

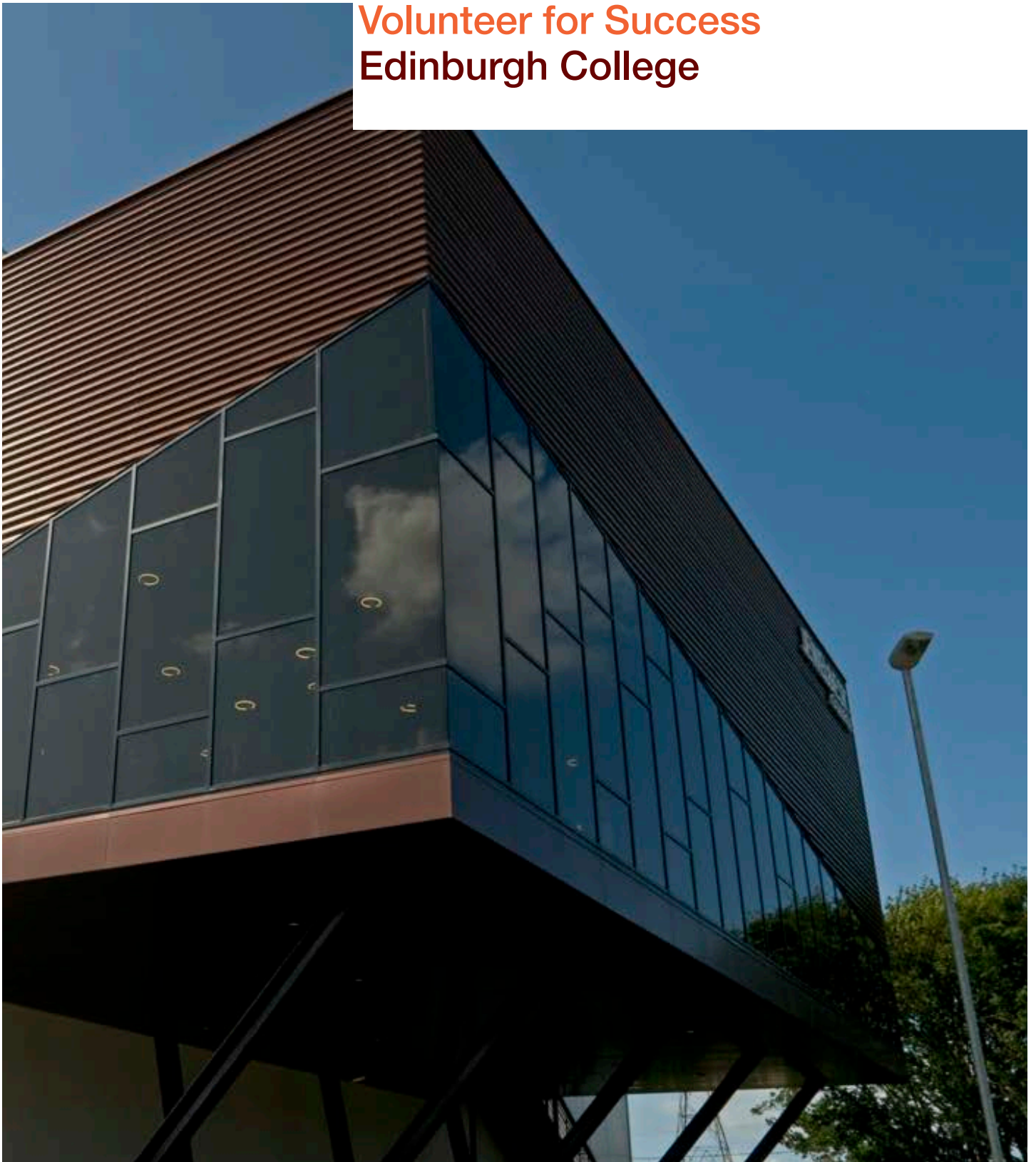
UK Council  
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FOR INTERNATIONAL  
EDUCATION

2016-17 Pilot project  
supporting the international  
student experience in the UK

## Volunteer for Success Edinburgh College



# Volunteer for Success Edinburgh College



This project was highly commended for the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2017.

## Project aims

- To address the significant impact on the publicly-funded Further Education (FE) sector of the removal, in August 2015, of part-time work rights for Tier 4 students. This is a particular challenge for students on vocational courses.
- To equip Edinburgh College's international student graduates with extra skills and confidence gained from volunteering to excel in their future careers.

## Summary of project outcomes

Throughout the academic year 2016-17, Edinburgh College connected more than 30 international students with various local volunteering opportunities, including a charity shop, animal rescue centre and numerous charitable fundraising events. With over 60 volunteering experiences in total, the feedback from students on what they gained from their volunteering and from local charitable partners was overwhelmingly positive.

The significant benefits of volunteering is not limited to those international students with a work prohibition and extends to all Tier 4 students at degree level and above.

## Background to the college

Edinburgh College is one of the largest publicly funded FE colleges in Scotland with approximately 20,000 students across its four campuses. Edinburgh College welcomes a small number of international students each year (including students on Tier 4 (General) visas and short-term student visas), primarily to enrol on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, Access, Higher National Certificate or Higher National Diploma courses, or to enrol on Edinburgh College's International Foundation Programme.

## UKVI rules and guidance on volunteering

International students on Tier 4 (General) or short-term student visas at publicly-funded FE colleges have not had permission to work during their studies since August 2015. A key aim of the project was to address the adverse impact of the removal of such work rights. Critically linked with that aim was to ensure the project did not breach relevant UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) rules on work and volunteering. The Tier 4 Policy guidance and short-term student visas guidance states that all short-term student visa students and Tier 4 migrants can volunteer. However, the relevant UKVI guidance makes an important distinction between *voluntary work* and *volunteering*.



*Xu Jie from China, studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (Academic Year 2016-2017). Volunteer at The Great British Dog Walk, a fundraising event organised by Hearing Dogs for Deaf People.*

*Voluntary work* is only permissible for those migrants with work permission. In developing the project, Edinburgh College's priority as a Tier 4 sponsor was, therefore, to ensure that the College's short-term and Tier 4 visa students participated in permissible *volunteering* opportunities only.

In determining whether an individual is volunteering or doing voluntary work, the relevant UKVI guidance lists factors which are indicative of acting as a volunteer – volunteers do not have an employment contract, do not take the place of an employee and usually help a charity or voluntary or public sector organisation. Voluntary work, however, is normally a more formal contractual arrangement (that is, individuals must attend work at a particular time and carry out specific tasks) and the employer has a contractual obligation to provide work. As detailed below, the project primarily promoted one day ad hoc volunteering

opportunities with local charities. Consequently, the Volunteer for Success project could safely operate within the UKVI work prohibition for Tier 4 (General) and short-term student visa students.

## How the project aims were achieved

### Step 1. Identify suitable volunteering opportunities

Having established the legal framework for the project, the next stage was to identify suitable volunteering opportunities with local charitable organisations. This was achieved through members of the International Team attending the Edinburgh Volunteer Fair, the Recruitment and Jobs Fair at the College or using personal charitable links to organise either one day volunteering opportunities at local charities or selecting one-day charitable fundraising events for international students to take part in.

As well as ensuring the opportunities were UKVI compliant, another key priority was to identify opportunities which were local and allowed students to prioritise their studies. Most volunteering opportunities took place in the Edinburgh area, were accessible by public transport and on Friday afternoons or weekends. In response to requests from charities, most one-day volunteering opportunities were only available for between two to six students.

Volunteer for Success offered a total of 13 volunteering opportunities with seven external charities including Barnardos, SSPCA, Hearing Dogs for Deaf People and Re-Act (Refugee Action) Scotland. The International Team also contacted local college teams to identify suitable internal opportunities, including the Sustainability/Community Garden Team and the Tourism and Hospitality Team. Volunteer for Success offered international students seven college-

based volunteering opportunities, many led by the College's own community garden co-ordinator.

### Step 2. Inform international students and generate interest

Having identified suitable opportunities, the next step was to inform the college's international students about the project and generate interest in volunteering. This was achieved by including a presentation on Volunteer for Success in the international student induction timetable. Delivered in conjunction with Volunteer Edinburgh, the College explained the concept of volunteering and the benefits participation could bring.

In contrast to the previous induction in August 2015 when the International Team had to deliver negative information about the new work prohibition, promoting Volunteer for Success in August 2016 (and again in the January 2017 induction) marked a positive new chapter for the international student experience at publicly FE education colleges. Members of the International Team also informed students about the project in any one-to-one interactions. This was especially important for those students with lower levels of English.

### Step 3. Connect international students with volunteering opportunities

The project aims were achieved by connecting international students with specific local and college-based volunteering opportunities. Students were informed primarily via email of volunteering opportunities exclusive to Edinburgh College students. The Volunteer for Success news email, sent approximately every two months, included details of when and where to meet and a brief description of volunteering duties to expect (eg, sorting donations at Barnardo's or planting seeds in the Community Garden).

Students were further incentivised by offering reimbursement for reasonable

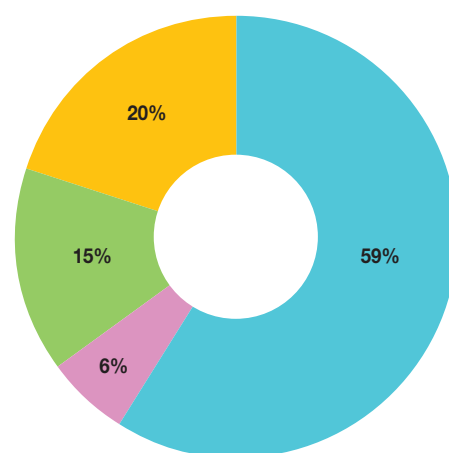
travel and subsistence expenses (allowed by UKVI Volunteering guidance), a Certificate of Participation and advice on their eligibility for the college's brand new 'International Volunteer of the Year' award. (See the note on the 2017 winner at the end of this report).

## Breakdown of participants by nationality and visa type

Approximately one third of the college's international students participated in at least one volunteering opportunity, with some students choosing to take part in several opportunities. Students representing over a dozen nationalities took part, including Colombia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, China and Belarus. The project was promoted to all our international students as well as to selected short-stay student groups.

Of the two-thirds of international students that chose not to participate, the majority were studying on visas that allowed them to work (eg, Points Based System visas or dependant visas) or were British/European passport holders without the requisite ordinary residence to qualify as home students as demonstrated below:

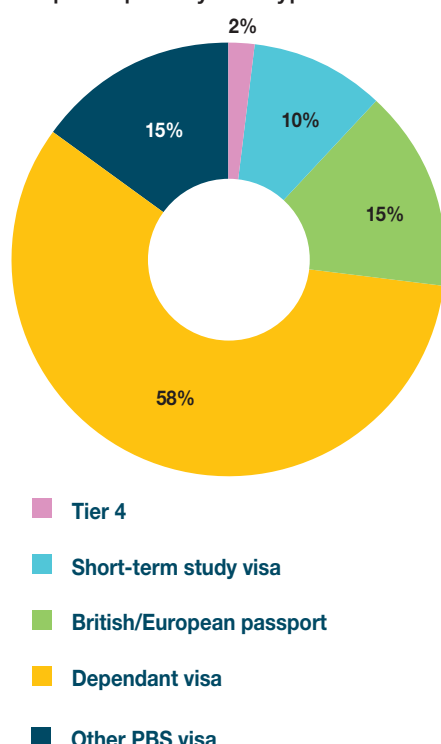
Participant by visa type



- Short-term study visa
- Tier 4
- British/European passport
- Dependant/other PBS visa



Non-participant by visa type



## Project finances and staff resources

Expenses were lower than projected at only £400. This was incurred mainly on volunteer reimbursement, travel and purchasing trophies for the new International Volunteer award. Most students surveyed in the focus group in December confirmed they would have volunteered even if no reimbursement had been offered. This demonstrates that the project can be continued in future academic years without any capital investment.

Launching and co-ordinating the Volunteer for Success project did, however, require staff resources. The college estimated 15 hours for the total initial project set-up time, including facilitating initial contacts with charities and arranging one-day volunteering opportunities. About seven hours in total were spent by the International Team towards the end of the academic year to prepare individual certificates of participation and to select a winner of the new International Student Volunteer award. Approximately two and a half hours

per week were spent on co-ordinating the project (including emails to students, charities etc.). Other teams at the college also assisted with the Volunteer for Success Project; the Marketing Team designed the project logo and the Events Team coordinated the inclusion of the new International Student Award in the end of year Awards ceremony.

## Student feedback and key findings

The college facilitated a Volunteer for Success focus group in December to gain crucial feedback from international students. All students were positive about the benefits of volunteering:

**“Good opportunity to meet new people, improve your CV and helpful to improve English. By volunteering outside College you hear different accents and practice communication skills.”**  
(Talal, Yemen)

**“Particularly enjoyed the Community garden project as it was an opportunity to learn a new skill.”**  
(Pin, Taiwan)

**“Amazing experience! During the Re-Act project, I learnt new vocabulary, met new people and learned more about the political situation in Syria.”**  
(Juan, Colombia)

The College identified two key findings from the student survey:

1. It was important that Volunteer for Success was led by the International Team to be able to identify suitable volunteer opportunities.

By leading on and delivering the Volunteer for Success project, the International Team could ensure visa students did not risk breaching their visa conditions. It also broke down the

traditional barriers to international students integrating into local community projects (eg, language, lack of local knowledge, administrative hurdles).

2. The majority of students preferred to take part in ad hoc one-day volunteering opportunities rather than commit to a regular volunteering role which may interfere with their studies.

This preference for ad hoc volunteering with local charities meant the project could safely operate within the UKVI rules on permissible volunteering by Tier 4 and Short Term visa students.

## Benefits of Volunteer for Success to Edinburgh College and international students

The project has been a success both in terms of benefits to international students and to Edinburgh College.

International students benefited from the project through the enrichment of their student experience: it provides the opportunity to equip themselves with transferable skills and confidence to excel in future careers and even assist with their re-integration to their home countries. The project enhances their CV and employability, improves their English and gives students a greater sense of belonging at Edinburgh College and in wider local communities. These benefits apply to all students and not only to those visa students with a work prohibition.

In terms of benefits to Edinburgh College, Volunteer for Success provides an essential framework to nurture the desire of international students to enhance their employability and creates a college culture of inclusion that rewards and celebrates students who give back to their local community. The project favourably enhances the profile of

international students at the college and in the wider local community. It also represents an additional offering to students who join the college from commercial groups and this can be highlighted in proposals and tenders. For example, a group of Panamanian students who joined Edinburgh College on a short 4-month course were able to join the project this year.

### Future of Volunteer for Success

Having run a successful pilot of Volunteer for Success, the intention is to continue with the Volunteer for Success project at Edinburgh College, offering suitable volunteering opportunities to the college's international students and selected short-stay student groups. The project framework is now in place (including template emails and certificates, project logo (see below) and International Student Volunteer Award) and can therefore easily be rolled out in future academic years. In particular, key college and charitable contacts have been identified with the goal of adding one or two more charitable contacts each year to diversify volunteering opportunities on offer.

### Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Recognise that all international students can significantly benefit from volunteering during their UK studies (not just visa students with a work prohibition).
- A Volunteer for Success project is viable without any financial commitments.
- Identify and promote volunteering opportunities which do not breach work prohibition rules (ie focus on one day/ad hoc volunteering)
- Keep volunteering opportunities local and accessible by public transport.

The Volunteer for Success project framework can be duplicated in other FE and HE institutions, offering international students the opportunity to enrich their UK student experience in a unique and UKVI-compliant manner.

### Further information

**The project was led by Anna Le Gall**, International Advice and Compliance Officer, Edinburgh College who has since left the college.

**Contact** details are now:

**Sarah Gore**, International Business Manager  
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### International Student Volunteer of the Year Award 2017

The Edinburgh College's new International Student Volunteer of the Year Award 2017 was won by Danny Guillermo Canas Rojas. Danny was an English Language Scholarship student from Colombia, who studied Academic English from August 2016 – June 2017. He was a great supporter and ambassador for the International Team's Volunteer for Success Project. He regularly volunteered for the children's charity Barnardos, helping out at the charity's Leith Store. Danny also volunteered on several occasions during the year with Re-Act, a Scottish refugee charity which gathers donations from the public to provide to refugees in the worst affected areas in Calais, Greece, Syria, Lebanon as well as refugee families arriving into Edinburgh. Danny also volunteered at the College's own Christmas Fair raising funds for Cash for Kids. Danny's extensive



*Danny Guillermo Canas Rojas with his International Student Volunteer of the Year Award*

volunteering commitments showed his desire to help vulnerable people, both locally and internationally and he was a highly deserving winner of our first International Student Volunteer of the Year award.

Interview with Danny at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FF6btj\\_9g4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FF6btj_9g4&feature=youtu.be)



**Edinburgh College**  
**Volunteer**  
**for Success**