

## Co-creating outreach: the vital contribution of student ambassadors

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

Student ambassadors play a vital role in the outreach work Higher Education Institutions undertake with school aged students to support underrepresented groups into and through HE. However, there is limited research focused specifically on the role of ambassadors in the pedagogies and practices of outreach. This paper presents findings from two projects that involved student ambassadors in co-creating and undertaking activities in schools. Findings indicate that ambassadors can play a valuable role in in this process which has significant benefits for ambassadors themselves, and helps to ensure outreach activities are student centred and relevant for individual school contexts.

Ambassadors' involvement in the co-creation of outreach activity also chimes with the civic mission of HEIs, by embedding community partnerships, promoting engagement with big societal issues, and encouraging university students and staff to develop a shared sense of civic responsibility.

### Full paper

### Introduction

Higher Education outreach activity has a long history of targeting groups underrepresented in HE (Gartland & Hayton, 2020) and university student employees and volunteers, often entitled student ambassadors, play a vital role in this activity (Gartland, 2020). Socio-economic status (SES) and other intersecting aspects of young people's identity impact on young people's access to and success in the education system (Ingram et al, 2023; Abrahams, 2024). However, whilst there have been significant attempts to measure the impact of outreach interventions, limited attention has been paid to the practices of ambassadors and their role in outreach activity. This paper aims to address this gap by

presenting a pedagogical model for co-creating outreach activity with ambassadors for 12-14 year old secondary school students in schools serving disadvantaged communities

Research specifically focused on student ambassadors highlights the importance of ambassadors' backgrounds and that they share intersecting identities with school students such as subject interests, geographical area, socio-economic status and ethnicity. Having shared identities with school students is seen as important to building effective relationships (Corradini, 2012; Gartland, 2015; 2020). Student ambassadors' subject knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm is also considered significant (Corradini, 2012; Gartland, 2015, 2020; Bissoonauth-Bedford and Stace, 2017; Bonny, 2018; Moison et al., 2020). The importance of other ambassador attributes including leadership skills, communication skills and commitment to helping others are also noted (Nickson and Henriksen, 2014; Gannon, Tracey and Ullman, 2018). There is more limited research that focuses on the pedagogies of outreach with student ambassadors. Recent findings have highlighted the importance of the types of ambassador interactions with school students and such as questioning and forms of ambassador talk (Miel et al, 2023; Halim et al., 2020). Research also highlights the value of student-centred activities in supporting positive relationships between ambassadors and school students, enabling ambassadors to be viewed as role models (Halim et al., 2020; Gartland, 2015,2020). The benefits to ambassadors themselves are noted in building relationships with peers and staff, developing employability skills, and progressing to post graduate study ([Foloștină et al, 2025](#)).

## **Methodology**

This paper presents findings from two projects (an Erasmus+ Higher Education Partnerships project and UKRI funded school based project), focused on working with student ambassadors to support the educational progression of school students from groups under-represented in HE. Student ambassadors from different disciplines led in co-creating outreach activities targeting for 12-14 year old school students from under-represented backgrounds. Ambassadors worked collaboratively with teachers, academics, WP teams, careers staff, and a charitable organisation to co-create outreach activities. An inclusive approach was widely adopted with activities often focusing on whole classes. Activities were piloted in schools across Europe. In England, activities were piloted in a school with high numbers of students on free school meals in an area of multiple deprivation and discussions/focus groups were held with teachers, student ambassadors and school students. Ambassadors additionally filled in a reflection tool to explore the impact of the work on their own development.

## **Findings**

In their work co-creating outreach activities with teachers, academics, WP teams and other stakeholders, student ambassadors were able to act as bridges (De Lima, 2010), connecting and bringing together the expert knowledge of these different professionals. With the advice and support of professionals, ambassadors were able to create or adapt existing student-centred activities and ensure these were relevant to particular classes of KS3 students (Foloștină et al. 2025). Ambassadors were motivated by big societal problems which led to the linking of all activities to the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Foloștină et al. 2025). Learning activities developed through the projects centred on real world contexts and connected to school curricula. Key benefits of this co-creation approach as well as supporting ambassadors in developing relationships and employability skills, included empowering ambassadors through their role in the co-creation process with ambassadors feeling motivated to make a difference. Younger students were enthused by their work with student ambassadors and student-centred activities which allowed more creativity and collaboration than usually encountered in lessons. Ambassadors' presence in school classrooms gave school teachers more confidence to introduce active, hand on, student-centred approaches with whole classes and enriched curricula.

Co-creating activities was found to enable a focus in outreach on effective student-centred pedagogies, and ensures outreach activity is bespoke, relevant and adapted for specific school contexts. Project findings indicated that co-creation can help to build community partnerships, promote engagement across sectors with big societal issues and promote the civic mission of HEIS as the shared responsibility of staff and students.