



Concept Guide for Terminology

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. The relationship between volunteering and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) (e.g. service learning, internships, practica and work experience) are part of this debate.

This guide is based on data gathered for this project. Details of the project are on the back page and on the project website.

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, such as 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*.

See the *Guide for Host Organisations* to find out about Academic, Facilitated and Independent Student Volunteers.

Defining volunteering

In the Australian context, the term 'volunteering' has a number of accepted definitions. Volunteering Australia has recently conducted a review of its definition of volunteering, and in July 2015 has adopted the following definition:

Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.

(Volunteering Australia, 2015a, np).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses a definition with four criteria: unpaid, willingly undertaken, help in the form of time service or skills, and formal, through a group or organisation (ABS, 2007). They exclude some forms of student volunteering from their statistics.

The accompanying notes to the Volunteering Australia definition of volunteering indicate that

Compulsory educational service learning (where students are required to volunteer as part of a course)

(Volunteering Australia, 2015b, np)

is not considered to be volunteering, but is recognised as a valuable activity, and could be considered to be a pathway to volunteering (Volunteering Australia, 2015b).

Similarly, in their definition of volunteering, the ABS excludes activities done 'as a result of a legal or institutional direction' (ABS, 2007, p.72) and 'student placement' (p.87).

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.



Comparison of volunteering, community participation and service learning

Volunteering

- primary purpose is to help the community, environment, or people beyond family or household;
- of own free will (so not a required part of a course or unit of study);
- unpaid; not rewarded with any compensation;
- may be for credit or other recognition by the university;
- may be on campus e.g. Open Day, Expo;
- may be organised by students or the university.

Community participation

- primary purpose is to help others in need who are outside their own family or household;
- unpaid;
- may be for credit or other recognition by the university;
- activity done outside the university, in the community, may be for a not-for-profit or other similar charity organisation and may be within a school, hospital, event, or tourism setting but it is not practicum or placement in a school or hospital;
- may be organised by students or the university.

Service Learning

- purpose gives equal weighting to both service and learning;
- associated with learning in a unit or course of study for credit, is required, recognised with credit, usually assessed or graded;
- is usually recognised in an academic transcript or similar;
- tends to involve written reflection or other activity to enhance learning;
- may be organised by students or the university.

What is meant by *volunteering* in the university setting?

In general, University Student Volunteering refers to those activities that university students do that meet the criteria of time given, no remuneration, free will, of benefit to the community, and formally structured. In many organisations, students work alongside and in the same capacity as other volunteers and unpaid workers. They are welcomed and offered the same processes, recognition and events. Volunteering activities are integrated into universities in a variety of ways, whether within units and courses or independent from academic programs.

Students' motivation to volunteer

Students take up volunteering of their own volition, often encouraged by their universities, for a range of reasons. Some want to help others and give back to society. Our evidence indicates a trend towards volunteering motivated by self-development, personal growth, and career development as university students seize opportunities to gain experience, skills, and networking contacts assisting them to find employment.

Volunteering for learning

The evidence is strong that even those students who volunteer for reasons other than learning, will benefit and learn from the opportunity. The learning 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. Students report that volunteering enhances their confidence and self-efficacy, helping them to feel that they can make a difference and achieve something positive for others. See Learning Concept Guide.

Two main inconsistencies

Two main differences of opinion were identified in this study. There is debate around whether students are volunteering if:

- they receive credit for a unit of study, or
- the activity is compulsory within a unit or course of study.

This debate is reflected in the variety of terminology in use across universities.

Extra-curricular volunteering

The term volunteering is used to refer to activities including service by students to their university, service to clubs and associations ranging from environmental groups to photography, business and sporting clubs; placement in volunteer positions in community organisations; and volunteering through university and guild-organised programs such as a volunteer hub, referral service or centre.

There is a trend in universities to recognise extra-curricular volunteering on an academic or similar transcript and this is often measured by the number of hours, but mechanisms to capture this volunteering are a challenge for universities.

University students are often recruited to volunteer on campus (e.g. orientation and open days), and in community engagement programs arranged in part by the university or student groups such as the student guild. Leadership and support roles of university clubs may also be referred to as volunteering but membership of these clubs is not. This volunteering is considered to be 'extra-curricular'.

Volunteering within the curriculum

Students often volunteer in order to learn professional, personal or employability skills. In general, learning is the primary goal of university student volunteering activities within courses.

Volunteering has been integrated into academic programs as *Work Integrated Learning* (WIL) (including practica or placements), service learning or community service identified by other terms such as learning through participation. Volunteer activities embedded into academic study may attract credit. There are usually specific learning objectives or statements of skills to be developed that may be discipline-based or designed to enhance generic graduate attributes.

Students and university staff in our study used the term 'volunteering' to refer to both compulsory and elective elements of university courses or programs and while this does not strictly fit the definition of volunteering as identified by Volunteering Australia, it is recognised as a pathway to volunteering. Many of the good practices identified in this project apply to these pathway activities as well as to more general student volunteering activities.

Terminology in use

Over 75 terms, or permutations of terms, were identified in the articles selected for a systematic review of the literature on university student volunteering. These terms can largely be clustered into three categories:

- volunteering,
- community service / community engagement and
- service learning.

WIL was not canvassed by this literature review.

Evidence in the interview data was that study participants also referred to internships, practica, placement and work experience as being forms of volunteering in some circumstances. Community engagement and service learning were found to be moving towards a model of mutually beneficial, reciprocal collaboration in which all parties work together towards agreed goals with long-term impact.

Some participants stressed the voluntary nature of volunteering, and others felt that the reward of credit in a university unit is an important component of the activity. Holdsworth and Brewis (2014, p.204) suggest that "the ideal of active citizenship assumes that volunteering is a choice, and the celebrated figure of the selfless volunteer who contributes to their communities is valued not just on the basis of his/her unique contribution, but because their contribution is given willingly without compulsion". Despite this, some literature refers to students being required to volunteer (Kang et al., 2011) and 'service learning or other compulsory volunteer programs' (Gage & Thapa, 2012, p. 426).

What is meant by volunteering in the university setting? continued...

Terminology in use in Australian universities

One conundrum in terminology is when volunteering is said to be *required*. Volunteering Australia states clearly that volunteering is always a matter of choice and specifically excludes compulsory activities required by the university. The data from the desk audit, and in the interviews for this project, however show that volunteering, as a term, is often used in universities as verb to describe what students do in a compulsory activity or a program. For example, university students are often said to volunteer to do community service activities or service learning units or courses. Even if service learning or community service activities are electives and therefore not compulsory, if the activity is a required part of a unit then some would say that it is not of their own free will. Yet our research indicates that these programs are often described as volunteering.

There is a growing trend for university students to volunteer in nonprofit, community groups or other volunteer involving organisations. The demand for universities to arrange experience-based learning for students to develop practical, professional and employability skills has meant that university students seek the opportunities that volunteering activities offer.

Differences in uses of the term *volunteering* in universities

In Australian universities, *volunteering* is currently being used as a noun to describe an activity that students do of their own free will in an unpaid capacity to help the environment or people who are outside their own family or household. *Volunteering* is also being used as a verb to describe what students do in volunteering, service learning, community service or other activities that may be part of an academic program, or separate from their studies.

Service Learning

A variety of experiential learning has been termed Service Learning. One defining feature of Service Learning is the balance and equal weighting on both service and learning. When Service Learning is a required part of a university course, students are not volunteering according to some interviewees. Service Learning is any service experience in which a student has intentional learning and service goals and intentionally reflects on their learning and experiences.

Our study has separated out formal Work Integrated Learning such as placements and practica from volunteering but it is not as easy to separate out Service Learning and community participation.

Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Patrick et al. (2009)'s definition of WIL is now generally accepted and widely used:

- WIL is "an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (p. iv).
- a WIL placement as "a type of work integrated learning that requires the student to be situated in the workplace" (p. iv).



Keeping it legal

All volunteering students do which is associated with the university has 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.

In addition, there are 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.



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. A modified grounded theory 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:

- 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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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**



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