Good Practice Guide for Senior University Staff

Enhancing the learning in Australian University Student Volunteering

Volunteering *to* **learn**

Why do universities support student volunteering?

- To attract students
- To boost student retention
- To help students apply academic learning
- To give students leadership skills and experience
- To enable international students to immerse themselves in the local culture
- To help students develop soft skills, (e.g. communication and problem-solving skills)
- To increase students' employability
- To enrich the student experience
- To build relationships with the local community
- To build a good reputation for the university in the community

" *Some of the best universities in the world are very active in volunteering and service learning and we aspire to that.* "
Institutional Representative

What is University Student Volunteering?

University Student Volunteering refers to students acting in a volunteer capacity in a range of organisations, both inside and outside universities. This is the term adopted by this project.

When we do similar tasks not through an organisation, we are helping others out. There is debate about whether students required to volunteer are genuinely volunteering. The relationship between volunteering and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) (e.g. service learning, internships, practica and work experience) are part of this debate. For a discussion of the complexities of definitions refer to the *Concept Guide for Volunteering Terminology*.

This guide is a resource for senior university staff developing or redeveloping their university student volunteer based programs based on data gathered for this project. Details of the project are in the back of this guide.

What do we mean by Good Practice?

Good practice refers to those activities, structures, situations and practices which provide benefit to students, universities, and host organisations in university student volunteering, primarily in relation to enhancing learning. We are using the term 'Good Practice' in this project in preference to best practice because our aim is not to encourage the same practices in all settings. Rather we aim to capture what works, and highlight what may not, in an effort to assist students, universities and host organisations to enhance university student volunteering.

Volunteering to learn or learning to volunteer?

Not all university student volunteering is undertaken to enhance the learning associated with the degree or qualification being studied. Where the activity is undertaken for credit, there will be specific learning objectives or statements of skills to be developed. Students take up volunteering of their own volition, for a range of reasons. Even those students who volunteer for reasons other than learning benefit and learn from the activity. The learning which takes place includes a range of life skills, including leadership, time management and organisational skills, and an appreciation of what it is like to be an active volunteer and give back to the community. This type of learning is as valuable as the learning associated with courses of study and contributes to university goals of developing engaged citizens. For more on the learning aspect of university student volunteering see the *Guide on Learning from Volunteering*.

Organising student volunteer programs

Student volunteering programs can be organised in many ways which depend on several factors including historical roots, university strategies, the learning outcomes of individual study programs and the efforts of individual staff and students. Programs can be:

- **University-driven** – established as part of a university strategy often linked to developing employability or leadership skills and found in career services or leadership centres

- **Student-university partnerships** – student-driven programs, which have been brought within the university's control and are run in partnership

- **Faculty-based** – volunteering within specific academic programs, often for students to gain relevant discipline-specific experience

- **Guild/ student union clubs and societies** – students volunteering for a club

- **External organisations operating on campus** – examples include the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)

- **Integrated student volunteer programs** – where the university has strategically linked all programs across campus together with shared outcomes for students

- **Student-driven** – typically set up by the guild or student union and operated by students for students but may be supported with paid staff

See also *University Program Manager* and *Host Organisation Guides*.

" *I would love to find more ways that we can make students feel more rewarded from that experience and make the most of those unique opportunities that the university offer.* "
Institutional Representative

Different University Student Volunteers

Our evidence is that there are three broad types of university student volunteers:

- **Academic** – This university student has assessable coursework requirements associated with their volunteer activity.

- **Facilitated** – This university student volunteer is not undertaking assessable work but their relationship with the host organisation is facilitated by the university, or a university associated program, or organisation such as a volunteer hub.

- **Independent** – This university student volunteer undertakes their volunteer activity independently of the university, but will still have study commitments which make demands on their time.

Other types of student volunteering are:

Traditional volunteering	Befriending, mentoring, tree planting, hospital volunteering,
Long term volunteering	Committed long term member of a group who volunteers
Short term volunteering	Semester long programs, summer holiday programs.
Episodic volunteering	Short term, sporadic or intermittent volunteering includes events and festivals
Project volunteering	Student or student group completes project such as developing a communication plan for nonprofit
Micro volunteering	Monitoring and counting wildlife, citizen science
Online volunteering	Online tutoring, creating updating webpages, blogging for a cause
International volunteering	Group activities or individual placement with nonprofit in foreign country
University service	Orientation, open days, peer mentoring
Student service	Student government, student club leadership
Activism	Campaigning for a cause

See also *Concept Guide for Terminology*.

Effective university volunteer programs:

- have **champions** and achieve buy in from all stakeholders across the university.
- have been properly **planned** before implementation. The university is clear about the strategic goals for the student volunteer program and adopts the most appropriate model for program delivery.
- have an appropriate **structure** which reflects the intent of the program and provides the support needed, as well as providing an the interface between the faculties and central areas.
- establish **policies** to provide clarity for all in terms of expectations, roles and responsibilities – particularly important as the arrangement will reflect on the image of the university through the behaviour and actions of their students.
- provide **job security and ongoing funding** for staff delivering the program to provide stability, allow for long-term relationships with external organisations and enable proper succession planning.
- develop **strategic partnerships** both on and off-campus and have clear guidelines on which organisations can deliver programs or host student volunteers.
- provide **access** to student volunteering to all students: internal, external and off-shore.
- offer a **variety** of volunteering opportunities to cater for different needs and abilities.

Keeping it legal

All volunteering activities associated with the university have some form of legal framework. Formally arranged volunteering within a university is incorporated within university legal structures. In many cases legal agreements are drawn up between universities and host organisations. All parties should be familiar with what they cover:

- the nature of the host, student and university relationship;
- the obligations of all involved;
- what restrictions there are, if any;
- what liabilities there may be;
- how insurances are arranged and what they cover; and
- the period of the agreement.

These are in addition to the more broadly applicable legal provisions which apply to any workplace, such as confidentiality, or harassment.

While it is not possible to provide individual information to cover all circumstances, nor is it appropriate to provide legal advice, all student volunteers, managers and host organisations should be aware of the specific provisions which apply, including those relating to employment law.

What makes an effective university volunteer program?

" *It's good to have a really sound foundation in some values that the volunteers and those running the programs are aligned with.* "
Institutional Representative
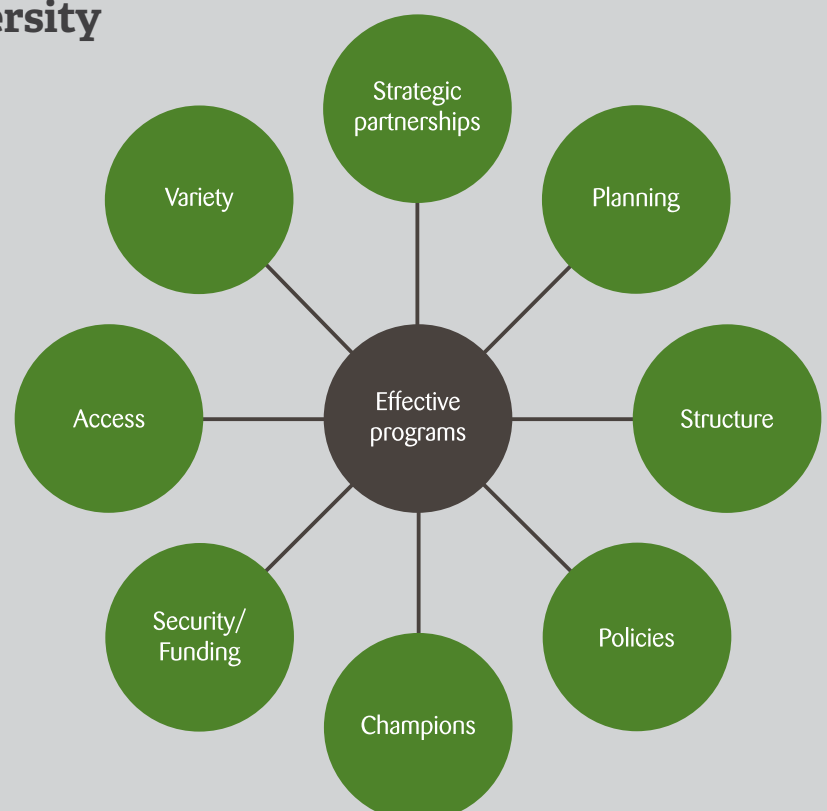
Trends in student volunteering

Our project identified that student volunteering is extremely dynamic and programs are constantly evolving. Influencing factors include a change in university leadership; changes in student demand and study patterns; concerns about student employability and the university's social responsibility; and efforts to differentiate the student experience at each university.

The key trends that we identified in our project at the university level were:

Volunteering organised by careers offices to boost employability

Integrating programs across the university

A new emphasis on service learning

Trends

Universities taking more control from student-led volunteer programs

Bundling volunteering with leadership

Secondary transcripts to recognise volunteering

Challenges for universities

The specific challenges identified in our data include:

- **Starting up a volunteer program from the very beginning** – the advice is to start small and gradually increase the number of volunteer placements each semester.

- **Building relationships with host organisations** – it takes time to create meaningful partnerships and it's better to have a few good friends than many casual acquaintances.

- **Coordinating activities across the university** – this is important in developing a university-wide volunteer strategy and if student volunteering is to be recognised through a formal transcript.

- **Finding ways to engage off-campus students** – challenging but not impossible! Students can volunteer online and many universities have volunteer programs at their off-shore campuses.

- **Staff and student turnover** – like any program, losing good leaders means that there is a constant cycle of recruitment both to run the program and participate in it.

- **Recognising the volunteer activity** – what is the best way for students and the university? Transcripts, references, award ceremonies, t-shirts, parties are some of the formal and not-so-formal ways of rewarding students' contributions.

About the Project

Volunteering to Learn is an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded project led by Murdoch University and involving Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Macquarie University and the University of Western Australia.

Methodology

The project relied on a qualitative approach to develop an understanding of the different perspectives on university student volunteering from a range of stakeholders.

The project team sought to collect data in a way that allowed for inclusion of the voices of stakeholders. The multi-stage data collection involved familiarisation with the extant literature, a mapping exercise to capture the publicly available information on university student volunteering from all of the Australian university websites at one point in time, and an extensive suite of interviews conducted with: students, host organisations, participating universities, and peak volunteering bodies.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by members of the project team, who developed and used a set of interview frameworks to ensure some level of consistency across the various interviews with different stakeholder groups. The interview frameworks were informed by the literature, the mapping exercise, and the pooling of knowledge and experience of the team. An interpretivist approach was used in the analysis of data.

Drafts of the Guides were sent to our reference group, and a group of critical friends for feedback, and a series of workshops were held to further refine the guides before they were finalised.

Other Good Practice Guides:

• Students
• University Program Managers
• Employers
• Host Organisations

Plus Concept Guides on:

• Terminology
• Enhancing Learning

The Research team would like to thank Volunteering Western Australia for the provision of many of the images in these brochures.

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