



Guide on Learning from Volunteering

Enhancing the learning in Australian
University Student Volunteering





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. For a discussion of the complexities of definitions refer to the *Concept Guide for Volunteering Terminology*.

This guide discusses the diversity of learning from volunteering by university students identified in data gathered for this project. Details of the project may be found on the back of this guide.

Learning

Our evidence is that the learning associated with university student volunteering is wide and varied. Partly, this relates to the type of volunteering activity and the different expectations of participants. It may also vary with the student and the relationship with the host organisation.

“ Some [learning from volunteering] fits broadly under emotional intelligence ... how to get on with people, show up on time, all those sorts of things, how to be a team player, through to more difficult stuff like problem solving in teams, project management as well, how to pitch ideas, how to persuade people, how to negotiate, how to get on with people who are different from you and don't do what you expect. All those things that you encounter in your workplace that no one actually teaches you. ”

University administrator

What do universities expect students to learn through volunteering?

- Academic learning applied to a community or workplace setting
- How to relate to others and build relationships with the local community
- Employability skills
- Cultural competence
- Leadership skills
- 'Soft' skills, such as communication, problem-solving, listening, following instructions
- Learning about other cultures (especially in international volunteering), and community issues

Much of the learning reported from volunteering relates to Graduate Attributes, which can be developed in a multitude of settings – not necessarily in a discipline specific context. Some data suggested that a context not related to the discipline of study may be more beneficial and offer new insights for students. This kind of learning is reported for a range of volunteer activities, whether for credit or extra to the curriculum, but is learning that is not easily provided in a classroom setting. However, many host organisations do not distinguish between students who are volunteering for credit and those who are not.



Learning students have identified as emerging from university student volunteering

- Soft skills
- Leadership skills and experience
- Communication skills
- Self awareness
- Professional or technical skills related to their studies
- About career opportunities for their future job
- How to think critically about life and future decisions

Valuing volunteering

An important component of the learning is helping students to evaluate/value their volunteering on paper, online and in person as well as enjoying the experience.

Why 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. The evidence is strong that 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.

What do students expect to learn/gain from volunteering?

- Experience of helping others
- Confidence
- Develop new skills, which may or may not be directly related to their studies
- Practical experience useful on their CV and advantageous in job seeking
- Employability skills
- Make a difference
- Confirmation of their values
- New friends and networks
- Know their skills and limitations
- Enjoyment

“ Firstly leadership skills, it gains my confidence and getting in touch with working in real life and dealing with real people, ... and it’s also for a great cause, that’s another drive for me. ”

Student volunteer

“ There’s a personal motivation of wanting to develop myself and who I am as a person, ... there are also other benefits as on your transcript it looks really great... but the people most involved in volunteering don’t do it because of that, they do it because they get satisfaction, they like seeing other people be happy and satisfied. ”

Student volunteer

“ You can talk about leadership all you want and how you should best go about doing it, but it’s not until you actually do it, is how you learn... ”

Student leader

“ I’ve always seen the value of volunteering because it gives you a lot of experiences, it allows you to interact with a lot of people who can potentially give you opportunities in the future, and also a sense of belonging, which I think is really important in any kind of community, in many different kinds of communities and the bigger community as well. ”

Student volunteer

“ Independence, developing personal resilience skills, developing cross-cultural communication skills, developing leadership and teamwork skills, just the ability to try to adapt to a new culture, learn new things. Because of my degree ... there were direct benefits. ”

Student, international volunteering

What do hosts and other groups expect students to learn from volunteering?

- Employability skills, “all the things that employers say that they want over and above a specific discipline”
- Life experience
- Think about things in a different way
- Enjoyment
- New relationships and networks
- Responsibility

It is not only the student volunteers who learn through the volunteering experience. Host organisations report learning by paid staff, often related to innovative or different ways to tackle an issue, and learning by beneficiaries of the volunteering (especially in a school or community setting). Organisations also learn about the capabilities of future graduates and some have offered jobs to those who have volunteered in their organisations.

Host organisation representative:

“ [Student volunteers are] getting some guidance and advice outside the academic world – they’re getting it from the real life world that they’re going to step into when they finish their studies. ”

“ what they’re doing in a real life situation is in fact learning something, which is to do with service within a community, or it’s to do with integrating their study and project work. ... our volunteers are doing Work Integrated Learning whether uni recognises it as such or not. ”

“ ...students learn about themselves and the world of work and a way can use their skills in the community. ”



Questions for reflection

- Why are universities encouraging university student volunteering?
- Are learning outcomes similar whether or not students receive credit for participating in volunteer activities?
- Will learning outcomes change if volunteering is no longer a choice?

Keeping it legal

One area of learning for student volunteers is the legal frameworks around volunteering, work and employment.

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.



Challenges

Documenting learning

As universities encourage more students to experience volunteering or build 'volunteering' into their courses, the greater the need is to develop partnerships that offer 'quality' volunteering experiences and effective ways of documenting outcomes. The most usual method of documenting volunteering is in hours completed. Many universities don't have a formal process for documenting learning outcomes, especially when volunteering is extracurricular. In the past, anecdotal evidence or surveys during the volunteering experience have been the main methods of documenting the volunteering experience and any learning.

One university has developed an online survey, which includes closed and open-ended questions including skills gained as well as positive and negative aspects of the experience. As with any online survey the difficulty is getting all students to complete them and response rates can be low. With a systematic approach, learning outcomes can be linked to particular student cohorts and types of volunteering. In another university an academic has set up an online forum, resembling Facebook, to which students have to make five posts. However, moderating it is time consuming for staff.

Staff involvement

Program managers and student leaders are often more involved when volunteering is outside the curriculum. Whether it is related to a student's discipline, interest, or is co-curricular, or not related to the student's studies and extracurricular, what students learn is often dependent to how much they engage with the experience.

Academic staff are more involved in volunteering related to the discipline area. They learn about the current realities of the workplace through feedback from student volunteers. Others further develop partnerships for research or inviting representatives from host organisations as guest speakers.

“ For every activity and placement we do, for every activity that we do we're trying to make sure that it meets the learning outcome of the unit because obviously if they are doing it through a discipline based unit we have to make sure that it is actually contributing towards what they should be learning. ”

Academic staff member

Encouraging learning

All types of volunteering can lead to learning. From this project it is evident that there are a number of factors that may contribute to learning and level of learning.

- Having organised volunteering activities
- Allowing student choice of volunteering experiences, type of volunteering and level of commitment
- Clarifying expectations, with clear understanding about the role of the university and host organisation in assisting students, whether for credit or not
- Encouraging self-reflection, either formal or informal, so that students can articulate the learning gained through volunteering, and its impact.
- Host organisations providing feedback to students on their volunteering

“ There isn't capacity [in most universities], and it surprises me, there doesn't seem to be an understanding, to be able to track what they are doing and actually report on what they are achieving, and I don't see how they can grow what they are doing or demonstrate the value of what they are doing, if they are not tracking it. Not producing the hard data that is needed and not just lovely anecdotal stories. You still need these. ”

**External Program Manager,
across multiple universities**



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
- Senior University Staff
- University Program Managers
- Host Organisations
- Employers

Plus Concept Guides on:

- Terminology

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