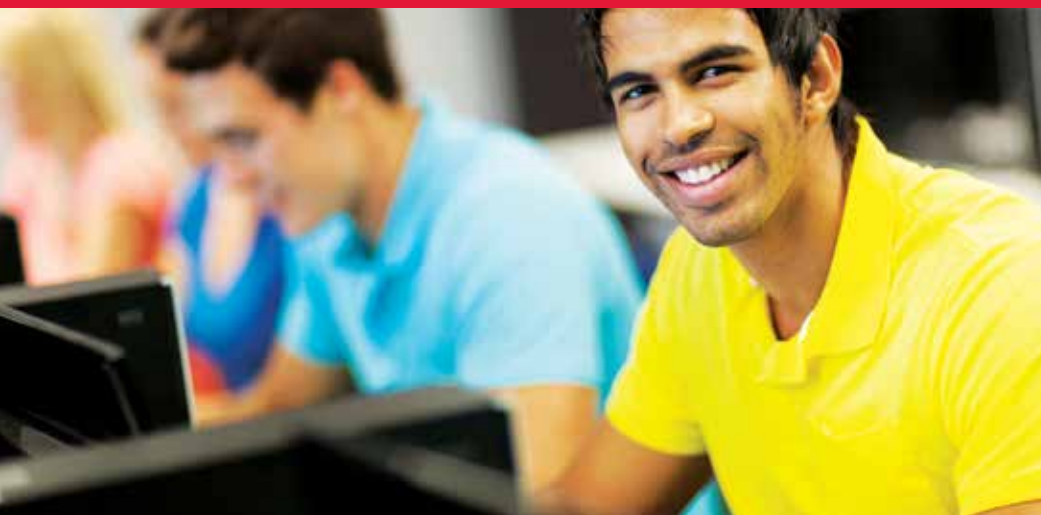




# Good Practice Guide for Potential Employers

Attracting students with volunteering  
experience for an engaged workforce



## The importance of employing graduates with volunteering experience

Employers want employees who will do their best work to help a company achieve its objectives. Employees want jobs that are challenging and meaningful. A term that is increasingly used to describe this win-win situation is 'engaged workforce'. In a world that is changing both in terms of the global nature of work and the aging of the workforce, having engaged employees may be a key to competitive advantage.

Research shows that there is a new way to engage employees – through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the positive reputation that companies have in the community. A study led by Stanford University in the US showed that students are willing to sacrifice a substantial amount from their annual salary to work for an employer that is responsible and sustainable. If you are a responsible and sustainable employer with a strong CSR, graduates who volunteered in the past could be what you are looking for. These students come out of university with social awareness; a strong set of values and skills; and a desire to work for an employer with social responsibility. Recruiting people who care and who are good global citizens could lead to a more engaged workforce. The value congruence between your company and such students could lead to organisational commitment, job satisfaction and long term retention, and eventually to better financial and overall performance.

## 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 is a resource for potential employers interested in attracting graduates with volunteering experience for an engaged workforce based on data gathered for this project. Details of the project are on 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.

## People who volunteered in the past are more likely to volunteer again

- Recruiting graduates with volunteering experience means they would be more likely to not just participate in your corporate volunteering programs, but also engage in extra-role behaviour, such as mentoring others.
- Participation in corporate volunteering was found to be related to other positive workplace outcomes such as positive CSR attitudes, job satisfaction and emotional attachment to the organisation.

Our study on student volunteers in several Australian universities shows that student volunteering also develops the students' employability. Through their volunteering experience (domestic or international), students develop new skills, confidence and social awareness. These graduates demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy, independence and ability to deal with pressure. Many students mentioned that volunteering led them out of their 'comfort zone', which allowed them to mature more quickly than their counterparts who did not volunteer. In addition, by hiring graduates who have already volunteered, you may be able to leverage on the human and social capital they developed during their volunteering experience, (i.e. stronger social networks).

This would assist in increasing corporate volunteering rates in your organisation; create stronger social impact; and enhance the company's positive reputation.

## What to look for in potential employees' CV

Past volunteering experience could be a point of differentiation for the student and make them a more desirable candidate for your organisation. But what should you look for when examining an applicant's curriculum vitae (CV)?

Graduates often detail their volunteering experience to enrich their CV. Volunteering experience can be as important as paid work experience, since it can assist the applicant in developing important skills, self-efficacy, independence and social awareness. It is important to therefore clarify (either through the CV or during the interview) what they did as volunteers; what skills they gained; and what challenges they faced. In particular, it is good to know if the student undertook voluntary leadership roles as this could indicate another set of skills which could be important for the student's future promotion in your organisation. See also the *Guide for Students*.

### When examining the applicant's CV, you may see different types of volunteering:

- **Episodic volunteering vs. ongoing volunteering:** Episodic volunteering is usually done as a one-off contribution of time compared to ongoing volunteering in which the student volunteers frequently over a long period of time.
- **International vs. domestic volunteering:** international volunteering is done outside Australia, usually in a developing country. It can help the student develop their independence, maturity, a new language, and professional and cultural knowledge. If the job the student applies for requires some travelling and/or cross-cultural work, international volunteering experience could be vital. In addition, international volunteering may mean the student managed to obtain a travel grant, which can signal additional skills and capabilities. However, domestic volunteering experience is also extremely important and students are still often exposed to new cultures and social groups, develop new skills and a strong social capital.
- **Online volunteering vs. physical volunteering:** Online volunteering is usually done through a computer from a distance. For example, online volunteers can help non profits design their website or brochures, provide support via chats or volunteer to raise awareness through the social media, without physically visiting the non profit's site. This is a growing trend, highly promoted by the United Nations Volunteers, and provides students with additional technical and other skills.
- **Management and leadership experience:** some students begin managing and leading other volunteers, even as young students. These experiences can contribute to their leadership ability in the future.







## Referring to the voluntary experience during the selection process

Volunteering experience can help assess if the graduate is the right candidate for the job. Volunteering is strongly related to the student's employability, skill development and confidence, and therefore should be asked about during the interview just as you would ask about paid work experience.

It would be useful to fully understand what volunteering roles the applicant undertook during their university years, and what type of volunteering it was (e.g. international or domestic, episodic or ongoing). Ask applicants to elaborate on their volunteering experience and the challenges they faced.

### Specific questions can be asked during such interviews:

1. Tell us about your volunteering experience in the university. Where did you volunteer? For how long? How often?
2. What kind of roles did you undertake in your volunteering? What tasks and responsibilities did they include?
3. Why did you want to volunteer? Why did you stop volunteering?
4. What level of responsibility did you have? Did you have any leadership roles as part of your volunteering?
5. Were you working as part of a team? How did you find it?
6. Tell us about your work with the clients.
7. Did you have any experience of working in an office environment?
8. What new skills and capabilities did you develop through volunteering?
9. What did you learn from your volunteering experience?
10. What challenges did you face as a volunteer? How did you overcome them?
11. Why do you think volunteering is important?
12. Would you like to participate in our corporate volunteering programs? Why?
13. How do you think your volunteering experience can contribute to your success in this role?

## Success Story

Students who volunteered explained how the experience increased their employability and their ability to be selected for a job:

*“Any time I’ve ever given my resume out to anyone they look at the top box and they say, “Wow, you’ve got scholarships for Peru and Austria and England and Cambodia, this is a huge differential from anyone else, and especially that vocational aspect. There’s such a focus on students now, they don’t spend a lot of time at university, they spend a lot of time working trying to get ahead by getting this experience so that when they apply for a job the employer will say, “You’ve already had two years’ experience, I’m going to take you over the person that has none.” And, the program has facilitated that within a university context, they’ve given you really interesting work experiences that stand out on a resume but that’s in the holiday period and it allows you to still go to all your lectures and get the most out of your education.”*

**Student volunteer**



## 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

### Plus Concept Guides on:

- Terminology
- Enhancing Learning

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