertfordshire, University of Middlesex and Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology.

Since 2001, Student Volunteering Week has taken place in the last full week of February each year and continues to be celebrated by a similar mix of high profile national events and local level activities. Such was the success of the first year that the numbers of participating universities, colleges and students’ unions doubled to 150 in 2002.

In 2005, the organising body – Student Volunteering England (known as Student Volunteering UK until 2003) – introduced the ‘Gold Awards’ to be presented to outstanding student volunteers by their institutions or students’ unions.

From 2008, responsibility for Student Volunteering Week transferred to Volunteering England after its 2007 merger with Student Volunteering England. Student Volunteering Week 2008 also brought an exciting development, in the form of an innovative virtual volunteering project. During the Week, hundreds of 16-25 year old volunteers helped local and national charities to ‘youth proof’ their websites, providing advice on how they could make their websites more attractive to young people.

Several Oxford and Cambridge colleges establish missions in London

1870s

John Ruskin involves student volunteers in a road-building experiment in Oxford

1874

First two university settlements open in London

1884

Student Christian Movement of Great Britain and Ireland established

1893

Student Christian Movement's Social Service Committee formed

1909

Student Christian Movement conference attracts 2,000 students

1912

Most recently there has been strong focus on engaging stakeholders across the public, private and voluntary sectors to reflect the benefits of student volunteering for business, community and education. This has been highlighted in the theme for the 2010 and 2011 campaigns: *Inspiring futures; connecting communities.*

Student Volunteering Week 2011 also saw the expansion of the Gold Awards and Matt Spencer Award to allow volunteer-involving organisations and Volunteer Centres to nominate student volunteers they work with. The launch of the Student Volunteering Week Ambassadors scheme also encouraged involvement from representatives across business, community and education, in lending their names to the Week and supporting its promotion.

## Santander's support for Student Volunteering Week

In 2010, international banking group Santander became the official sponsor of Student Volunteering Week and this support has continued through to 2011.

*"The role volunteering plays in helping to build strong communities is more important than ever. Through our support of Student Volunteering Week, we are providing opportunities for students to become active citizens and connect with their local communities and organisations that rely on voluntary support.*

*Not only does this have a positive community impact and promote a deeper appreciation of voluntary organisations, the experience gained and skills developed are valuable in enhancing student and graduate employability."*

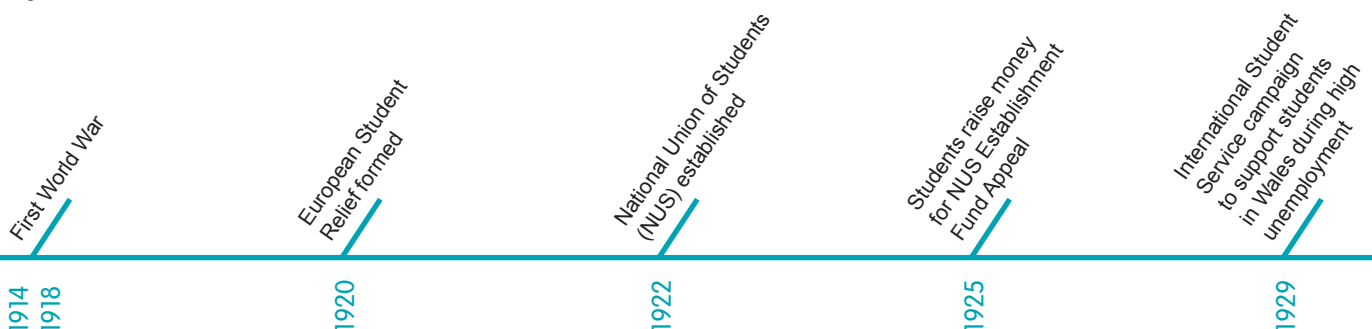
**Christianne Carrick,**  
**Santander Community Relations**



Student Volunteering Week 2007. Partnership working has been a key feature of Student Volunteering Week over the past ten years. Various institutions and students' unions join forces with one another, and community organisations, to organise the annual North West beach clean for students.



Santander is the official sponsor of Student Volunteering Week 2011





*Student Volunteering Week  
2007 - two centuries on  
from the start of the student  
volunteering movement*



## A long tradition

Student Volunteering Week is part of a long history of volunteering, fundraising and campaigning by Further and Higher Education students in England. Although the roots of the movement can be traced to religious societies formed at universities in the eighteenth century - some of which involved volunteers in visiting sick people and prisoners - it was the expansion of Higher Education in the last quarter of the nineteenth century which saw a number of innovations in student volunteering.

The foundation of new university colleges, ongoing reforms to the ancient universities and the beginnings of Higher Education for women coincided with a new enthusiasm for social service among students.

By 1914, social study circles, social service leagues, branches of the Student Christian Movement and committees to support university settlement or mission work formed a significant part of student life in all British colleges and universities.

## Surviving the wars

In the years that followed, the heightened political consciousness of the inter-war period produced a range of new student volunteering opportunities. The post-war Depression and high unemployment in Britain inspired a movement for organised economy and relief among the student community, known as 'student self-help'. This movement gradually evolved into many of the most recognisable activities of students' unions today, such as subsidised books and travel.

Rag fundraising for hospitals and other local charities emerged as an increasingly important aspect of student culture, becoming popular at many civic universities and colleges in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, the National Union of Students (NUS) made increased efforts to 'inculcate a social consciousness among students', and students at several universities organised camps for unemployed working men.<sup>2</sup> Students also played an important role in fundraising for overseas causes and international relief efforts, particularly the Spanish Civil War.

Aid committees formed at universities and colleges to raise money for victims of the Spanish Civil War

International Student Service fundraising campaign for student refugees from Germany

Universities' Council for Unemployed Camps formally launched

NUS campaign to promote social service among students

Second World War

Students from all over the country volunteer at rest centres in London Blitz

International Student Service launches European Student Relief Fund for student victims of the war in Europe

1930s

1933

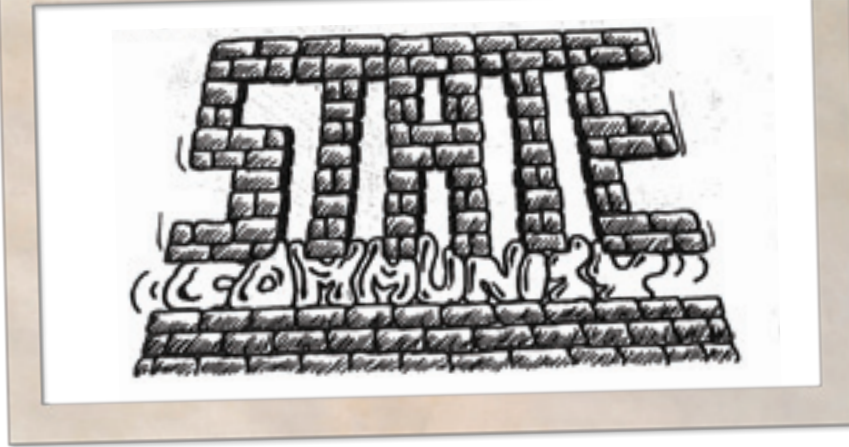
1934

1939

1939  
1945

1940

1940



*Developments in the 1960s laid the foundations for students in the 1970s to look at setting volunteering in the context of wider debates about the role of the state*

The Second World War also provided students who remained in colleges and universities with many new opportunities to volunteer on the Home Front. They volunteered as hospital cleaners, made camouflage netting, helped in air raid shelters and first aid posts, ran summer activities for evacuated children and taught in schools. Such experiences began to break down the sense of separation many university and college students felt from the rest of society.

Student volunteering post-Second World War continued to gain momentum. The traditional institutions of student social service, such as settlements and boys' and girls' clubs, continued to receive support from students and recent graduates, although the nature of such help was changing with the expansion of the welfare state.

## A new direction

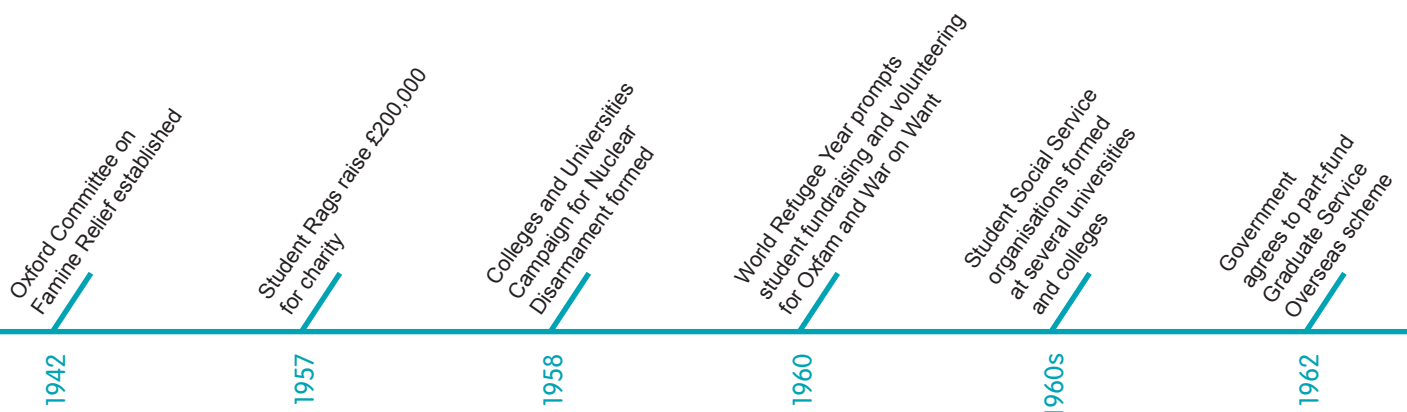
In the 1950s, the rag tradition was revived as increasingly outrageous fundraising stunts took place, avidly reported by the local and national press. At the same time, however, some students began to press for reallocation of rag funds to causes other than hospitals or traditional charities. Students began to take on campaigning and fundraising roles in connection with new movements such as the Campaign for

Nuclear Disarmament, Oxfam, War on Want, the United Nations Student Association and the anti-apartheid movement.

In the early 1960s, students and recent graduates began to seize new opportunities to serve overseas as volunteers in developing countries.<sup>3</sup>

This period also saw the formation of student social service organisations at several universities as part of a wider youth 'volunteer boom', motivated by debates on the role of volunteers in state-run welfare services and how to engage more young people in volunteering.<sup>4</sup> These organisations involved small numbers of regular volunteers in a range of roles, often at public institutions such as long-stay hospitals and children's homes.

However, by the mid-to-late 1960s, many students were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the social service model. At several universities, students began to press for more effective involvement of students with community problems, marking a transition from traditional social 'service' to community 'action'.<sup>5</sup> This shift represented a more politicised understanding of volunteering, which was also reflected in the formation of new campaigning organisations as well as the wider questioning of the values of Higher Education by students.



SCA highlights the transition of the students' union from a social body to a campaigning body



## Changing communities

In the 1970s, Student Community Action (SCA) groups emerged; their focus was on two key elements: effecting lasting change in communities and providing social education for participating students.<sup>6</sup>

Activities of the SCA groups ranged from 'service' roles, such as decorating projects, childcare, teaching immigrants, mental health projects and work with older people, to more radical campaigns on such issues as alternative education, short-life housing, squatting, anti-racism and tenants' rights. However, involvement in community action was controversial; critics questioned its legitimacy on the grounds that students did not experience the sustained poverty of the areas in which they volunteered.<sup>7</sup> Despite the push towards community 'action' by the SCA's national leadership, many student groups were still pursuing the more traditional community service model.<sup>8</sup>

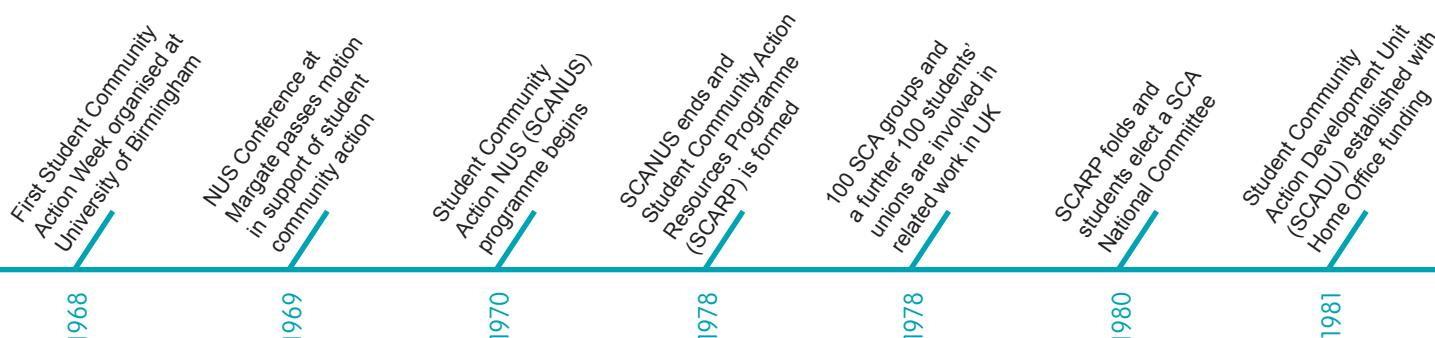
Nevertheless, the infrastructure needed to support local-level student volunteering and community activities developed significantly during the 1970s. Between 1970 and 1978 the NUS ran a programme to develop and support student community action in colleges and universities. In 1981 the Student Community Action Development Unit (SCADU) was set up with funding from the Home Office, becoming a registered charity in 1983.

By the late 1980s, SCA groups were involving 15,000 students a year. Popular activities included: work with children through holiday play schemes, Saturday clubs and babysitting for lone parents; clubs and excursions for older people; and raising awareness about mental health issues and racism. With unemployment growing in the early 1980s, students became involved with centres for the young unemployed and lobbying on problems faced by disabled people living in Britain.

Some SCA groups also lobbied for 'community access', aiming to make colleges and students' unions more accessible to local people. In this climate there was new recognition of the skills that students themselves gained from involvement in volunteering and the potential of student volunteering for influencing career choices.

## Towards the present: inspiring futures and connecting communities

The 1990s brought a greater emphasis on student volunteering for skills development and enhancing employability, and there was a new recognition of the role that student volunteering and community action could play in improving a university's relations with its local community. At a local level, students continued to be involved with campaigns on key causes, such as support for refugees and asylum seekers in Britain, homelessness and







Student Volunteering Week 2001

Third World debt. SCADU's work focused on issues such as volunteer training, sharing good practice among groups and developing a national profile for student volunteering, leading to the establishment of the first Student Volunteering Week in 2001. In 2000, the organisation was renamed Student Volunteering UK and later became Student Volunteering England.

Since the 1990s, there has been a shift away from student-led community action, towards university or students' union-based brokerage services placing individual volunteers with local organisations and a growing trend of embedding volunteering into the curriculum through accredited and cross-curricular volunteering modules.

The Higher Education sector benefited greatly from the Labour government's (1997-2010) commitment to encouraging more young people to volunteer in their local communities through the establishment of the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF) in 2002. The funding stream ended in 2006, and today challenges remain about how to consolidate this expansion of volunteering services.<sup>9</sup>

These changing models of volunteering reflect wider changes in the student experience, which see greater numbers of students living at home, studying flexibly and part time, entering university when they are older and working to fund their studies.<sup>10</sup>

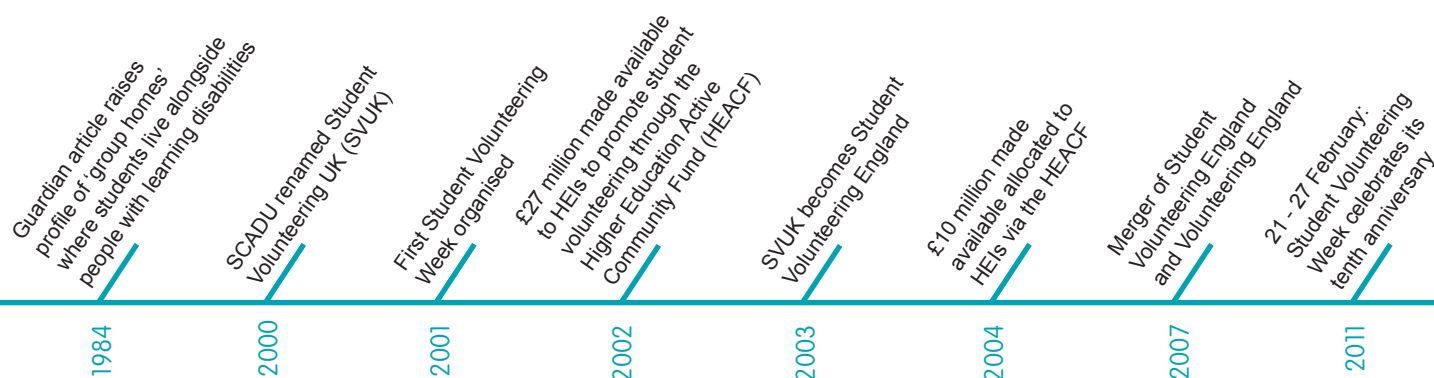
## Conclusions

Despite the changing face of student volunteering over time, the concepts of volunteering, campaigning and fundraising have long been integral to the student experience and remain so today.

Student volunteers have benefited from specialist infrastructure aimed at widening participation, promoting good practice and demonstrating impact, with excellent results. Two research studies published in 2010 confirm that as well as having a range of positive impacts on students' soft skills, personal development and employability, volunteering plays an important role in developing students' community awareness and integration into communities outside the universities.<sup>11</sup>

Another feature of student volunteering and community action through history has been the ability of student groups to respond to changing social needs. In a period of stringent public and voluntary sector cuts, students should remain flexible about the variety of ways they can contribute their time to communities.

A driving force behind student volunteering over the past 130 years has been the leadership that has come from students themselves and this should not be lost, although education institutions and students' unions have much to gain from recognising student volunteering as part of their core strategy. Today, as in earlier generations, students continue to make positive contributions to the wider community through volunteering.



## References

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- <sup>2</sup> NUS (1939) 'Social Service and the University Student', *New University* (Supplement to February edition).
- <sup>3</sup> Brewis, G. (2011) 'Youth in action? British young people and voluntary service 1958 – 1970', in Melanie Oppenheimer and Nicholas Deakin (Eds.) *Beveridge and voluntary action in Britain and the wider British world*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 94-108.
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- <sup>7</sup> Holman, R. (1973) 'Students and Community Action', *Universities Quarterly: Higher Education and Society* 26, no. 2, 187-194.
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- <sup>9</sup> Darwen, J. and Rannard, A. (2011) 'Student volunteering in England: a critical moment', *Education + Training*, Vol. 53, Iss: 2/3
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Volunteering England  
Regent's Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London  
N1 9RL

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