

Student Ambassadors



The Role of Role Models in
Widening Participation

A Go Higher West Yorkshire
Research Report by

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Executive Summary

The Role of Role Models in Widening Participation

Higher Education (HE) student ambassadors are regularly utilised in widening participation work, often in the hope that ambassadors will function as role models for the young people with whom they engage. In this report, Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) shares the findings of a research study conducted with student ambassadors from across our partner institutions.

Drawing from both our primary qualitative research and wider academic literature to explore how student ambassadors function as role models to the young people with whom they work, this report outlines some key considerations in ensuring ambassadors are effective as role models: context and informality; honesty, experience and authenticity; representations of diversity. We also consider what motivates students to become ambassadors. Finally, the report makes a number of recommendations for best practices to enable student ambassadors to carry out widening participation (WP) work in ways which are evidence-based and impact-focused.

“How I see myself is like a scout to these students, so it’s like they [have]... a path they want to go down but they’re a bit hesitant and I’m trying to like put more light on that path so they see things and it’s up to them if they want to make that decision or not... And it’s a very serious responsibility to be able to properly put the light on.”

Key Findings

1. Ambassadors can be powerful peer role models in informal contexts
2. Ambassadors provide a trusted, experience-based and honest source of HE information
3. Student ambassadors can be authentic representations of diversity in HE
4. Most students have both altruistic and instrumentalist motivations for becoming ambassadors



Recommendations For HE Providers

Facilitate informal, interactive encounters with student ambassadors

- Allow opportunities for ambassadors and young people to have one-to-one or small group encounters during outreach activity.
- Ensure that recruitment and training covers the importance of ambassadors being confident in initiating and facilitating informal conversations with young people.
- Ensure time and space is given to enable informal conversations between ambassadors and young people, not just ambassadors ‘playing the role of teacher’.

Ensure diversity within student ambassador cohorts

- Ambassador teams needed to represent a diversity of backgrounds and experiences and include ambassadors from groups underrepresented in HE.
- Utilise Student Union societies to improve recruitment from groups underrepresented in HE.

Prioritise opportunities for young people to develop ‘imagined selves’

- Harness opportunities for learners to imagine themselves within HE settings by giving opportunity during campus visits for ambassadors to talk about where and how they learn, relax and socialise on and near campus, framing this in “you” terms (e.g. “this is where you would have lectures/this is where you can get lunch and meet friends between lectures”).
- Ensure that learners have the opportunity to meet student ambassadors from similar backgrounds and ethnicities will assist learners from groups typically underrepresented in HE to imagine themselves within HE settings.

Introduction

It is received wisdom in widening participation that student ambassadors are central to the work we do with young people. Indeed, data collected from young people by GHWY via evaluations of outreach activity, together with academic studies (including Austin & Hatt, 2005; Gartland, 2013) suggests that student ambassadors can play an important role in how young people experience HE outreach. For young people with no family or community tradition of progression to HE (such as those from widening participation cohorts), ambassadors can provide ‘insider’ information about HE that they might not otherwise have access to through social and family networks (Slack, et al., 2014). Recent research commissioned by Go Higher West Yorkshire suggests that, for young people from backgrounds typically underrepresented in HE, the opportunity to encounter role models ‘like them’ in the form of student ambassadors plays an important part in their experience of HE outreach and education more widely (Cosmos, 2021). However, the mere presence of student ambassadors during outreach activity doesn’t automatically lead to impactful encounters for young people (Gartland, 2015).

Through the collection of rich, qualitative data via surveys and focus groups, and using the valuable insider knowledge of the HE outreach staff with whom the research was co-produced, this research was designed to allow a thorough exploration of the role that ambassadors have in outreach delivery, how they perceive their role, and how they can be most impactful as role models to young people.

Participants demonstrated a keen understanding of how they function as role models during their ambassador work, identifying honesty, authenticity, and relatable peer relationships as being key. Furthermore, they discussed the varied and complex reasons that HE students decide to become ambassadors, with the majority having both altruistic and instrumental motivations for taking on the role.

It is hoped that the findings from this report will enable Go Higher West Yorkshire, our HE partners, and other HE providers across the sector, to best utilise student ambassadors in ways which are impactful and evidence-based. To this end, we offer a number of recommendations for best practices based on the research findings and wider literature.



**STUDENT
AMBASSADOR**

Academic Context

Research shows that young people view student ambassadors as trusted sources of information about HE (Austin & Hatt, 2005). This is particularly the case for young people from families and communities where progression to HE is not ‘the norm’, as they generally do not have access to ‘hot knowledge’: that is, knowledge acquired through social networks, which may be considered more reliable than official (or ‘cold’) knowledge acquired via, for example, an institution’s website or prospectus (Ball & Vincent, 1998). Student ambassadors, in these cases, can be sources of either ‘warm knowledge’ – not as ‘hot’ as that acquired through social networks, but significantly more trusted, and viewed as more authentic, than institutional ‘cold’ knowledge (Slack, et al., 2014) – or, particularly in contexts where ambassadors and young people are able to have in-depth but informal conversations, ‘hot’ knowledge (Gartland, 2013).

Relatedly, the context in which student ambassadors are used has the potential to significantly impact the extent to which young people view them as role models: the more informal the context, such as taking activities out of classroom settings and allowing for casual discussion, the more likely young people are to view ambassadors as aspirational role models (Gartland, 2015). Authenticity is also an important factor, with young people responding better to encounters that involve “engaging with an individual in a dialogic and meaningful way” (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). P.363) rather than more rehearsed, scripted encounters such as lecture-style formats.

Harrison (2018) introduced the idea of ‘possible selves’ as a concept to replace ‘aspiration’ within widening participation work, allowing young people to construct multiple potential representations of where their lives might lead. Building on Harrison’s work, this research suggests that ‘imagined selves’ is an important concept in how young people view student ambassadors, with ambassadors’ peer (or near-peer) relationships with learners allowing the young people encountering ambassadors to imagine themselves ‘in the shoes’ of the ambassadors and, therefore, to imagine themselves as a HE student.

Finally, understanding what motivates students to become ambassadors can be particularly useful to HE providers seeking to recruit to their ambassador teams. Taylor (2008) suggests that student ambassadors are often drawn to the role both because it has the potential to benefit them, for example by enabling them to gain skills for their CVs, and because they had a desire to help others. Ylonen (2010) likewise found that students are often motivated to become ambassadors due to the relatively well paid and flexible nature of the role, alongside more altruistic motivations such as encouraging learners from underrepresented groups to progress to HE.



Methods

Qualitative data was collected through an online survey, which received 102 responses from student ambassadors working at HE providers in West Yorkshire. Initial thematic analysis of the survey data informed the planning of five qualitative focus groups with a total of twenty-seven ambassadors from eight local HE providers. The focus group data was then thematically analysed using NVivo. The themes identified as a result of the survey analysis were used as a starting point, with further themes emerging during analysis.

The research was co-produced with members of WP/educational outreach teams from five local HE providers. The outreach staff were fully involved in the research process: contributing to the design of the survey and focus group questions, co-facilitating each focus group discussion, and contributing to the thematic analysis of focus group data (after receiving training from the lead researcher on using NVivo to conduct thematic qualitative analysis).

The outreach staff involved in data analysis were also former student ambassadors, so were able to bring their previous experience as ambassadors – in addition to their current experience as ambassador managers/outreach practitioners - to the process of analysis, offering an insider perspective. Such ‘dual perspectives’ were also prevalent in the discussions with research participants. During focus groups, all participants devoted significant time to reflecting on their own encounters with ambassadors when they were considering HE or participating in outreach themselves. As such, although the research didn’t directly engage with learners themselves, the data collected reflects two perspectives: HE students’ memories of being a learner encountering student ambassadors, and the perspective of their current work as ambassadors.

Findings

Ambassadors can be powerful peer role models in informal contexts



“You’re speaking the same language as well, you’re not speaking corporate speak, you’re speaking from a point of view that you were just at school, what would you have wanted to hear from someone? You know what they’re going through and like, ‘What was I stressed about during that time?’ and you’ve got that recent experience you can draw on.”

Student ambassadors considered that a key part of what made them successful as role models was shared peer or near-peer relationships with the young people with whom they work. When learners are able to relate to ambassadors – on the grounds of age and shared experience, but factors such as race, gender, religion or disability (see page 10) also contribute – the potential for impactful encounters is higher.

“You can kind of give them your experiences and I think that’s a lot more valuable when it’s more of an informal conversation.”

Participants felt that informal settings and/or one-to-one or small group settings - in which ambassadors can engage learners in a casual discussion about their experiences - were more successful than formal settings. This is supported by research carried out with learners

themselves, which suggests that the informality of the setting is key in ensuring ambassadors are perceived as peer role models (Gartland, 2015) and purveyors of ‘hot knowledge’ (Gartland, 2013). Previous studies show that where ambassadors merely take the place of teachers (for example, delivering presentations or lectures to large groups) they are less effective as they are not perceived by learners to be peers who can offer authentic, relatable experiences (Gartland, 2015).

“When I was visiting universities I was thinking, ‘Can I imagine myself being here?’ So the role of the ambassador... being able to say to someone, ‘You’d do this module here’ might make them think like, ‘I can imagine sitting here and having a lecture’ which I think is quite important, for people to be able to see themselves at that place.”

During focus groups, the participants frequently spoke of ‘imagining’: allowing young people to imagine themselves ‘in the shoes’ of the ambassador (and therefore imagine

themselves in a HE environment) was central to how they felt they functioned as role models. Student ambassadors' encounters with young people should therefore be designed in such a way that allows the potential for learners to imagine themselves as students.

“You kind of relate more to them [student ambassadors] and you feel like you can see yourself fitting in their shoes and what they're saying, it resonates with you.”

Ambassadors provide a trusted, experience-based and honest source of HE information

“I didn't become an ambassador because I wanted to sell the university; I became an ambassador because I wanted to give other prospective students, as I once was, a realistic view of what they might be going in to... I'd rather be honest so that they feel like they've got enough information to then make a really informed decision.”

Participants in both the survey and the focus groups felt that the information and guidance they offer to prospective students is valuable because it allows young people to get a “realistic view” of HE. Respondents felt that young people are more likely to trust ambassadors than ‘cold knowledge’ (Ball & Vincent, 1998) from marketing materials or HE staff. The authenticity that student ambassadors offer, both due to shared peer or near-peer relationships (see page x) and because they have current experience of studying in HE, was considered by the participants to be a central part of ensuring learners can relate to them and thus take on board what they say. They also felt that they were able to offer different kinds of information to young people than academic staff.

“I feel that being a student at the university allowed me to give them my first-hand experience and to offer them advice that perhaps any lecturers were unaware of.”

“I think [young people] kind of trust us more... I think being similar in age, it's also kind of more like a conversation you'd maybe have with... [a friend] you've just met.”



Crucially, participants suggested that one reason young people trust ambassadors is because they are not perceived as being part of the formal recruitment structure within HE. Participants felt the responsibility of this trust keenly and therefore prioritised honesty about their experiences of studying at HE, even when those experiences may have been less positive. Notably, participants were in agreement that they perceived

themselves as being ambassadors for HE generally, rather than for their specific HE provider. Ensuring that learners have the information needed to make informed decisions (even when that decision may ultimately not be in favour of the ambassador's own institution) was an important part of their role.

“I think it's about showing them the whole picture so... just be honest about it, word it in a way that's appropriate so you're not doing the university a disservice but you're not doing the student a disservice either.”

Student ambassadors can be authentic representations of diversity in HE

“I think sometimes there's a stereotype of the type of person that goes to university and especially if you're not from a background where people typically access higher education, that stereotype sort of sticks in your mind more. And, when you do these ambassador shifts, I think you're actively breaking down these misconceptions.”

Many of the ambassadors who took part in this research identified as belonging to a group – or, often, multiple intersecting groups – that are underrepresented in HE, and the need to ensure diversity within student ambassador teams came up frequently in both the survey and in focus group discussions. This idea of diversity was both a motivating factor for students to take on the ambassador role and an important function in how they saw their work as role models. Participants spoke about their experiences, variously, as first-generation students, international students, disabled students, taking non-traditional routes to HE via access courses or BTEC,

studying traditionally male-dominated courses when female, and progressing to HE from communities in which higher education is not ‘the norm’, and they expressed a strong desire to support prospective students with similar experiences by becoming an ambassador.



“Growing up I didn't have any family members who had been to university so higher education events and visits to universities were the only means I had of being able to hear what university was like... Being an ambassador was my way of inspiring other students like me.”

Participants described how meeting ambassadors ‘like them’ had helped them to choose a path to HE and left them with a desire to provide the same support for others. For others, their motivation to become an ambassador was, conversely, because they hadn't encountered student ambassadors ‘like them’, and they wished to ensure that the role models they had lacked would be there for other young people

from similar backgrounds. Relatedly, recent research commissioned by GHWY suggests that learners from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds can view HE providers' attempts to recruit them as inauthentic when this isn't backed up by visible diversity among the role models they use for outreach (Cosmos Engagement, 2021).

Diverse ambassador teams that include groups typically underrepresented in HE are therefore key, and the participants had several suggestions for how institutions could ensure that ambassador teams have diversity.

Institutions working with student union organisations – for example, groups for Black students, or disabled student networks – to recruit more diverse ambassadors were one common suggestion from participants. Focusing on the flexible and relatively well-paid nature of the role was also felt to be important for students who may have other commitments outside of their studies, such as caring responsibilities.

“I feel like seeing people from the same race and gender is very important especially in the [traditionally male-dominated] course I study”

Most students have both altruistic and instrumentalist motivations for becoming ambassadors

Understanding what motivates students to become ambassadors may be of help to HE providers when recruiting, particularly when considering how to ensure diversity within ambassador teams. Through both the survey and focus group discussions, we found that student ambassadors had a variety of motivations for taking on the role, all of which can be categorised as either instrumental (benefiting the ambassador) or altruistic (benefiting others). Corresponding with previous research findings (Taylor, 2008; Ylonen, 2010), the majority of participants expressed motivations that straddled both categories: individuals were largely not entirely altruistic or completely instrumentalist, but a mixture of both.

“That was the main thing that really influenced being a student ambassador, being able to help other people.”

“I really genuinely love my course and it's just such a pleasure to be able to share that with prospective students.”



Altruistic motivations cited by the participants included:

- Offering support to young people and other prospective students (especially students ‘like them’)
- ‘Giving back’ to their institution, course, or city of study
- Providing a role model for young people their own previous encounters with ambassadors

“A large part of me taking on the ambassador role [is] because I wanted to make sure that there were mature students represented.”

Instrumental motivations cited by the participants included:

- Earning a decent hourly wage
- Developing their skills/CV
- Flexible hours
- Improving their own knowledge of their institution

“One of the main things for me was definitely the money for it, so instead of having to go through, like trying to find part time jobs elsewhere, it was a lot easier to apply... to be a student ambassador.”



Concluding Discussion

The Role of Role Models in Widening Participation

Through qualitative co-produced research alongside a review of relevant academic literature, we sought to explore how student ambassadors function as role models in widening participation and outreach work. The recommendations, grounded in evidence both from this research and from existing literature, provide suggestions for how student ambassadors can be used in ways which are most impactful. Future research to evaluate the efficacy of these recommendations in practice – for example, by looking at effects on recruitment and retention rates – as well as research that speaks to young people themselves about student ambassadors, may be useful to develop the findings of this report.

Recommendations

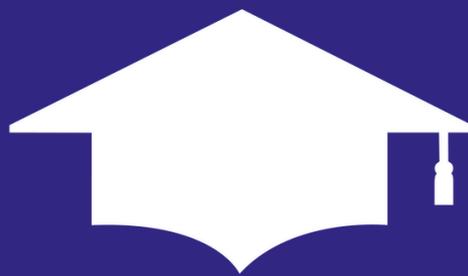
1. **Facilitate informal, interactive encounters with student ambassadors**
2. **Ensure diversity within student ambassador cohorts**
3. **Prioritise opportunities for young people to develop ‘imagined selves’**

Further Reading

For more about ambassadors in formal versus informal settings, see: *Student Ambassadors: ‘Role-models’, Learning Practices & Identities* by C Gartland in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (2015)

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