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Volunteering to Learn
University Student Volunteering

Pilot: Western Australia

Volunteering to Learn Project Team

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Volunteering
to learn

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FOREWORD

The Western Australian State Government has a long track record of supporting volunteering and volunteering infrastructure. The role of the state government covers legislation, policy development and funding, including support of research to strengthen and promote the volunteering sector. We are proud to present this interim report which outlines the key findings of a pilot project funded by the Department of Local Government and Communities in pursuit of our goals. The pilot project is the first stage of a much larger study being undertaken across Australia to investigate university student volunteering.

Key findings from this pilot project fall into two categories – the practical tips gleaned so far from the project, and clarification of the directions for further development of research in this area. Many of the practical tips identified to date have been included in a flyer which is included as an appendix to this report.

It is clear from the work undertaken as part of this pilot project that university student volunteers enrich volunteering with mutual benefits for the communities they connect with and for the students as learners. Volunteer programs that successfully enhance learning (whilst ensuring productive experiences for all involved) encourage students to continue to volunteer during their professional lives. Preliminary findings from this pilot study highlight good practice in student volunteering as including paying attention to planning, establishing clear expectations and communication. The work on the pilot has identified a range of areas to be further investigated as our project progresses, including ownership and responsibility of programs, and identification of those factors which enhance or hinder learning for students. It is evident that host organisations will benefit from being able to fit some aspects of their volunteer opportunities to the needs of students if they are looking to recruit student volunteers.

This report has provided a valuable foundation on which to build a larger project and we are grateful to the Department of Local Government and Communities for their support and assistance with this pilot. Further details of the Volunteering to Learn project can be found at:

http://volunteeringwa.org.au/about/research/volunteering-to-learn.aspx

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Project Leader, on behalf of the VTL project team.

Information about the WA Government's commitment to Volunteering can be found at

- '**Vital Volunteering**' (State Government Strategy for Volunteering)-
  http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/communities-in-focus/volunteers/Pages/Vital-Volunteering-2011-2016-State-Government%E2%80%99s-Support-for-Volunteering.aspx
  -An electronic copy of the '**Vital Volunteering**' document can be accessed
  at: http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/Documents/Volunteers/Vital%20Volunteering%202011-2016.pdf

- **Guidelines for Successful Partnerships Between Public Sector Agencies and Volunteers'-** An electronic copy of the document can be accessed at:
  http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/Documents/Volunteers/VO17%20Guidelines%20for%20Successful%20Partnerships.pdf

- **'Volunteering and Local Governments in Western Australia' & 'Helping Local Councils Support Volunteering'-** http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/communities-in-focus/volunteers/research/Pages/Helping-Local-Councils-Support-Volunteering.aspx
  - An electronic copy of the full research report can be accessed at:
    http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/Documents/Volunteers/Volunteering%20and%20Local%20Governments%20in%20Western%20Australia%20Full%20%20Report.pdf
  - An electronic copy of the summarised **'Helping Local Councils Support Volunteering'** document can be accessed
    at: http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/Documents/Volunteers/VO12-2011%20Helping%20Local%20Councils%20Support%20Volunteers%20factsheet_web.pdf

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Introduction

 The Department of Local Government and Communities in Western Australia funded a pilot to commence exploration of university student volunteering in this state to help develop Good Practice guidelines for organisations and institutions looking to recruit and engage student volunteers. This report identifies both research focussed and practical outcomes from this pilot project. It identifies some of the program types operating in WA universities, and reports early findings on what works and what needs attention. The accompanying flyer sets out key information from the pilot project and should be consulted for tips on improving student volunteering programs. The flyer will be made available on the website of the Department of Local Government and Communities and via the project website. The project team extends thanks to the Department of Local Government and Communities for providing the funding for this pilot project.

Research in the university student volunteering field

The *National Volunteering Strategy* (DPMC, 2011) identified promotion of volunteering as a major policy initiative of the Federal Government and highlighted it as important for students. Defining volunteering broadly as 'freely giving time to help others or support a cause' (p. 8), the strategy committed to 'work with state and territory governments and education providers to promote, support and recognise volunteering programs in educational institutions' (p. 13). An important aspect of this is the development of programs which address the needs of all stakeholders, and offer a learning experience for students that has the capacity 'not just to increase graduates' employability but to develop a sense of social responsibility, connectedness and leadership' (p. 13).

Community calls for greater involvement of young people in volunteering (DPMC, 2011) are echoed by calls from employers for better generic and transferable skills in graduates (e.g. BIHECC, 2007; DEEWR, 2012). At the same time there is increased interest in the variety of ways universities can contribute to the development of not only employable graduates, but also informed and capable citizens. Volunteering by university students is seen as one avenue by which some of these outcomes can be achieved. Despite this, there is a significant gap in information about Australian university student volunteering, and there is currently little shared knowledge between universities about program structures and outcomes, challenges and solutions. Thus there is a clear imperative to examine the breadth of university student volunteering experiences to capture what constitutes good practice, and identify the potential of well-managed, and well-structured programs.

Kezar and Rhoads (2001) identified four tensions which apply to student volunteering activities. Articulated by four questions, these tensions provide a sound basis for examining extant student volunteering programs in Australia:

- The learning question – What central learning outcomes do universities and other stakeholders expect from student volunteering?
- The locational question – What are the different options available for location of programs within universities, including allocation of responsibility to staff members?
- The organisation of work question – How is student volunteering factored into expectations associated with learning, including student workload?

- The implementation question – What are the different options for structuring student volunteering and evaluating its outcomes?

A further key to the examination of the learning arising from student volunteering is its relationship to activities such as work-integrated-learning (WIL), community engagement and service learning, to broader elements of development of graduate attributes such as global citizenship, and civic responsibility (Einfeld & Collins, 2008), and to the core skills for employability, now a primary concern for universities and governments. Kezar (2002) asks the question 'Are we identifying the right outcomes?', arguing that it is necessary to have an understanding of what outcomes are achievable, and how these may best be approached.

In addition to the tensions identified by Kezar and Rhoads (2001), it is also necessary to examine the impost on host organisations, the third stakeholder in the student volunteering experience. Work undertaken on service learning by Blouin and Perry (2009) indicates that at times undesirable student conduct, poor communication between institutions and organisations, and bad 'fit' between expectations and outcomes lead to poor results in both learning outcomes for the student, and value of service to the organisation. Nevertheless, student volunteers have been identified as providing a valuable service to community organisations if they are given appropriate training and support (Edwards, Mooney & Heald, 2001).

Research suggests that students, like all volunteers, take up voluntary activity for a range of reasons (Francis, 2011; Gage & Thapa, 2012). Passion for a cause and feelings of obligation have been found to underpin volunteering across all types of volunteers. Students may also undertake volunteering to enhance their resume, to seek out employment opportunities, or to find out if their chosen profession or pathway will suit them (Handy et al., 2010; Lee & Won, 2011).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that host organisations can be ill-prepared to host and engage student volunteers. Organising activities that can be undertaken by inexperienced groups or individuals can put pressure on already stretched management systems and resources. Similarly, student volunteers may feel overwhelmed by the tasks they are assigned, and fail to yield learning benefits from their experience. Despite these concerns, student volunteers can provide valuable and timely support to host organisations, and learn much about the context in which they have volunteered. Brewis and Holdsworth (2011) have suggested that universities can play an important role in ensuring that the student volunteer experience is a positive one, including by 'helping students make sense of and reflect on their experiences' (p. 174). Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett (2012) in their recently conducted examination of the host organisation perspective identified that there are important contributions to be made by student volunteers to the organisations which host them, which can include a contribution to organisational learning and increased organisational capability. They also suggest however, that there are important elements which need to be developed to better obtain benefits from university student volunteering, for all parties.

The Pilot Project

In 2013 The Department for Local Government and Communities funded a starter project investigating volunteering by university students. This pilot study was focussed on mapping the activities taking place at the West Australian universities, and on capturing an early picture of

practice from the perspectives of stakeholders. The data collection to date has involved two stages: a desk audit and two workshops.

Desk Audit

A desk audit of the range of student volunteering conducted with and through Western Australian universities revealed a wide range of programs, ranging from official programs which were well recognised by the universities, to student organised and run programs affiliated with the university or which have no official connection to the institutions.

The spectrum of what is considered to constitute student volunteering was wide and varied, and different universities used a range of terminologies for similar activities. This led to the development of a range of interview questions about what constitutes volunteering to clarify this at a national level. It is clear that there are associated terms which overlap with or are subsets of university student volunteering. These include such activities as work integrated learning, service learning, student clubs, guilds and unions, and voluntary activities undertaken for and on behalf of the university itself. The subsets of university student volunteering also await further clarification as the various models are investigated in more depth.

At this stage there is a clear bifurcation of types of volunteering programs/activities between those which are associated with credit and learning outcomes established and monitored by the university as part of a degree or course of study, and those which are student run, and student developed. There are, however, a range of university student volunteering activities which fall between these two types, and which receive varied levels of recognition, support and even funding from the universities in which or with which they operate. Limited consistency between universities was also apparent, and the preliminary typology below (Figure 1) will require further clarification and refinement. This pilot study has confirmed the need for the 'voluntary' nature of some of the activities labelled 'volunteering' to be considered. The required/compulsory nature of some of the activities may mean that they more appropriately fall into the category of work-integrated-learning, rather than being considered volunteering, despite the labels being used.

Figure 1: Preliminary University Student Volunteering Model
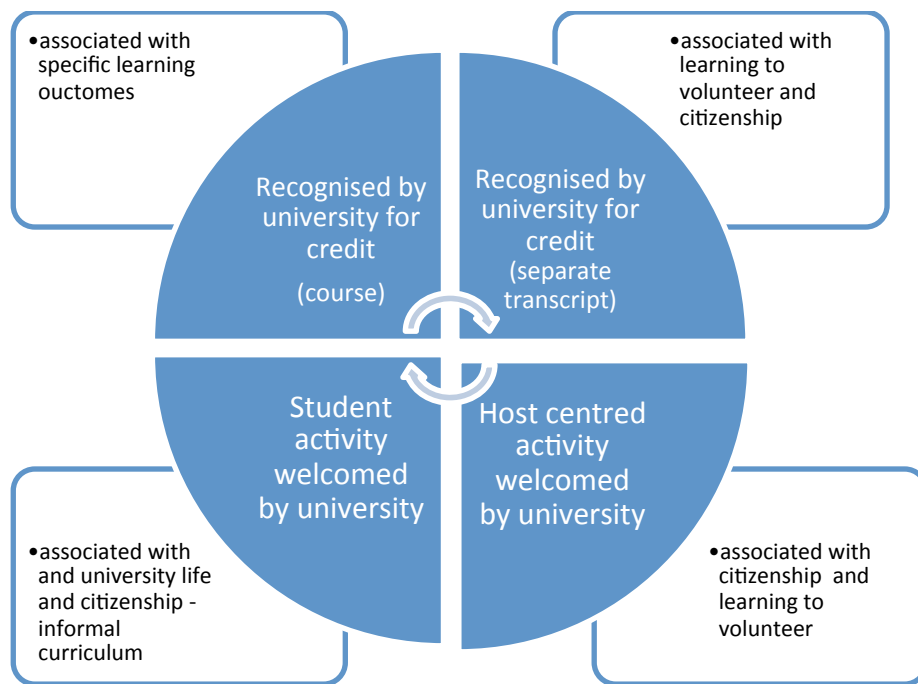
The nature and types of programs and activities which fall into these categories include:

Recognised by university for credit (Course):

This first quadrant is directly and explicitly related to learning outcomes for students. There is a formal association with the unit or course in which the activity takes place.

Activities which are for credit in a unit or course: Some of the programs identified as volunteering involve a placement, project or activity within a host organisation where the students are working towards credit for their study. Such activities can involve a group of students preparing a publicity campaign for an organisation, or reviewing policies and procedures (The distinction may be made by the university between 'work experience' or 'work-integrated learning' and student volunteering, but host organisations are often not clear about the distinction, and students may not be either). Other examples which fall into this category are activities such as 'clinics', often associated with professional degrees such as in health or law, although this type of activity may also fall into the next category.

Recognised by university (separate transcript or similar):

The next quadrant is associated with community engagement and development of university students as citizens, but is still formally recognised by the university. At this stage it is apparent that there are several different types of activity which fall into this category:

Activities which are run by and for the university: Orientation, mentoring and support volunteering by current students to help new and incoming students, international students and prospective students is found in all of the WA universities. Often the students who are involved in these activities are provided with t-shirts identifying them as a volunteer, and are provided training, briefings and support to undertake such roles.

Activities which are run by and for faculties/departments/schools within Universities: There are programs run from within academic organisational units within universities which early evidence suggests operate separately and under different drivers to the centrally run activities. Often these activities are designed to supplement the professional development of students in the faculty, department or school, and may involve 'clinics' or activities which take the student beyond the classroom but still under the supervision of instructors and or academic staff.

Activities which are run by student organisations and clubs: University guilds and clubs may run activities which the university recognises as making an important contribution to university life, some of which can be documented and submitted to the university for inclusion on service/developmental transcripts or in other ways. These include student associations who provide valuable services to the students and to the university, for example providing student representatives for university committees, organising social and cultural events, and, in some cases employing paid staff for services to the students and the university. In some universities the student association volunteers form the governing body which employs a co-ordinator in the volunteer hub described below.

Student activity welcomed by the university

University life is seen to be enhanced by student activities, some of which are facilitated by university acceptance, promotion and support of their operation without any formal recognition.

Activities which are run by student organisations and clubs: Student clubs and organisations add to campus life and offer recreation, support, collegiality and social contact to members. Student representative organisations such as student unions or guilds are run by volunteers, and offer services to students. These organisations and others can contribute to the health and well-being of students – for example sporting teams, to the development of course related skills and knowledge – for example drama clubs or photographic societies, and sustainable garden projects; and to the reputation and image of the university for example debating clubs and student journals. Universities often provide facilities in which these organisations can operate such as rooms or grounds, and allow publicity about their operation to be promulgated through the university. At times these organisations are affiliated with similar organisations at other universities.

Host centred activity welcomed by the university

There are many volunteer activities which are welcomed by the university but which are not formally credited, recognised in transcripts or associated with student clubs or associations, and which are often centred on the host or the beneficiaries. These include:

- host activities which can be accessed by students via a referral service run by the university or the guild or a particular school or faculty;

- recommended activities not formally captured by the university or a student association;

- degree, course, career or leisure activities not specifically referred or recommended; and

- activities where a particular organisation established to run a service targets students to offer this service.

Referral service: Referral services run in a similar fashion to those in volunteer resource centres, providing a link between potential volunteers and host organisations. The models in use in Western Australia vary from a service facilitated and co-ordinated by the university, with university employees having responsibility (this model is in place at Edith Cowan University) to a service run by the guild with responsibility for operations being located with an employee of the guild (this model is in place at the University of Western Australia and Murdoch University). Referral can often happen via a direct arrangement between a host organisation and a faculty or school, where groups of students volunteer via an arrangement made at a more local level. Examples of this include an organisation which works with an academic staff member to recruit event volunteers for a particular project each year.

Recommended activities not formally captured by the university or student associations: Students are often advised to consider voluntary activity in their field of study as a supplement to their studies. These are not organised to be supported by the university, nor are they supported by student organisations or services, but are a direct result of the advice and assistance given. Examples of this include students in health related areas signing up for voluntary work with health related organisations, or sport science students being encouraged to take on voluntary roles in sporting organisations. Often these are promoted as pathways to employability and further training, as skill building, and for assisting with network and reputation building.

Degree/course/career related activity not specifically referred or recommended: In addition there are students who take on volunteering with a view to improving their skills without there having been a specific recommendation by anyone associated with the university – this might include psychology students who volunteer to provide assistance to crisis help lines.

Host developed programs: For host organisations the development of a clear understanding of the different types of university student volunteering, the aims and potential outcomes for students, universities, and their own organisation will assist in the effective involvement of student volunteers. At this stage anecdotal evidence indicates that there are some organisations which have established university student focussed volunteer programs and activities. Some of those which exist are the result of a direct partnership between a particular university program or club, and the host organisation, whereas others stand within the host organisation as a program which has been specifically tailored to meet the needs of students, but which is not confined to one university or program. There are other organisations established with a different target 'client' group, who specifically recruit university students to offer their service. An example of this is AIME – the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, which operates in most West Australian universities and links university student volunteers to Indigenous high school students in mentoring relationships.

Outside the model?
There are various forms of student volunteering which might be considered to be beyond the scope of this research and therefore may fall outside this model. Such groups might include political activism or religious organisations which are considered to be part of university life, but which have a different role in university settings. Well-being and identity related organisations may also fall into this category. These include women's collectives, Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender (LGBT) organisations, and illness/wellness organisations such as self-help associations. How these

organisations fit into the picture will be able to be further investigated as data collection progresses in the larger project, and may be incorporated into the model at a later date.

Development of the model

There are student volunteering activities which are captured by this model but which may develop as requiring a separate 'type' in the model. One example of this is the range of volunteering associated with international students. There are examples emerging where the volunteer activity is aimed specifically at international students, and in some cases restricted to this group. As the project progresses it will be necessary to determine whether these activities require a separate category, and this is likely to be determined once data collection moves into seeking to establish how the activities work, what benefits and obstacles are encountered, and what elements are considered to be good practice. It is also clear that there are elements of funding sources which may need to be considered in the development of the model.

> Research outcome – Mapping of the various university student volunteering frameworks in the different universities has identified clear differences. The various approaches will be further explored and the model will be further refined as the project progresses.

> Practical outcome – There is a need for host organisations, universities and students to clearly identify whether any learning outcomes are being sought, what those anticipated outcomes are, and whether any proposed hosting arrangement/model is likely to achieve them.

A further indication of the variety of programs available across, within and between universities is the locus of responsibility for the program or programs, and the degree to which the university 'owns' the program. The evidence to date indicates that ownership can extend from one small group of students with a common interest, to individual schools or departments, to the chancellery of the university, and to outside agencies which facilitate or fund the volunteer activity. Encouraging students to sign up as volunteers to enhance their civic engagement, or to improve their post course employability, has a different 'ownership' focus to self organising groups of students taking up volunteer activity, and to those who are volunteering in a program which might equate to work integrated learning or service learning. There are a range of implications such as legal and insurance requirements, but also clarity on the locus of responsibility can assist with elements such as recognition of attainment of learning outcomes, management of performance and establishment of time lines. Funding responsibility is a further aspect of this.

The outcomes with respect to ownership and responsibility are as follows:

> Research outcome: The matrix for mapping activities will need to be extended to include ownership and responsibility elements as well as funding.

> Practical outcome: Host organisations, universities and students will need to clearly identify who has responsibility for the students while they are involved in the volunteer activity.

Workshops

Two workshops were held to gather data from stakeholders about the operation of student volunteering programs with, through and in universities. Participants in the workshops were from universities, host organisations and student groups including volunteer hubs. The workshops explored a number of themes including the level of involvement and interest of host organisations,

the highlights of student volunteering experiences, and what were seen as benefits and barriers experienced by participants. Three key themes which emerged from the data collected in the workshops included Planning, Expectations and Communication.

What works

Thematic analysis of the benefits identified by participants showed the 'benefits' were considered from different perspectives by different participants. This included many identified benefits for the students, including pathways to employment, work experience and skill development. Others identified benefits for organisations including new ideas, skills knowledge, low or no cost, energy, enthusiasm, access to current learning, volunteer availability and some degree of renewal for the organisation by the inclusion of youth. Frequent mention was made of some mutual benefits such as intergenerational interaction and skills exchange.

At this stage of the project preliminary evidence illustrates that good planning, good communication and clear expectations will aid the volunteer-host-university relationship. It is already clear from the workshops that there are often different expectations from different partners in the student volunteering relationship. The evidence from students is that they often seek to undertake volunteer activity which will fit in with their studies, allowing them to put their course of study first (as a priority), and to change their volunteering commitments as their study commitments change. The evidence from host organisations indicates that, at times, they seek to train up student volunteers in the hope that they will stay on once their university related commitment to volunteering ends. These mismatched expectations and priorities can lead to disillusionment on both sides and lead to damage or a breakdown in the relationship.

There were a number of issues which were identified as working well for particular stakeholders, and it will be important to further explore these as the project progresses. For example it was argued that volunteer relationships work better if students find their own host organisation, via referral services or other means, with hubs or university based organisations assisting with police clearances, *Working with Children* checks or through the provision of other support. It was also suggested, however, that this is not a catchall position and that activities such as those arranged with Curtin Volunteers to provide a group of volunteers for a particular activity are also successful. Further exploration will be undertaken to identify the contingency factors associated with 'what works'.

What needs attention

Key obstacles and concerns which are beginning to emerge generally fall into three areas:

- Different needs and expectations with respect to time available, length of voluntary service and potential long term volunteering commitment;
- Different needs and expectations with respect to skill development - including training provided/needed and pathways to employment;

And

- Different understandings about the costs in terms of time, administration, training, supervision/management and follow through which are often borne by the host organisation.

Research outcome: Contingency factors need to be further explored to identify what constitutes good practice.

Practical outcome: There is no 'one size fits all' approach but there are effective practices in place, and good communication and relationship building is evident in good practice identified to date.

Research outcome: The project interviews will need to explore the differing expectations of different stakeholders, and identify the variety in these.

Practical outcome: Host organisations, universities and students will need to clarify expectations when setting up volunteer activities.

Where to from here?

The desk audit will continue and will gather data from universities across Australia, enabling refinement of the model, and clarification of some of the differences between volunteering types. This project is designed to identify and disseminate findings about good practice to assist universities, students and host organisations develop better policies, procedures and practices to enhance student volunteering. Those interested in following the project can access the project website at http://volunteeringwa.org.au/about/research/volunteering-to-learn.aspx

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