

# International Student Volunteer Initiative

*an information kit for education providers on increasing opportunities for international students to volunteer.*

*part of Volunteering Qld's innovative engagement initiatives.*



# International Student Volunteer Initiative

The International Student Volunteer Initiative is a Volunteering Qld initiative to increase opportunities for international students to volunteer in Queensland funded by Multicultural Affairs Queensland.

As a part of this initiative a set of information sheets and tools have been developed to help build capacity around engaging international students as volunteers and to educate international students on volunteering practices in Australia. The following kit has been compiled to answer the questions, provide inspiration and give advice to Queensland education providers to help their international students access and reap the benefits of a volunteering experience.

The information kit covers:

- **Why increase opportunities for international students to volunteer:** The benefits for students, education providers and the wider community
- **How education providers can increase opportunities for international students to volunteer**
- **What support and resources are available to help:** Including important links and resources for students

## Clarifying terms

The term volunteering in the following information refers to the formal practice defined as an activity which takes place through not for profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- To be of benefit to the community and the volunteer
- Of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion
- For no financial payment
- In designated volunteer positions only

Volunteering takes place outside of any optional or compulsory university courses and happens as a result of a student applying for volunteer positions on their own volition.

Volunteering Qld has been providing the volunteer sector with resources and up to date information on issues surrounding volunteering for 30 years. The content for this project is grounded in that knowledge and was developed after consultation with international students, education providers and Queensland not-for-profit organisations.

All this information and more is available at [www.volunteeringqld.org.au](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au)



## International Student Volunteer *Anastassiya (Kazakhstan)*

Anastassiya is a Masters of Finance and Accounting student from Kazakhstan. Before starting with the Pyjama Foundation in 2011, she had 12 years of previous volunteering experience in her home country.

### **The organisation**

The Pyjama Foundation is a mentoring program for children in foster care. The organisation aims to address the gap in educational (and other life) outcomes between children in care and their mainstream counterparts.

### **The role**

At the Pyjama Foundation, Anastassiya has been performing in an administrative role. Her duties have included: maintaining the Pyjama Angel volunteer database, filing and various paperwork tasks and the preparation of play-based learning materials for the Pyjama Angels to use with their mentees (children in foster care).

### **The motivations**

For Anastassiya, volunteering was a chance to share of herself and to develop strong professional relationships with new people: "Friendship is about sharing...your knowledge with others. Sharing what I can do and [my] experience with people [allowed me to be] a small part in the large vehicle, make a contribution to the organisation and to develop working relationship with other officers". Anastassiya also understood her volunteering effort as a way to express her identity, and her desire to do good in the world: "when we share, we make our world better. From what you do, people know who you are."

### **The benefits**

In addition to the interpersonal skills that Anastassiya picked up while volunteering, she was able to improve her English communication skills and to increase her understanding of Australian culture simply by chatting with workmates. She feels that getting intercultural insights would not have been possible by simply living a 'normal (international student) life'.

### **The challenges**

For Anastassiya, volunteering 7 hours per week meant that she had to become adept at managing her time and different commitments. She recommends that students consider carefully how much time they can give in between full-time study and part-time paid employment. For those working with international student volunteers, she recommends encouraging potential volunteers to plan out their time thoroughly in advance. To aspiring international student volunteers, she reminds them to consider that their volunteer roles might not necessarily correspond directly to their area of study, and to plan accordingly.

# Why increase opportunities for international students to volunteer

*The benefits for students, education providers and the wider community*

The International Student Volunteer Initiative recognises that there are three stakeholders that benefit from an increase in opportunities for international students to volunteer, the international students themselves, the community nonprofit organisations with which they volunteer (and in turn the communities these organisations support) and the education providers hosting these students.

Volunteering Qld has found international students show an overwhelming interest in volunteering, and get an enormous amount from their volunteering experiences. It is well documented that students benefit greatly from the experiential learning opportunity that is volunteering. Increasingly, students are looking for a wider range of meaningful ways and activities through which they can engage with the local community while studying. This is particularly so for international students who see volunteering as a chance to improve their professional and interpersonal skills, get real-world experience, and get to know the local culture and the local community playing host to them. Whether their activities are related to their field of study or not, the experience they gain by participating in professional workplaces and taking part in activities that involve a broad cross section is one of the most memorable experiences of their tertiary studies.

Engaging international students in volunteering is also beneficial for the nonprofit organisations and communities which they volunteer with, both through the contribution of their time and expertise and through the result of better integrating these students with the community.

Finally, having international students volunteer during their time studying in this country is also beneficial for education providers. International students often find it hard to integrate with the domestic students and in turn with the new communities they find themselves a part of, a factor which affects how they rate their experience as a student in Australia. Volunteering is an opportunity for students to get involved with their host community and build relationships which provide them with a better experience of Australia. This engagement can support students in their transition to living in Australia by helping them find new activities, make friends, and have greater interaction with their community. Volunteering also has significant benefits for international students' learning experience and career prospects with employers both locally and abroad valuing the experience in an Australian workplace.

International students need support in finding and perusing volunteer opportunities and education providers play an important role in facilitating opportunities for international students to volunteer. Institutions are often a first point of contact for support and advice about life and work in Australia, and a primary source of career advice. Engagement between institutions, community organisations and students is essential to help students access the personal and professional benefits of engaging with the local community.



## International Student Volunteer *Prasawad (Indonesia)*

Prasawad is studying for a Masters of Law. He has been volunteering with the St Vincent de Paul Society of Qld, in the VoRTCS (Volunteer Refugee Tutoring and Community Support) scheme.

### **The program**

VoRTCS is a Special Works of the St Vincent de Paul Society of Qld. The program provides both tutoring and practical support for families who have recently arrived in Australia as refugees. Volunteer tutors assist young people with their homework and assignments, as well as parents and older family members who might be engaged in English language or other studies at TAFE. Volunteers are also on hand to read letters, help with forms and other practical assistance.

### **The role**

Prasawad has been filling an administrative role while at VoRTCS. His work involves organising VoRTCS' archives, document management and moving files over to electronic storage. As a first time volunteer, Prasawad was unsure about his ability to take on large projects as well as do his university coursework. He instead requested a less complex role. After sometime working in the office, Prasawad says that he now feels ready for some 'frontline' work.

"My main interest is working with refugee families and I wanted to find about the programs here and learn about how to help. I will try to learn more about the social aspects and legal aspects about how I can help. I hope to learn here and be able to bring knowledge home about how to help refugee families."

Prasawad feels that his supervisor is receptive, and has no concerns about requesting a different role from him: "Yes, I feel comfortable to ask Jules to do a different role, because we talked about this at the start and he gave me what I asked for, and he is always interested to make sure that we are happy."

### **The challenges**

Having asked for a role which would be less complex and 'heavy' than his Masters Coursework, Prasawad was assigned a task-based administrative role, which for him, became repetitive after a while: "At the beginning I wanted to do this, I have never volunteered before, and so this is something I thought I could do [but now] I want to try as many things as possible."

The benefit of working within the VoRTCS program is that there are a variety of volunteer roles on offer, including the direct, in-home family support and tutoring work, which is the main activity of the program, and where Prasawad will next use his skills. In addition to changing his role, Prasawad would like to focus on learning more about the Society, and the varied works that it does: "The next step is to join the tutor program, [as well as] focus on "getting to know more people and...more of the programs here, and what they do."

# How education providers can increase opportunities for international students to volunteer

Education providers play a critical role in increasing opportunities for international students to volunteer and have the capacity to do so in a variety of ways.

Most simply and most effectively education providers can increase opportunities for international students to volunteer by providing international students with information on volunteering in Australia and stressing the reciprocal benefits of engaging in volunteering. Volunteering Qld has been developing a series of informative promotional materials designed to promote volunteering to international students including flyers, posters and postcards. For hard copies contact Volunteering Qld, soft copies can be found on the **International Student Volunteer Initiative page**.

Many universities and private education providers will have their own on-campus organisations, opportunities and pathways for students to engage in volunteer activities. Encouraging international students to take advantage of these is another effective way to engage more international students in volunteer activities. It may be useful to consider how access to these opportunities for international students can be improved, consider:

- Is it necessary to specially targeted international students with information that would cater to their questions and concerns?
- How can you ensure information reaches international students? Is there a mail-list used to send out information to international students? Do international students have their own support services that could be used as a point of contact? Are there notice boards at student accommodation facilities which could be utilised?

Volunteering Qld has talked to international students in order to find out what they are most concerned about when it comes to volunteering in Australia. By addressing these concerns through providing information, guidance and support education bodies can increase opportunities for international students to volunteer.

International student concerns:

- Language barriers and potential miscommunication
- Culture shock
- Managing time
- Work-life balance and juggling commitments
- Safety
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of experience
- Transport and logistical issues
- Feeling a part of the community
- Challenging themselves
- Perfecting professional language skills

Other ways which education providers can increase opportunities for international students to volunteer include:

- Holding a volunteer fair where local nonprofit organisations can promote volunteer opportunities and connect directly with students.
- Including information on volunteering at career fairs.
- Providing access to information on volunteer rights and responsibilities, workplace procedures, visa requirements, insurance considerations (all of this information is available in Volunteering Qld's guide to volunteering for international students).
- Making students interested in volunteer work involving children aware that they will need a volunteer blue card from the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.
- Building student capacity through on-campus activities including:
  - Information sessions about volunteering which raise awareness of the pathways to skills development provided through volunteering.
  - Workshops that build confidence with language and interpersonal skills, including: public speaking classes, introduction to Australian culture, customs and language, writing applications and going to interviews, working in groups/teams, project management, etc.
  - Social groups that engage in episodic volunteer activities, e.g. clean up Australia activity, one-off fund raising activities, tree planting day, etc.
  - Provide guidance on how to approach organisations to seek opportunities or create new ones.
- Developing relationships with local organisations and supporting them to take on international students as volunteers. This can be done through:
  - Providing organisations with a point of contact who they can inform of volunteer opportunities and who can then promote these to international students.
  - Link individuals from specific discipline areas with organisations working in that field so that students have the opportunity to volunteer in positions relevant to their studies and organisations have access with volunteers who understand and are interested in their work e.g. Medicine and Nursing students with hospitals and aged care facilities, Teaching students with organisations supporting young people, Environmental Science students with environmental organisations, Law students with advocacy groups, etc.
  - Addressing some of the concerns of organisations including: Fear that student volunteers will leave the organisation after a short space of time; Misconceptions around the language and communication skills of international students; Not having enough meaningful work for volunteers or work that could be related to a student's area of study.

## **Innovative approaches to increasing opportunities for international students to volunteer**

Volunteering Qld is interested in exploring new and innovative ways to increase opportunities for international students to volunteer and has been working with several different education providers on different models of student engagement. Read on for two examples of these projects, one from a project run with QUT students and another with CQU students.



## QUT International Student Volunteering Initiative

The International Student Volunteering Initiative partnered Volunteering Qld, QUT and local organisations to provide a pathway for international students to engage in volunteering. This initiative placed 30 QUT international students in small teams at 7 different non-profit organisations for a 12 week volunteer placement. These students were at different stages of their studies in a range of degrees and were placed into a variety of roles according to their skills and personal interests. The international students applied their professional skills to developing a public relations program for a community care provider, conducting environmental research, providing companionship to patients and developing marketing and fundraising strategies. The project-based approach allowed students to commit to their organisation while balancing study commitments, and students gained experience working in multidisciplinary teams and working to a project schedule to produce tangible outcomes.

The initiative revealed an overwhelming interest from international students in contributing to the community. With students reflecting the initiative was "an opportunity to link with local people. Being an international student here, I really want to get more and learn more, not only from uni but also from a different side."

The 7 not-for-profit organisations who engaged student volunteers through this initiative found them to be a great source of professional skills and boundless enthusiasm. The organisations commented that the students displayed a strong willingness to learn and were highly committed with some even staying on to volunteer beyond the life of the initiative "They are such a lovely group of people and they really know how to work hard. I absolutely love their enthusiasm."

Students said their volunteering was a great experience that they would recommend to others. "It's a really valuable experience... what you can learn is not just about work, but also builds on your personal development, and team work. Good chance to get real world experience." Highlights of their learning experience were real-world work experience, improving communication and teamwork skills in a multicultural setting, and realising the contribution they could make to the Brisbane community. Beyond this, it helped to build relationships between international students and their new communities in Brisbane.

The key to the success of this initiative is the orientation, ongoing support and reflection modules delivered by Volunteering Qld and funded thanks to a QUT Innovative Engagement Grant. This extra framework of support provides the students with the additional preparation and structure they need in order to get the most out of a volunteer placement. This unique model of engagement is also of great benefit for students' learning as it gives students information and support for their entry into Australian workplaces, helps them identify how they can apply their skills in meaningful activities, and encourages them to reflect on their learning and development through the experience. This initiative was once again made available in semester 1 of 2012, with 30 new QUT international students being placed in 8 not-for-profit organisations in Brisbane.



## CQU Community and Corporate Engagement Program

The CQU Community and Corporate Engagement Program has been running since 2005 and was designed based on the philosophy of providing opportunities to give back to the community in a supported way. The Community and Corporate Engagement Program also recognises the increasing value of soft skills in the workplace by providing specific training to develop culturally suitable soft skills in students from a variety of backgrounds. The program engages up to 30 students per semester and is designed to complement the academic skills and abilities developed in the formal education process.

The first step of the program involves two workshops developed and facilitated by Volunteering Qld. These workshops help international students to develop crucial soft skills in aspects such as team work, leadership, volunteering practice and conflict resolution. The orientation of the program is to bring students from a variety of cultures and backgrounds into a supportive environment where they can learn the skills required to adapt successfully into an Australian workplace.

Once students have completed these two workshops they, along with a selection of representatives from local non-profit organisations attend a formal lunch. This lunch is used as the setting for the students to learn about the organisations and to use their new skills to network and explore opportunities for volunteering with these organisations. From this point it is up to the students to negotiate a volunteer placement or go on to seek other opportunities to volunteer. The feedback from this project has been very positive, with students stating:

"I feel really confident after doing this program. I have learnt about my strengths, and how to overcome my weaknesses." - student from India

"I have learned how to respect other cultures and improve my listening skills. I have gained self-confidence for future positions." - student from Germany

"This program made me think about what exactly would I do in the future. It helped me to build clear paths and plan for my future." - student from Iran

This model has had several additional benefits for students outside of giving them the skills and confidence to pursue volunteering in Australia. These included: some students going on to getting paid positions with the organisations they volunteered with, a clearer understanding of personal goals, a new understanding of career pathways into the non-profit sector and new friendships.

## What support and resources are available to help *Including important links and resources for students*

Volunteering Qld is developing a range of resources to support the increase of international student volunteers in Queensland, which can be found online at Volunteering Qld's **International Student Volunteer Initiative page**, and includes:

- Promotional flyers for international students, with information on why volunteer/how to volunteer/what kind of volunteer work can you do.
- Posters promoting volunteering to international students.
- Comprehensive information kits for organisations with information on how to engage and work with international students as volunteers.
- Legal considerations for international students and organisations: visa restrictions, insurance, rights and responsibilities.
- Profiles of international student volunteers.
- Volunteering Qld TV episodes on international student volunteers.

For further information, access to resources and training materials, or to discuss the delivery of workshops please contact Volunteering Qld on (07) 3002 7600.





## Volunteer Manager *Anastasia (UnitingCare Community)*

In 2011, UnitingCare Community volunteer manager Anastasia recruited international Masters of Accounting student Jeen Poh to revamp, update and re-organise their office Intranet. She has had this to say about the experience: "Jeen's been fantastic, she's really resourceful. I'm really happy with her work. She didn't necessarily have the tech background but she goes and asks her friends and she's really making progress."

A move away from traditional volunteering roles has allowed UnitingCare Community to capitalise on the pool of skilled student volunteers capable of taking on discrete, project-based roles with greater responsibility: As an organisation, "we're looking at the work we want [to do] and there's been a process of organisational change which has opened us up to different ways of engaging volunteers. For a long time it was all about the 'traditional roles' but now we [are realising] the potential of volunteers... There are young people out there that can really thrive - if you give them the information and resources! They don't need their hand held..."

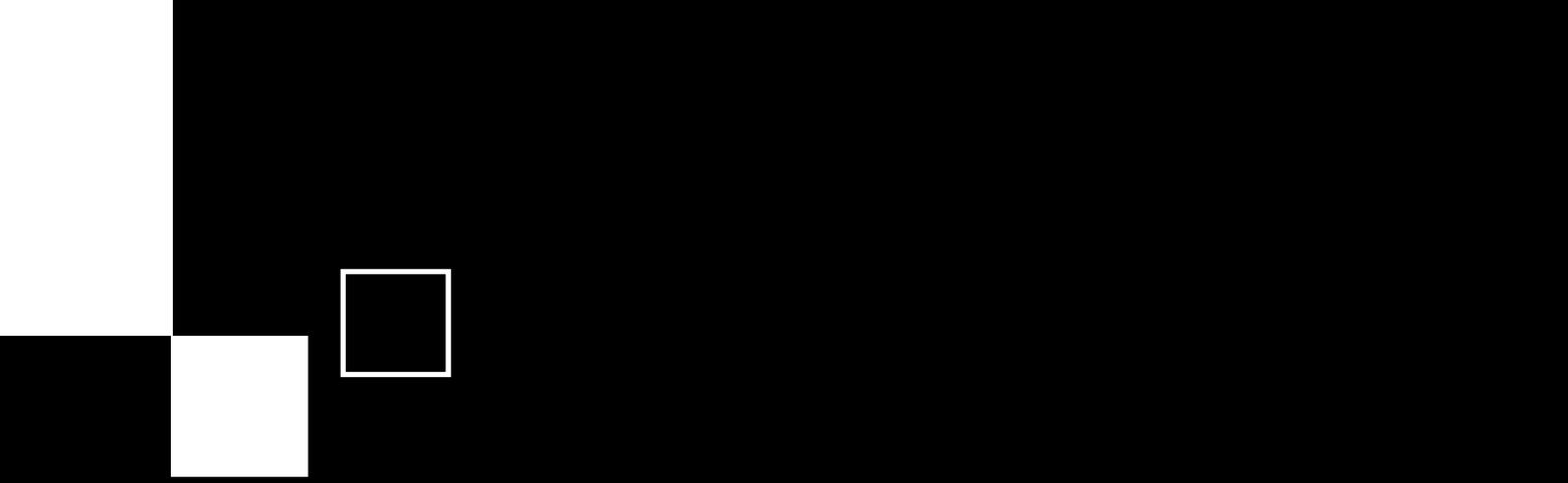
"Project based volunteers can be easier to keep happy as well. Because the life cycle of engagement is shorter – [it is easier to] keep them engaged, and to find development pathways to keep them involved in the organisation."

For Anastasia, working with an international student volunteer has not presented an increased drain on resources: "The community has a bit of a backward view of international volunteers. They're just like other volunteers, and you take them on a case by case basis. Once Jeen comes in, she's not 'international student Jeen', she's just 'volunteer Jeen', and that's how you work with her..."

Working with international student volunteers requires the same application of volunteer management know-how as with any other volunteers: "Friendly induction is important – really talk to them! Don't forget the people side, it is easy to get too caught up in all the bureaucracy!"

Matching the skills of the volunteer to the needs of the organisation is essential: "the project comes first – figure out what you'd like to get done, and then match the skills of the volunteer to the project."

For more information on volunteer recruitment and role design, please visit Resource Central: [www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/index.php/resources/menu/resource-central](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/index.php/resources/menu/resource-central)



Funded by



This resource kit was published in June 2012  
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