

FE - What is Social Action and how can it help the campus community?

Social action is growing in popularity, as it provides people the opportunity to act on many of the issues or topics they discuss during interfaith or belief dialogue. One of the major frustrations for students in the past with traditional methods of inter faith and belief activity has been the lack of action following dialogue.

What is Social Action?

There is no fixed definition of social action but it is often labelled as civil society or community engagement. The basic meaning of social action is:

a number of people coming together to serve their community, whether that is the town or city they live in, their faith community or their college or university.

Social action can involve direct work with people in need or it can also mean bringing people together to campaign on an issue they feel strongly about. The point of social action is to foster relationships between often disparate people to achieve a collective goal. Social action projects can include activities like:

- Mentoring and befriending
- Community cafes and drop-in centres
- Work with the homeless and vulnerable and marginalised groups
- Music and arts projects
- Work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Many people get involved in social action projects because it encourages others to engage further with community and because they feel an obligation to improving their community and society overall.

Faith based social action

For many faith and belief groups and individuals, engaging with social reform is a

long standing part of their identity and the spiritual teachings of their faith. Thus many students arrive at their colleges with experience of engaging with their communities through their place of worship and various volunteering or community outreach programmes they may run. This can be linked with activities students do in their community.

As social action projects by faith communities are long standing there have been many sources of support for faith based social action projects from various third sector and local government sources. Social action projects are now more important than ever because they bring together diverse communities with a single goal.

How can it help the campus community?

Successful social action can benefit the college community in a number of ways:

- By improving the college campus (e.g. litter pick ups, planting barren areas, painting walls)
- Increasing the visibility of student lead action
- Demonstrating positive relationships between different groups coming together

It can also build and/or deepen partnerships between students' unions, student faith societies, local charities, and voluntary or community groups. Social action projects can also facilitate the following:

- Building skills and confidence for participation in society across groups
- Assisting in bringing the voices of the most marginalised groups onto your campus
- building structures and processes that last over time and that can respond to community needs
- Help to build social cohesion; groups which otherwise can be isolated work with others in the community

Interfaith and belief 'challenge'

An 'inter faith and belief challenge' is a one off community volunteer activity that brings students from different faith backgrounds together for cooperative social action. It is a particularly good activity where you have limited resources and availability from students; and as a trial activity for engaging students in collaborative volunteer programmes.

The challenge is for 10 or more people from different faith backgrounds to come together to contribute to the local community or environment by volunteering for four to six hours. It provides an opportunity for students to volunteer together on a shared interest or common concern in their local community. During volunteering together opportunities for informal dialogue occur. Organisers can also incorporate an hour for facilitated dialogue, asking participants three questions to start discussion:

- What motivated or inspired you to participate in today's inter faith challenge? What does your religious/belief tradition say about volunteering (or the issue you are responding to e.g. environmental conservation)
- What impact do you feel the group made?
- What have you learnt from this experience?

In a college this part of the activity can be done after the event within the classroom. This can then allow learners the opportunity to research what different faiths say about volunteering or the particular community issue addressed through the volunteering. You could also involve the chaplains or local community leaders to provide these perspectives.

Case study – Bucks Students' Union

Interfaith Community Clean Up

In 2013 – 2014 Bucks' were given £500 from the Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief project to run a number of interfaith social action projects on their campus.

Bucks held two interfaith projects in Interfaith Week in November. The first project was held in conjunction with the local Jewish, Christian, Muslim communities (JCM), where they constructed 'have your say pods', students were able to give anonymous verbal or written comments with regards to religion. The JCM, alongside the Head Brother of ISOC and Chair of the Christian Union also put together slides of provocative statements about religion, to encourage students to leave responses.

The second project was an interfaith community clean up where students of any faith or non-faith as well as community leaders, took part in a litter pick past places of religious worship in the local area. Afterwards students were invited to a multi-cultural buffet at the Students' Union.

More information and resources

[Public Spirit](#) – a forum for academics, policymakers and the voluntary sector to discuss faith related public policy and projects.

[Faith based Regeneration Network](#) – the leading multi-faith umbrella organisation for faith based community development and social action

[The Inter Faith Network](#) – advances public knowledge and promotes good relations between different faiths.

[Together in Service](#) – a Department of Communities and Local Government initiative which support faith groups in undertaking new multi-faith volunteering projects at local level.

[FaithAction](#) - a network of faith-based and community organisations serving their communities by delivering public services