



Good Practice Guide for Students

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

This guide is a resource for students based on data gathered for this project. Details about the project are on the back of this guide.

Some reasons university students say they volunteer

- To help others
- To act upon their values
- To support a cause
- To develop skills
- To learn/practice English
- To gain experience
- To increase employability
- To add to their CV
- To make friends
- For fun
- Because their friends volunteer
- To be active
- "Because it's what you do"
- "It's expected of me"
- For academic credit
- *Because it's required

* See the *Concept Guide for Terminology*.

How do I find out about volunteering?

The university you attend may have a 'Volunteer Hub', or other central location where volunteer activities are advertised or sponsored. You can also find out about volunteering opportunities through:

- Orientation week advertising
- Friends, peers, classmates
- Information promoted in class
- University careers centre
- The Guild or Student Union
- Joining a sports or other interest club
- Your local Volunteer Resource Centre
- Online via govolunteer.com

Some courses in universities include a Service Learning component, providing valuable learning opportunities.

REMEMBER: It takes time to set up a volunteering activity or opportunity. Many organisations will want to interview you, you may need to undergo background checking (e.g. a police clearance or working with children check), and you may need to attend induction or orientation before you commence volunteering. It is important to honour their commitment to you when you volunteer.

Thinking about volunteering?

Student volunteering could involve academic learning, or learning new skills and knowledge; it could be taking the opportunity to make new friends or discovering an interest or purpose in contributing to society; or it could be to enhance employability. Some considerations for you might be:

- **Your life goals** and what you would like to achieve when graduating – consider the way that volunteering could help you achieve these goals.
- How important it is to **challenge** yourself – get out of your comfort zone, become more independent, be confronted by something new.
- Your **time and other resources**: what can you reasonably fit into your schedule? Just because volunteering is unpaid does not mean you can leave whenever you like, because the organisation (and clients) are relying on you.
- Your **social goals**: how important is it to you to develop networks, make new friendships, help others to develop a sense of connectedness and community?
- Your **employment goals**: what additional skills and knowledge do you want to acquire, or new directions you want to pursue?
- Your **personal goals**: how important is it for you to gain satisfaction and happiness from helping others, as well as having fun and enjoying yourself in the process?
- Your **own characteristics**. Are you a person who prefers clear boundaries and structures, to be organised and given tasks to do? Or would you prefer to work on your own and be left in charge of how to do it? You might find this quiz useful: www.myworldofwork.co.uk/content/what-type-of-volunteering-is-for-me.



Thinking about learning

It is useful to reflect on your learning while volunteering, particularly if there is no framework provided for this. Keep a reflective log of your activities, the skills you have acquired, problems you have solved and experiences which have changed your thinking. Evidence suggests this will help you to get the most out of your volunteer activity. See the *Concept Guide on Learning*.

Thinking about graduating

The experiences and learning you have gained from volunteering are important additions to your job seeking. Including information about your practical experience and learning from volunteering in your CV, and using examples from your experience in interviews can give you an edge when competing for employment. Your reflective log can help jog your memory for job applications. See over and see also the *Guide for Potential Employers*.

What sort of host organisation might I work with?

Host organisations tend to fall into four groups:

- Student organisations
- University programs, projects or centres
- Organisations which have specific or particular arrangements or assignments for student volunteers, and
- Those organisations which involve or include students just the same as any other volunteer.

Some examples from our research include:

- Helping at events organised by the student guild/union or activity clubs
- Internal university activities, such as orientation week or open day
- Fundraising for charities
- Working in second hand book or opportunity shops
- Serving on committees
- Running student academic events
- Mentoring either in university or in the community (school students for example)
- Working with specific organisations in the community
- A self-organised student group formed in the student village collaborated to help other student organisations with events

Breaking down stereotypes – rewarding volunteering

The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) project works with Aboriginal school children to help them to achieve their goals through mentoring and workshops. Around the country AIME operates within many different communities and universities.

“ The big part of it is breaking down stereotypes for those students about what they can expect for themselves and what others expect for them, like showing and highlighting that to be an Aboriginal person is really a great thing, and that it’s a successful thing. ”



How might volunteering help me get a job?

Volunteering can develop work-related skills, knowledge and other attributes such as:

- learning the professional skills of managing, coordinating projects, time management and goal setting;
- developing new knowledge from a change in focus or direction;
- enhancing discipline-specific skills, knowledge and networks;
- preparing for an interview and workplace behaviours; and
- developing personal skills of self-efficacy and self-confidence, learning how to deal with pressure.

Volunteer managers want people who are reliable, conscientious and empathetic to the cause of the organisation, as do potential employers. See also *Guide for Potential Employers*.

What makes a good volunteering experience?

Finding an activity that suits your schedule, satisfies your interest and helps you achieve some of your more specific goals will contribute positively to your student volunteering experience. Our evidence is that good communication at the start of the volunteering relationship will lead to better outcomes. Clarification of expectations on both sides about credit, supervision, time availability, length of commitment, skills needs and reasons for volunteering will enhance your experience.

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.

In addition to the more broadly applicable legal provisions which apply to any workplace, such as, confidentiality or 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.

Eye-Opening experiences

“ People who are most involved in volunteering do it because they get satisfaction, they like seeing other people be happy and satisfied. It is a benefit. You do it because you want to do it and you get satisfaction out of helping other people. ”

Student volunteer in student formed organisation

“ When somebody comes in and says I can't afford five or ten dollars you go, oh no... that was an experience that I kind of stepped back and went I never really have to think I don't have clean clothes to wear today... I can bring that kind of experience back into what I do with other students. ”

Student volunteer in second hand clothing store



What are some common challenges?	And how do I deal with them?
Not having clear guidelines or structures to support your volunteering	Ask for a schedule, timetable or other specifics about the activity, your role, and expectations.
Time commitment	Assess realistically how much time you have and match your volunteering to that – it is better to increase your volunteering if you find you have more time than pull out altogether because you are over committed.
Culture shock or not feeling part of the culture of the organisation	This is common for all people on joining an organisation. Find out as much as you can about the organisation before you start and allow yourself time to 'settle in' and make connections there.
Reality check - we are not going to change the world	Maybe not, but the little that you do will make a big difference.
'Ungrateful' / 'angry' clients/recipients when things go wrong	Some people who are experiencing hardship or disadvantage in some way may react negatively to you as a volunteer. Understanding their situation can help, as can training and supervision in the organisation.
The 'bad' volunteer experience	Sometimes things don't turn out the way we hope or expect. Take the lessons from it and engage in a new experience. The vast majority of volunteering experiences are positive.
The cost	There will be some cost, even if only in time. Some organisations can help with bus fares for example. But again, choose a volunteering activity that is within your resources: close to transport, easy to access from work or study, to minimise any out of pocket expenses
Different motivations for volunteering (e.g. volunteering for the hours on a transcript)	Not everyone volunteers for the same reasons. Accepting that there are different roles people can and do play and therefore contribute can make the experience less tense.
Transport (Living off campus)	Choose a volunteering activity that fits within your schedule and availability. If you live off campus you may choose to volunteer for one-off events rather than sign up to a semester long activity.
Lack of interest from volunteering or university structures or services	If you find the service unresponsive, there are plenty of places that will welcome you – try your Guild or Hub.
Getting 'stuck' in the same role	Many students volunteer for one activity over a period and then move to another in the next semester, but there may be benefits in staying in the same activity – getting to know a stable network, demonstrating stability, developing skills to a greater depth.
There are few young people in some organisations	The demographics of a volunteer organisation differ. But extending your networks can be of immense benefit and be pleasurable too!



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:

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

Plus Concept Guides on:

- Terminology
- Enhancing Learning

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