



# International Student Volunteer Initiative

*an information kit for organisations on engaging  
international students as volunteers.*

*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 kits, resources and workshops have been developed to help build capacity around engaging international students as volunteers and to educate international students on volunteering in Australia. This kit has been compiled to provide information, inspiration and advice to Queensland organisations that want to start engaging and working better with international students as volunteers.

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 primary research and 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)

## Key content

- **International students as volunteers**
  - Who are international students
  - Drivers of international student volunteerism
  - Student perspectives on the benefits and challenges of volunteering
  - Organisational perspectives on international students as volunteers
- **Working effectively with international students**
  - Linking and recruiting
  - Selection process
  - Orientation
  - Retention
  - Out of the box (tips and case studies)
  - Cheat sheet (quick tips)

## Clarifying terms

The term volunteering 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 should not be confused with Service Learning, Work-Integrated Learning and other formal placements required of students training for a professional qualification. Volunteering takes place outside of any optional or compulsory university courses and happens as a result of a student applying for volunteer positions of their own volition.

Volunteering is also not counted towards the 20 hours students are allowed to work under student visa rules, so their commitment is not limited by their visa conditions.



## 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.

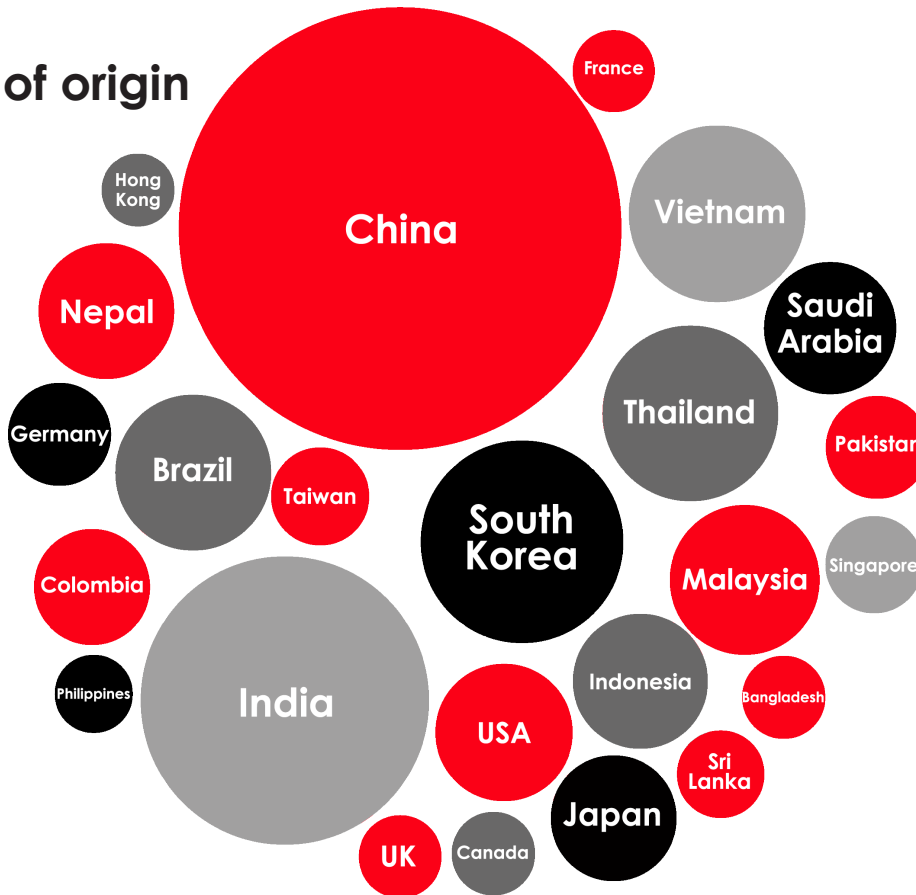


# International students as volunteers

## Who are international students

Volunteering Qld surveyed over 140 international students in Brisbane about their volunteering practices. This covered:

### Country of origin



### Area of study

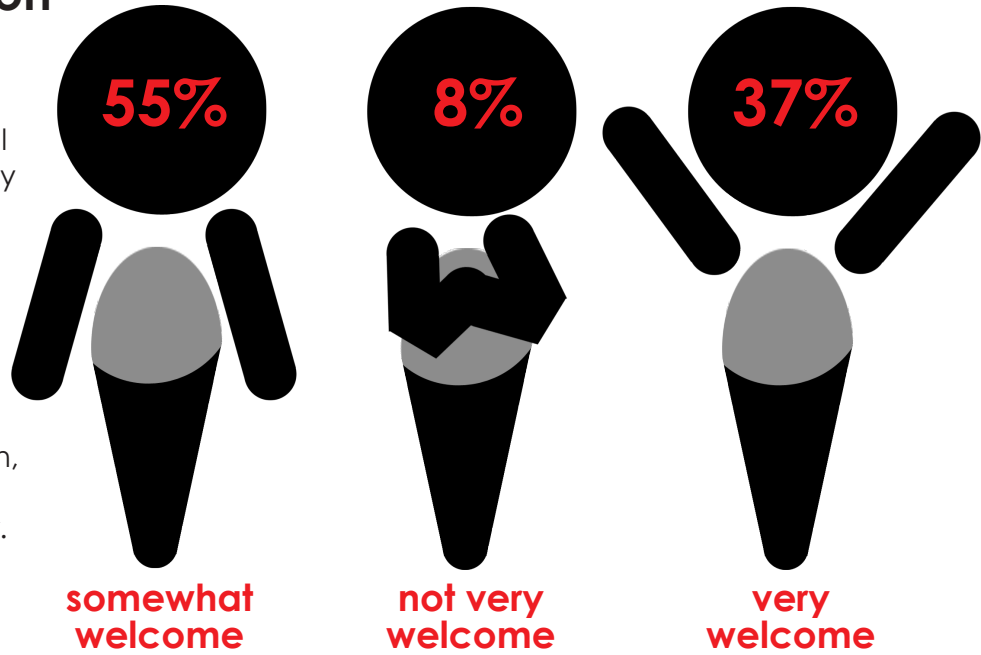
International students are studying a wide range of fields, including a number of qualified professionals completing postgraduate studies.



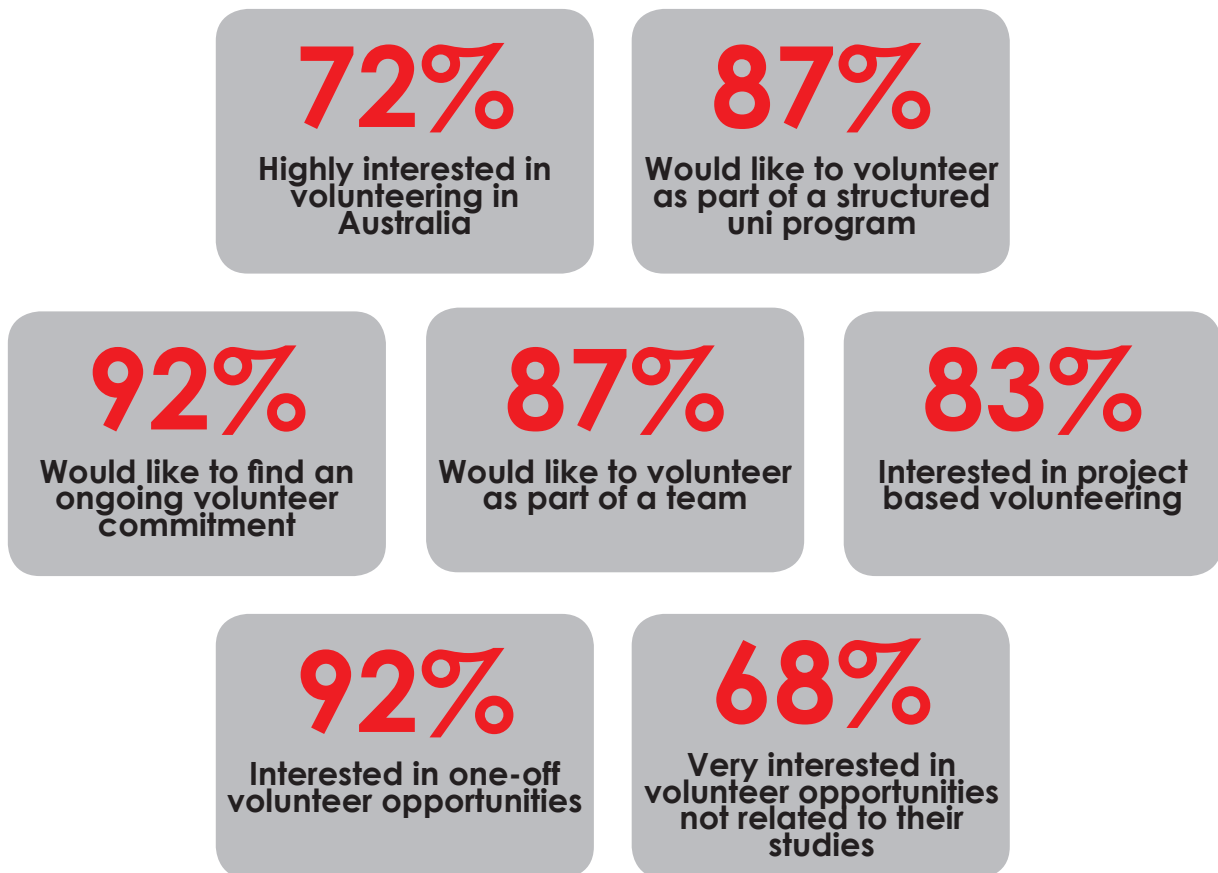
## Community integration

Volunteering has been identified as a way for people to build links to their community (Mayer 2003, Kerr 2009), and many international students see volunteering as a way to become more involved with their host community.

Volunteering motivations which related to integrating with the local community - such as making new friends, experiencing local culture and practising English, were common in international students' top reasons to volunteer.

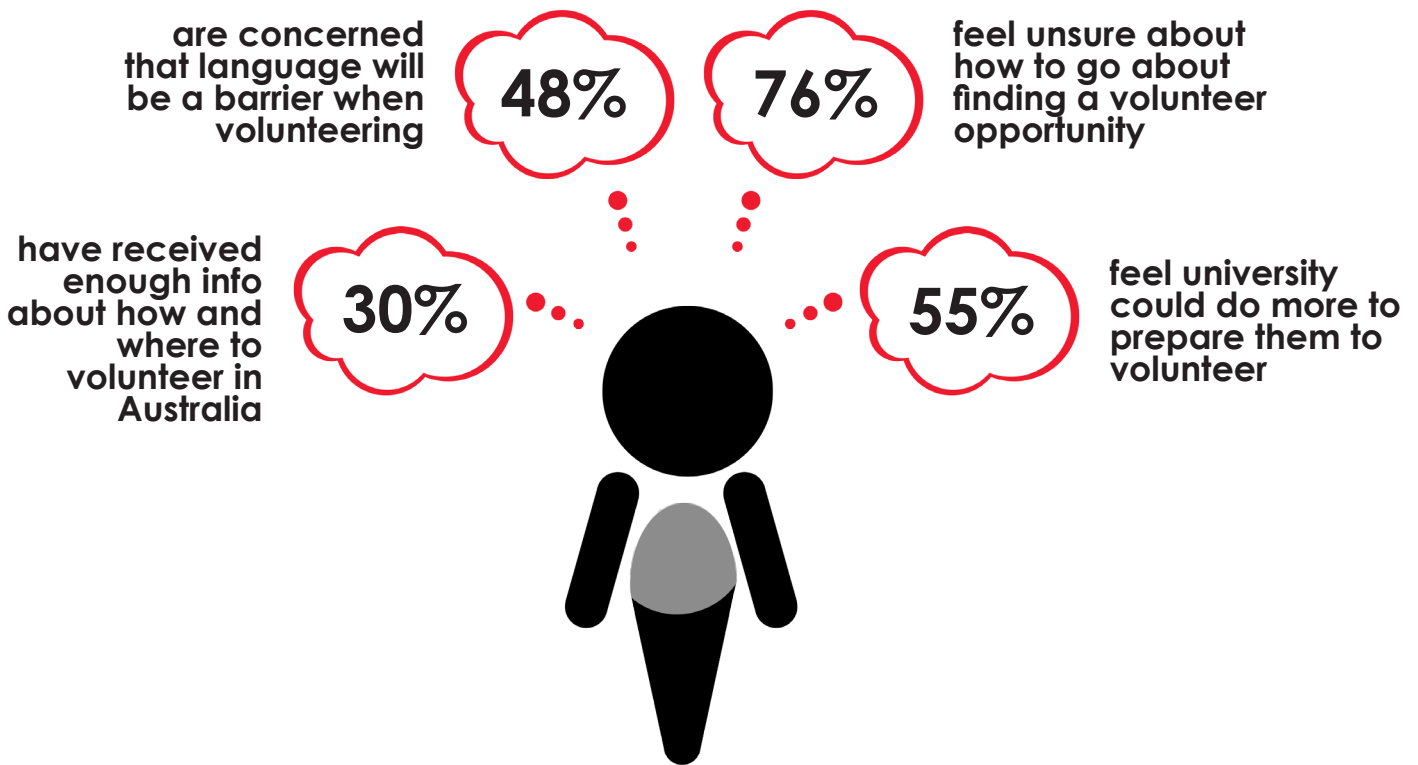


## Interest in volunteering



## Getting involved in volunteering

Despite their high interest, international students see some challenges in getting involved:



## International students as volunteers

### *Drivers of international student volunteerism*

Volunteering Qld has talked to international students in order to find out what the main motivations are for them when it comes to volunteering. Here is what they said:

- To do something meaningful with free time
- To experience something new/different
- To practice English language skills
- To network and make new friends
- To get more involved in their new community
- To learn about different cultures, including Australian culture and the multiple other cultures present in Australia
- To learn professional workplace skills first hand
- To develop practical skills to compliment theoretical learnings
- To improve skills in professional reflection
- To augment CV
- To feel personally/spiritually fulfilled

## International students as volunteers

### *Student perspectives on the benefits and challenges of volunteering*

International students, like domestic students, benefit greatly from engaging in volunteering activities during their studies. 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.



## International Student Volunteer *Jeen (Malaysia)*

Jeen is from Malaysia and is studying her Masters of Accounting. She volunteered with UnitingCare Community to revamp, update and reorganise their Intranet.

Jeen's motivations for volunteering were similar to those of other international students - she wanted to supplement her Australian study experience by gaining familiarity with an Australian workplace culture.

For Jeen, "joining a volunteering project was better than only studying during the whole semester". It allowed her to become comfortable in Australian organisational environments and with workplace communication practices. As she intends to stay on and work in Australia following her studies, she feels this will be a benefit for her future career.

For Jeen, being recruited to a project that was not in her area of expertise was something of a challenge, which she realises the benefits of: "As I want to make significant progress in my position, I was always trying my best, but it was not easy because I am not good at computers, [which is what my task was about]. I was not confident in my role because I lack IT skills, so at first I had some stress. But UnitingCare Community gave me good induction and support and then they teach me what to do in a friendly manner, [so I learned] something about IT skills. Finally I realised it's not necessary to be anxious about my performance and then I [began] to enjoy my job..."

Although initially Jeen expected to do a project related to her professional background, she feels that she gained useful skills during her time at Uniting Care Community and at the end of the project she said she found it very satisfying to have achieved a result: "I felt really good every week after completing my task for the project, I felt like I have achieved something I wouldn't imagine that I could do in the first place."

A standout memory of her time with UnitingCare Community is the friendly workplace culture and support that she received: "At first I was kind of nervous because I don't work with other volunteers, but I [did] enjoy working in the workplace because people there are so welcoming!"



## International Student Volunteer Janet (China)

Janet has been in Australia now for just over 3 years, she is completing a Bachelor of Communication majoring in Public Relations, final year, UQ. During her time here she has volunteered assisting with events management at the State Library on the 2010 'Unlimited: Designing for Asia Pacific' initiative; she volunteered doing social media updates for the 2011 'Media 140: The future of Social Technologies' at the Brisbane Powerhouse and currently she volunteers with the UQ mentoring program supporting 1st year students.

Initially Janet started volunteering in order to make new friends, gain work experience, practice her English and get to know Australian culture. As a result of her positive volunteer experiences Janet found that she now knows more people, has made close friends and has a lot of interesting work experience to put on her resume. She explains that all this is really important because as an international student you come here with no friends or family close by to support you and many potential employers are hesitant to employ international students. "As part of a volunteer team I felt confident and comfortable... they don't look down on you... that's why I love it!"

Her advice to other international students interested in volunteering is:

"The kind of volunteering you do really matters, search for a job/organisation that suits you before you decide to volunteer. Be on time. Communicate well with managers. Make sure you support your team, and remember that everything you do is on behalf of the organisation - you are not just your own person."

In the future she hopes to continue volunteering and says that she would recommend it to all international students, finishing off by saying that "one of the most important things for doing volunteering is that that rewarding feeling! It feels so great to help people out, both for the organisation and the clients. Nothing can compare with it."





## International Student Volunteer *Fabiola (Venezuela)*

Degree: Master of Engineering Management, QUT

“In my home country I participated in different community involvement initiatives. One of them was held at a children foundation. In this 3 month project, I got involved with the community where the resources were poor and very scarce. Through this experience I got the opportunity to connect with toddlers and kids who were disabled, injured, and homeless or suffered some kind of illness.”

“As a result, I had to undertake activities such as fundraising, accommodating facilities, teaching and assisting children how to read, write, how to play musical instruments and stimulate their cultural sensibility. In addition, I was involved in logistics activities when donations came from different sources, such as private companies or individuals.”

“This experience was definitely pure, memorable and rewarding. I felt I was really making a difference that positively impacted the community. As an outcome, I learned to be grateful for what I've got and for all the opportunities I have had. I definitely improved my human sensibility, my self-confidence and strengthen my religious beliefs, as anyone can make a huge difference, taking small actions.”

“More importantly, being able to give joy and happiness to others is an amazing feeling of giving back.”

# International students as volunteers

## *Organisational perspectives on international students as volunteers*

“Before we took on international student volunteers we were hesitant... our organisation was going through major restructuring and the climate never seemed right for something like this [... but we were] surprised by their skills [and their experience which was] greater than with previous local students - they weren't fussy about the work, which did range from complex to menial.”

### **Benefits for organisations**

International students come with a unique set of skills and experiences that can value add to any team. They are often highly motivated to get experience and exposure to the Australian workplace and get involved in their community. Organisations that have realised the benefits of engaging international student volunteers stated that they:

- Bring new ideas and increased cross-cultural understandings
- Improve capacity to service clients with different language needs
- Make services relevant to a wider group
- Have global networks and linkages
- Identify needs in the community
- Are tolerant of difficulties due to life experience and familiarity with overcoming challenges, e.g. moving countries
- Are professionals with high level skills

“Been fantastic, she's really resourceful. I'm really happy with her work... and she's really making progress... There's young people out there that can really thrive if you give them the info and resources.”

### **Workplace diversity**

Engaging volunteers from a range of cultural backgrounds brings benefits to the organisation by increasing workplace diversity.

Organisations identified the following benefits:

- New perspectives, energy and ideas
- Improved group dynamics and cohesion - diversity challenges people to come together as a team based on similarities and shared values
- Identifies where organisational culture has downfalls, e.g. addressing issues internally such as “are we really inclusive?”
- Can alleviate racism

Integrating international students as volunteers in your organisation can have flow on effects - increasing inclusion and integration within the mainstream community.

For more tips on working with volunteers from diverse backgrounds, refer to the Volunteering Australia website: [www.volunteeringaustralia.org/files/JMEGYF6XFG/CALDInfosheet.pdf](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/files/JMEGYF6XFG/CALDInfosheet.pdf) and [www.volunteeringaustralia.org/Skills-and-Training/-Training-skills-resources/Training-Manual-Recruiting-and-Supporting-Volunteers-from-Diverse-Cultural-and-Language-Backgrounds.asp](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/Skills-and-Training/-Training-skills-resources/Training-Manual-Recruiting-and-Supporting-Volunteers-from-Diverse-Cultural-and-Language-Backgrounds.asp)

# Concerns for organisations

We asked organisations what their concerns and challenges were in engaging international students, and these are some of the issues they raised. Many were concerns that apply to all volunteers, so addressing these challenges can benefit organisations' volunteer management more generally.

Drawing on the experience of organisations who successfully engage international student volunteers, and best practice strategies of volunteer management, the following tips provide ways to work effectively with international student volunteers. See the following pages for more info on these strategies.

- **Not having enough opportunities for volunteers or opportunities that could be related to a student's area of study.**  
**Meaningful engagement** can be more important to students than working in their field. See page 14.  
**'Dreaming Big'** can help you develop a new project to make use of students' professional skills. See page 18.
- **Feeling a lack of sufficient time/resources to ensure the volunteer has a good and meaningful experience.**  
Investing a little time initially in **selecting the right volunteer** and giving them a good orientation will go a long way to a good experience. See page 13.  
**A buddy system** or **team-based roles** provides peer support for a good volunteer experience, and eases time demands on managers. See page 17.
- **Fear that student volunteers will leave the organisation after a short space of time.**  
Like other volunteers, **getting to know their drivers** and **targeted retention strategies** will encourage longer term engagement. See page 16.
- **Lack of proper volunteer management and/or policies and procedures for working with volunteers.**  
Access **resource suggestions** for help with policies and procedures. See page 12.
- **Knowledge gaps in the organisation: not knowing who international students are, where they are, how to engage them, etc.**  
Students and youth can be engaged with **tailored linking and recruiting strategies**. See page 13.
- **Organisational culture: existing staff/volunteers or clients resistant to new or different volunteer involvement.**  
Access resources on **working with culturally and linguistically diverse volunteers** and the benefits of **workplace diversity**. See page 9.
- **Misconceptions around the language and communication skills of international students.**  
Due to their studies, most international students' English proficiency is good, although many are keen to perfect their skills. There may be a **range of language proficiency among international students** depending on their experience and background, but like any volunteer, the important thing is to match the skills to the role.





## 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."



# Working effectively with international students

“Add 10% extra support/preparation - get the added value.”

“It’s important to learn and understand cultural differences when working with international students, e.g. some will be reserved or expect a high levels of instruction as a result of culturally different workplace protocols.”

Like any other volunteer group, it is important to understand how international students prefer to work and what their skills, strengths, weaknesses and constraints are. Volunteering Qld already provides a wide range of free resources, available online at Resource Central on working with volunteers, visit [www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/index.php/resources/menu/resource-central](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/index.php/resources/menu/resource-central)

The key readings from Resource Central for working with international students are:

- Volunteering Qld: Volunteer handbook**
- Rationale for involving volunteers**
- Managing change**
- Recruit and select volunteers: 6 steps**
- Formal volunteering: Recruitment checklist**
- Job descriptions template**
- Recruitment and interview tips**
- Screening volunteers**
- Characteristics of an effective educator**
- Considerations for volunteer induction and orientation**
- Determining a training need**
- Supervising and supporting volunteers**
- Volunteer first day on the job**
- Volunteer orientation and skills training**
- Volunteer orientation checklist**
- Volunteer program evaluation**
- Volunteer review**
- Determining volunteer readiness**

Volunteering Qld also has a range of research publications which gather, create and promote knowledge to inform innovative thinking and practices in the field of volunteering and working with volunteers. Some key readings from the research are:

- Young People as Volunteers: A guide to moving beyond traditional practices**
- Youth Leading Youth: A look at organisations led by young people**
- Virtual Volunteering and Digital Engagement: A qualitative investigation**
- Virtual Volunteering: Best practices and future potentials**

Tailoring your management strategies according to your volunteer needs will help your organisation maximise benefits of international student volunteer engagement. Read on for more tips.

# Working effectively with international students

## Linking and recruiting

Linking and recruiting students was cited as a key challenge by organisations consulted by Volunteering Qld. Many said they were unsure of how they could link in with universities in order to inform international students of volunteer opportunities.

More broadly the non-profit sector faces the ongoing challenge of recruiting young people as volunteers. Volunteering Qld has identified several strategies you can use, which apply equally to international and domestic students:

- Link with university career advisors and student service centres to promote opportunities, especially those needing professional skills.
- Contact universities and education providers and ask if they have an international student support team whom you can contact.
- Online platforms and social media are very effective tools for linking and communicating to young people, however ensure that face-to-face relationship building is not lost amid technology.
- Take part in on-campus events like student career and volunteer fairs.
- Hold information and recruitment sessions nearby your local campus.
- Once you have one international student volunteer you can link with many more through capitalising on connections at their place of study and their social networks. Remember: most volunteers start volunteering because a friend was doing it.

Volunteering Qld has been looking at how to create pathways for better access for volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, for more information visit [www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/index.php/resources/menu/pathways-for-better-access/656-pathways-for-better-access](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/index.php/resources/menu/pathways-for-better-access/656-pathways-for-better-access)

# Working effectively with international students

## Selection process

### The right volunteer for the right role: Getting to know their drivers

Generally speaking, international students choose to volunteer because of one or a combination of the following key drivers:

- **Professional development:** Many international students are looking to gain professional experience through volunteering, whether it is in their field of study or not, students gain a lot from a firsthand experience of the Australian workplace.
- **Social:** Students are looking to meet new people, experience new things and make new friends through volunteering. Many are also looking to improve their social and networking skills in an Australian context as this may be very different from their home country.
- **Values:** Some students are looking to act on their own personal values and to make a difference through their volunteering. Like many young people, international students are looking to do what they think is right and to contribute to society.

But remember to ask! You may be surprised by what motivates your potential volunteer...

"We have found many international students are particularly interested in connecting with Indigenous communities and elders, they want to know who they are and about their history and culture. This interest stems from the importance of community elders and traditional leaders in many of the cultures that international students represent."

### Did you know

**93%**

of international students we talked to are very interested in volunteering in Australia

**55%**

have previous volunteer experience

**68%**

are very interested in volunteer opportunities unrelated to their area of study

**92%**

would like to find an ongoing volunteer opportunity

**83%**

would be interested in project based volunteering

**87%**

would like to volunteer as part of a team

### Be selective

Like any other time where you consider engaging a volunteer in your organisation make sure you are selective and choose a volunteer whose values, skills, availabilities and drivers align with your own and with the needs of your clients. Ensure the student understands what they will be committing to and ask them whether they feel this is the right role/organisation for them. If you find the potential volunteer unsuitable, make sure you explain yourself and encourage them to continue looking for a volunteer placement; can you recommend any other organisations who you think they would be better suited to?

### Things to remember

- FUN and socialising is important to young people, think about how you can build this into the volunteer experience.
- Be flexible with students, they have important study commitments.
- Technology is a useful engagement tool - but should not replace face-to-face contact
- Don't frighten them off with upfront commitment, think "try before you buy".

## Meaningful engagement

To get the most from student volunteers, it is important to give them a meaningful volunteer experience. Of course not all volunteering roles can be as rewarding as some, however it is possible to communicate the importance and impact of the work done by a volunteer. Doing so increases how meaningful a volunteer role is for students, giving them some context on why they are doing what they're doing and what that means in the larger scheme of things. Another strategy is to hand over ownership of the work to the volunteers, challenging them and increasing the amount of responsibility on the volunteer. This strategy works particularly well with students who show real initiative and an understanding of their work, rather than seeing such responsibility as a burden many young volunteers revel in the opportunity to prove themselves and get some experience in leadership roles.

To engage students' skills and interests to create a meaningful project:

1. Identify the volunteer's values, interests and skills.
2. Look for where these can be utilised in your organisation.
3. Put clear outcomes and timeframes in place so they can see a tangible contribution.
4. Continue to monitor and adapt as required.

Finally, always communicate project outcomes to volunteers and try to find ways to show gratitude for the time and expertise they have given. This goes a long way to making sure volunteers feel they have made a real contribution.

Some key statistics on international students with previous experience of volunteering about meaningful engagement:

**82%**

felt they had made a real contribution through volunteering

**79%**

thought volunteering helped with their career

**89%**

made friends through volunteering

**86%**

said they learnt important skills through volunteering

#### Things to remember

- Design volunteer opportunities for groups and look to develop project based volunteer opportunities.
- Challenge them with complex, interesting projects - you will be surprised how engaging and motivating this can be.
- Create pathways into leadership and encourage volunteers to take ownership.

## Working effectively with international students

### Orientation

#### Orienting international students

It is extremely important to spend time properly orienting your international student volunteers into your organisation and workplace. Most international students will have many questions about their new volunteer role (although, especially at first, many will be too shy to ask). Some international students also face the challenge of adjusting to a new set of cultural and behavioural norms as their volunteer placement may well be their first experience in the Australian workplace. These factors can be effectively addressed by a good orientation.

Some points you may want to cover during the orientation of your international student volunteers:

- Information about your organisation and its organisational culture.
- Who their main contact is, whether the volunteer coordinator or the person in charge of the project or program the student will be working on.
- Discuss what they hope to get out of this experience, what they hope to contribute and explore how that can be realised.
- Explain why you need volunteers and why the work they will do will be important.
- Some international students do not fully understand the not-for-profit sector in Australia (often we find international student volunteers wanting to volunteer with large for-profit firms) - explaining the role and impact of smaller non-profit organisations and highlighting the benefits can increase engagement.
- Manage their expectations by making the boundaries around their roles clear and letting them ask questions on what they are expecting to ensure that these match your own expectations.
- Transport and logistics is sometimes a concern for international students - a little initial advice on suitable transport or carpool options, and arranging a public transport-friendly work schedule can result in more committed, more available volunteers.

#### Things to remember

- Make sure volunteers feel welcome.
- Encourage equal treatment of paid staff and volunteers.
- Have a dedicated volunteer coordinator.
- Ensure all volunteers get orientation and training including OHS.
- Have the appropriate insurance and policies in place to work with volunteers.
- Celebrate success and communicate the impact of what you are able to achieve thanks to your volunteers.



For more general tips on orientation for volunteers, refer to Volunteering Qld's Resource Central: [www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/documents/Considerations%20for%20Volunteer%20Induction%20and%20Orientation.pdf](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au/web/documents/Considerations%20for%20Volunteer%20Induction%20and%20Orientation.pdf)

## Working effectively with international students

### Retention

Organisations consulted said that they were wary of recruiting international student volunteers who are by definition, not here for the longer term. Perceived lower retention rates and not getting enough return on the investment required for training were a key concern.

Many students are in Australia to study for several years and anticipate staying in the country for at least that period of time, if not more. To reduce the potential for volunteers leaving without notice, take time to explain to the students the proper processes for informing you if they plan to stop volunteering.

In addition to the volunteer retention strategies provided at Resource Central these are some tips from organisations successfully engaging international student volunteers:

Incorporating fun, food, facts and friends into your volunteers experience wherever possible will increase retention. You can do this by:

- Ensuring international students know that they can have fun as they do their volunteer roles. Discuss what they think would make their work more fun/exciting.
- Consider giving ownership of organising fun activities or events to the students, maybe they can help the entire workplace have more fun?!
- Have opportunities for volunteers to socialise with each other, with staff and where appropriate with clients.
- Ask students whether they have friends who would like to work with them.
- Free food ensures high attendance at events, including volunteer meetings! It is also a good strategy for retention to hold monthly volunteer morning teas or even to simply have tea and biscuits available for the volunteers as they work.
- Students appreciate having access to the information they need in order to make decisions that affect their work, study and life. Be clear and up front about expectations, roles and responsibilities, tasks, logistical details, feedback and challenges and opportunities going forward.

### Flexible working arrangements

Like all volunteers, international students have other commitments. For students, this is often to do with classes and exams. Flexibility is essential when working with international students and starts with an open discussion about the students' other commitments.

Keep in mind that during exam time, students' availability will be limited but that during the holidays they will have extra free time. Consider ways the organisation can purposefully take advantage of this.

Other options for flexibility include:

- Offsite or virtual volunteering (See Volunteering Qld's '**Virtual Volunteering and Digital Engagement**' report), or;
- Event, episodic or project-based volunteering.

These strategies will allow international students to work around their other commitments, minimise travel costs and potentially allow them to increase the time spent volunteering.

# Working effectively with international students

## *Out of the box*

### **The buddy system**

A buddy system or team-based volunteering is an excellent approach to working with international student volunteers. Linking an international student with another volunteer and/or creating small project teams of student volunteers helps students orient themselves to the organisation quickly, and provides personal and peer support. It also helps ensure communication and makes volunteering a more sociable experience which attracts students to continue volunteering.

Ways to encourage a productive peer support buddy system with a group of new volunteers:

- Facilitate some initial team building and socialising to build trust and friendships, e.g. have a morning tea after orientation and invite the team to introduce themselves to the team, try asking them to share previous volunteer experiences and encourage them to find commonalities.
- Have the group come up with a working agreement, this document can include: how the team wants to work together, how they will stay in contact, how often they meet, how they decide and allocate roles and tasks in the group, what to do in case of disagreements.

Ways to encourage a productive buddy relationship where a new volunteer is buddied up with someone already volunteering or working in the organisation:

When choosing a buddy for the student volunteer consider carefully who would suit the role:

- Would any of your staff or volunteers put their hand up for this role?
- Who would the students need to work closely with to undertake their volunteer work?
- Is anyone in the organisation from the same cultural background and/or is bilingual?
- Are there any other young people you can buddy the new volunteer with?
- Is there someone in the organisation that is a 'people person' and enjoys getting to know and supporting people?

Together with your new volunteer decide what is the best way their buddy can support them:

- Is the buddy relationship formal or social?
- Do they work directly together?
- Do they meet at regular intervals to catch up/debrief?
- Does the buddy provide any training?
- Establish the best methods for communication: Emails? Phone calls? Social media?

## ‘Dreaming Big’

A lack of existing or meaningful volunteer opportunities is often cited as a barrier to engaging international students as volunteers. A practical strategy to overcoming this barrier is to explore the potential of creating a new project based on an individual volunteers' passion, interest, expertise and which ties in or complements the work of the organisation. We encourage organisations when designing projects for international students to place them into small teams so that they can work on a role/project together. This strategy increases their motivation, reliability and retention while providing the organisation with additional support.

International students are highly educated and highly skilled in their field of study, they also have a unique global perspective and experience in volunteering and working in other countries. These facts make international students an excellent resource for the non-profit sector where organisations are often in need of professional advice and input but can't always afford it. Through inviting small teams of international students from a particular discipline to work with your organisation it is possible to tap into this pool of budding professionals in order to get assistance to innovate, problem solve, review and evaluate the work of the organisation.

Some examples of a project designed for a small team of international students to drive are:

- One off large scale events
- Advocacy/awareness raising campaigns
- Pilot projects
- SWOT analysis of marketing strategy, business plans, bookkeeping
- Re-design of new media strategy, promotion strategy, branding, public relations
- Upgrade of IT systems
- Working bee on garden/landscaping
- Survey, research and data analysis
- Analysis of volunteer engagement and management
- Events management
- Fundraising activities
- Volunteer recruitment

When inviting a team of international students to undertake an intervention it is important to give them a clear structure of what you are expecting or hoping for and on how to approach the project, including any restrictions or limitations. Give the students a good picture of the challenges or barriers the organisation is facing, allowing them to ask questions and access any information they feel is necessary for them to do their work. It is also important to make them aware of any confidentiality issues and discuss any privacy and confidentiality restrictions on information they are given.

Key things to keep in mind when coming up with project ideas:

- WHAT do you want to achieve and WHY.
- What can International students do for you that your other volunteers may not? (think about discipline specific projects eg. IT, marketing, accounting, law, health, research, etc.)
- Timelines are important, think about the students timetables when designing the project (when does the semester start/end, when are exams, when are holidays).
- Design a project that requires a team of volunteers.
- Discuss with your volunteer/s whether they have any ideas, questions or concerns about their role and see if there is any need to tailor it to their skills/availability, etc.
- Ask if there is something extra they think they could do that would be of benefit to your organisation?



## One-off event case study VoRTCS

Elaine is studying for a Bachelor of Business Administration, majoring in Marketing. She is 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.

### The role

Elaine started volunteering to put her expertise in marketing and events management to work, for the good of society. Jules, VoRTCS coordinator, was able to use her skills directly in a number of projects, some very high impact: "In the first week Julian offered me 3 projects. The first was helping with administration of recruits for the VoRTCS tutors, filing and preparing materials; the other one was marketing - building and searching contacts. It was good because Jules had a plan of areas that he wants to target and which organisations he thought VoRTCS could work with, so I worked through that plan, finding contacts for the program and putting them into a database. And now I am working on the CEO Sleepout, it is a big event; I am helping Karen (project officer) with the invitation list, every week updating the database for the participants. I am enjoying this a lot because it's very big." Elaine was initially nervous about the responsibility of contacting major companies to invite their participation in the CEO Sleepout, but was supported in this by her supervisor: "Julian kept encouraging me to call, saying, 'your English is really good' and so I did it the first time and it was a good experience!"

### The benefits

For Elaine, the volunteer experience with VoRTCS "has been very good, I have had many opportunities. I have... learnt a lot about the cultural differences ... particularly the differences in how to go about organising an event in Australia. [This is] good preparation for me [and now I feel] more confident about going into Australian work culture, and working in public relations here." In addition to personal professional skill development, Elaine was thrilled with the organisational culture at VoRTCS. "Even in work hours they will chat to each other - 'how are you?' they make time to go for lunch together. Sometimes they have free food for lunch in the tea room, and we can have lunch there." This is a major difference in workplace practices from her home country.

### The challenges

Working in such a large, international organisation was a key motivation for Elaine in joining the VoRTCS team. However, she feels that she would have benefited from more involvement with the wider organisation: "We are coming here because we are interested in this organisation; we want to know more about the organisation. It would be great to introduce us to more colleagues nearby so we can find out about their work..." Elaine would have appreciated the opportunity to talk to more of the staff about their work and what the organisation does, as she is keen to learn about more about the overall work of St Vincent de Paul Society of Qld.



# Working effectively with international students

## Cheat sheet

- Be ready, have a plan, get organised.
- Be professional: advertise positions as you would paid positions, include role description and conduct interviews with potential volunteers.
- Use places students would be familiar with to meet or hold recruitment events.
- Consider what additional information you may need to give international students to ensure they settle in to your organisation and can understand its culture. Ask about special needs and expectations - the same as you would with any other volunteers.
- Manage their expectations: be clear about the role and timeframes.
- Get to know your volunteer: their background, interests, skills and experience. Asking questions can reveal skills and experience that can be helpful to your organisation.
- Be flexible with timetables and other commitments.
- Where appropriate give assistance with transport and logistics.
- Utilise episodic and project based volunteering check out how to 'Dream Big' and get the most of your volunteers.
- Give ownership to volunteers.
- Encourage social activities amongst volunteers and employees to promote team building and the formation of friendships.
- Engagement methods to suit the demographic: fun social activities and free food keep volunteers happy and engaged!
- Remember specific cultural needs: Halal, Kosher and vegetarian foods, prayer room.
- Give feedback on work and behaviours: they are there to learn!





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