



Good Practice Guide for University Program Managers

Enhancing the learning in Australian
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*.

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 managers and coordinators based on data gathered for this project. Details of the project are on the back of this guide.

Types of Host Organisations

There are four main types of host organisation identified in this project:

- Those that involve student volunteers in the same way as any other volunteer
- Those that have particular arrangements / assignments for student volunteers
- Universities that involve volunteers
- Student organisations

Not all organisations fit neatly into these types, and some organisations are a hybrid. See also *Guide for Senior University Staff*.

Different University Student Volunteers

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

- **Academic** – This university student volunteer has assessable coursework 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 of their time

Equity of Access – University program managers need to be aware of the issues associated with volunteering for students on limited budgets who may not be able to afford to spend time on unpaid work, or who may need to be able to access reimbursement for expenses incurred while volunteering.

Where do I start?

Your local or state volunteer centre, other experienced university program managers, careers and volunteer hubs on your campus will be a good source of advice on where to start and who to talk to.

Macro/University wide volunteering considerations:

- Having **champions** and getting buy-in from all stakeholders across the hierarchy.
- Proper **planning** before implementation. That is, identify the strategic reasons for the university wanting to facilitate the arrangements, to what end, for whose benefit, and how to ensure the program runs well. Forward planning also includes proactively dealing with demarcation issues, if any.
- The **Structure** needs to be appropriate to reflect the intent of the program and the support needed. Appropriate arrangements also need to be in place, with a clear and well understood interface between Faculties and Centres.
- **Policies** are needed for the arrangements/programs to provide clarity for all in terms of expectations, roles, and responsibilities. This is especially important since the arrangements will reflect on not only the students, but also the image of the university through the conduct, behaviour, and actions of their students.
- **Job security and funding** – if the positions of the managers and coordinators of the program are not secure this reduces the sense of stability for the arrangements, and may possibly reflect on the program's value proposition. There is a need for stability, a sense of continuity, and proper succession planning to position the program well for best results.
- **Strategic partnerships** – who should the university partner with? Should this only be with non profits so as not to take away paid working positions from others? These can be vexed questions, with the answers varying from university to university and being related to the strategic intent of the initiative, and individual volunteering programs.

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.

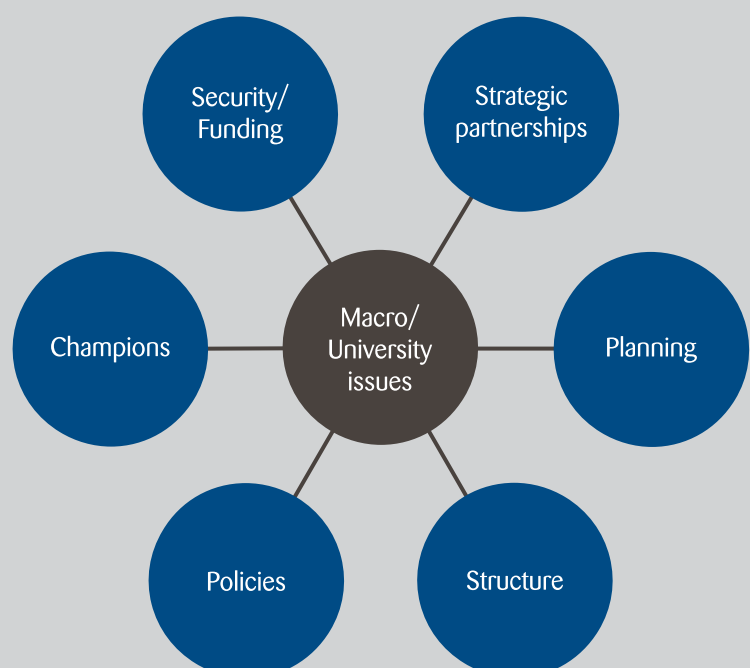
These are in addition to the more broadly applicable legal provisions which apply to any workplace, such as confidentiality, harassment.

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 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 host organisations, students and their universities to enhance university student volunteering.

Student volunteering issues for program managers and coordinators





Micro/Managing the program volunteering considerations:

- Realistic and appropriate **advertising and promotion**.
- Consider a proper **induction** regarding expectations and requirements of students.
- **Risk management** procedures need to be documented and monitored, including: health and safety issues; duty of care; students with medical conditions; and personnel checks such as police and those for working with children. Group volunteering programs are easier to organise compared to individual arrangements due to reduced effort as a result of economies of scale.
- **Timing** – indications are that programs run earlier in the semester are more successful than later (due to lower student workload).
- **Equity** – external students may feel excluded due to their inability to be directly involved.
- **Communication** – constant and open communication is necessary especially in outreach activities nationally and internationally.
- **Training** is needed, expectation management, and information on clear boundaries for operations. Cross-cultural issues also need attention especially for overseas placements.
- There is a requirement for **social support** for students as well as coordinators, especially in dealing with delicate matters such as refugee issues.
- **Provision of feedback/evaluation** and building quality loops to review and tighten arrangements.
- **Assessment** – for credit bearing units, consistent criteria are needed. There is also a requirement to ensure the placements are equivalent in terms of scope and range of activities.
- **Record keeping** – there is a need for proper documentation and continuity, for example relating to appropriate handover provisions.
- **Health issues** – burn out by students and associated staff is common in volunteering. There is a need to balance various competing priorities. Information should be provided on risk factors, and there should be careful monitoring of both staff and students, and the way they respond to the activities.
- **Management of performance** including behavioural issues and dependability. Managing volunteers is more difficult than managing paid staff. For example, sometimes attendance issues are a function of competing priorities and casual work which does not allow students to know their (paid) work schedules in advance.
- It may be useful to **have generic units** for service learning. These units can create a structure and framework for student activities, and allow consistent evaluation and assessment of activities.



Dispelling myths

- **Myth: Students are unreliable**

Our evidence is that they can be dedicated, enthusiastic, skilled and loyal. Matching expectations helps with this.

- **Myth: Students are hard work**

There might be some additional work to co-ordinate, supervise or train but if these are set up for one they can apply to others.

- **Myth: I don't have the skills/time to supervise**

It is possible to set up teams of student volunteers to self supervise, or assign a more experienced volunteer to help.

- **Myth: Volunteers are not as good as paid employees**

Volunteers are as committed, as hard working and can be as professional as paid employees. They do, however, require training and supervision like paid employees.

- **Myth: Volunteer work on a CV is not as good an indicator of potential as paid work**

Skills and experience gained from volunteer activity can be as good, or even better, than experience gained in paid employment.

What are some strategies to enhance university student volunteering?

- Ensure appropriate policies are in place and the structure and funding are appropriate for outcomes sought.
- Seek out strategic partnerships and ensure all stakeholders are aware of expectations, their rights, and specific requirements.
- Seek out one or more senior champions for the program.
- Ensure appropriate planning has taken place to avoid demarcation issues and conflict.
- Communication will need to be constant and open between all stakeholders, including feedback on the performance of the volunteers.
- Ensure appropriate feedback loops are put in place to evaluate activities of the program.
- Risk management procedures will need to be fully documented and duly followed.
- All stakeholders should receive an induction and training as necessary for the tasks they are to undertake.
- Allowance should be made for the provision of formal and informal social support as required, especially in difficult and emotive volunteering activities and settings.
- The scheduling of volunteering activities will need to take into consideration the competing priorities of students (including their paid work), and semester and study requirements (in terms of periods where assessments are due).
- Advertising and promotional material need to present a realistic view of the placements and associated requirements.
- Volunteers need to be very clear as to what is expected from them during their volunteer activity.
- For credit bearing units, there will need to be provisions put in place to ensure comparable and equitable assessment of activities for consistency, to meet academic requirements, and possibly accreditations.
- Provision should be made for possible alternate activities for students who may be solely studying on-line and possibly remotely and/or overseas who may not be able to partake in volunteering or service learning activities



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
- Host Organisations
- Employers

Plus Concept Guides on:

- Terminology
- Enhancing Learning

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