

# Leveraging Volunteering for a Holistic Student Experience

Victor Lee<sup>1</sup>, Willem Booker<sup>1</sup>, Madison Bryant<sup>1</sup>, Alex Connor<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

Community engagement, student volunteering, student engagement, applied learning.

## Leveraging volunteering for a holistic student experience

Volunteering serves as a potent mechanism through which universities actively participate in and contribute to the fabric of their surrounding communities. These activities afford students tangible opportunities to apply theory in practical settings, develop skills, and for universities to harness the transformative potential of volunteering to forge enduring connections, propel positive societal transformations, and nurture a cohort of socially conscious and globally engaged citizens.

Communitier is a social enterprise who connect, engage, and mobilise volunteers through a combination of programming and technology to make a meaningful impact on global issues. In their role as aggregator, advisor and amplifier, they have been working to form and maintain reciprocal partnerships between Australian universities, volunteer involving organisations, government, and industry.

## A holistic student experience

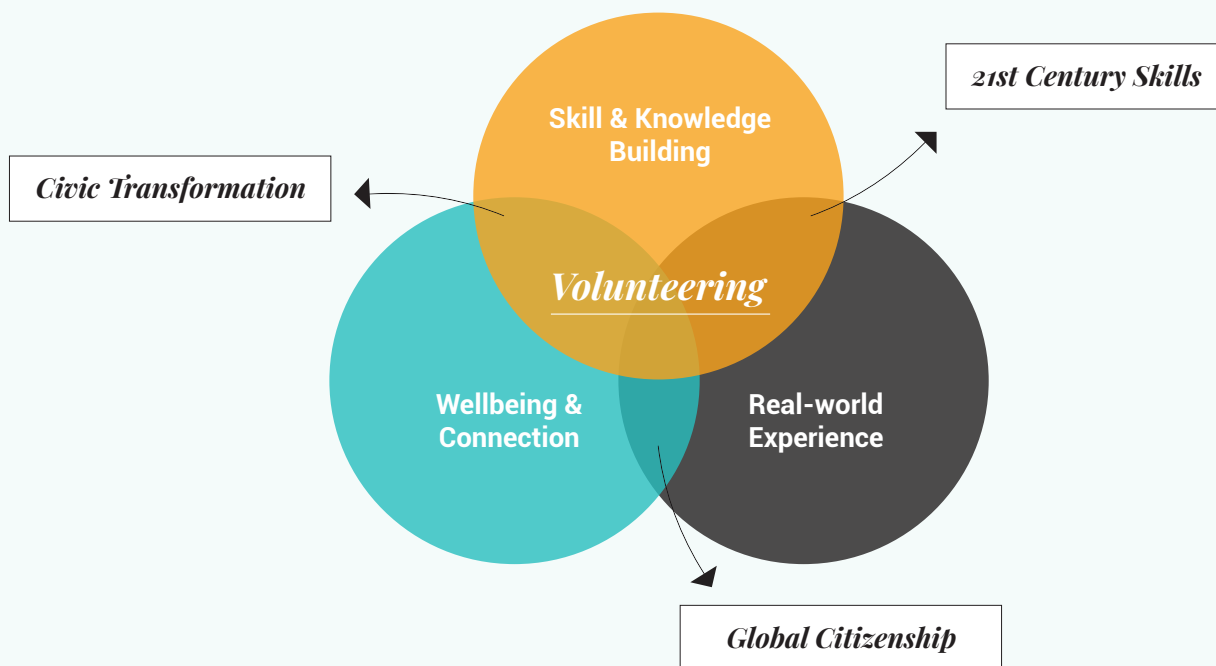
In order to best design and align volunteering experiences to student needs, Communitier consulted with sector partners and began by breaking experience needs down into 3 phases, each requiring a different set of value propositions and student needs:

1. **Arrive:** Where students feel welcomed, make new connections and settle into their new surroundings.
2. **Thrive:** Where students feel supported and are afforded opportunities to broaden their experience and grow.
3. **Succeed:** Where students are equipped with the confidence and experience for the next chapter of their lives.

These partners included with university students across a variety of demographics and stages of their education journey, university contacts specialising in student support and employability, program managers of extra-curricular services in the university, as well as local, state and

1. Communitier

**Figure 1** | *The Impact of Volunteering for Students and the Community*



federal government bodies and community organisations that were addressing the needs of students and youth in Australia.

Consultation included in-depth interviews and interactive online events which assisted us in collating common challenges and needs to then construct a framework and approach that blended the outcomes for students, institutions, wider community and other interacting

stakeholders.

Through ongoing validation, testing and refinement, we present the outcomes and insights we have gained through recent collaborations, to contribute to our collective knowledge-building of the applications of community engagement. While these outcomes are from recent collaborations, the work remains ongoing.

## Collaborators

- » **Communitier:** A social enterprise whose mission is to facilitate meaningful experiences between volunteers, customers and community organisations that revitalise our volunteering ecosystem. Collaborating across education, community, business and government sectors, Communitier

design volunteering programs and technology to enrich the student experience and build a sustainable volunteering ecosystem.

- » **Universities:** Provide opportunities for students to volunteer by enriching existing programs or courses and aligning activities with learning and employability outcomes.
- » **Volunteer:** Involving Organisations (VIOs): provide opportunities for people to volunteer and their subject-matter expertise.
- » **Governments (Local, State and Federal):** enable greater participation and community engagement potential through funding and access to cross-sector stakeholders.
- » **Industry Partners:** provide their employees and professional skills to amplify student contributions through mentoring and facilitation of group activities.

## Case studies

### *Arrive, with Study NSW*

Since August 2022, Communitier has been working with Study NSW to design and coordinate a volunteering program for international students state-wide. Study NSW is part of the Department of

Enterprise, Investment and Trade (DEIT) and each year supports events and activities that promote the state and the international education sector.

This program involved recruitment, induction, support and roster coordination of Study NSW's International Student Welcome Desk at Sydney and Newcastle Airports, local volunteering events and bi-annual recognition ceremonies, seeking to achieve the following objectives:

- » Provide opportunities for international students to gain skills, experience and accreditation;
- » Create a welcoming and inclusive first impression of NSW using a student-led approach;
- » Build a sustainable volunteering pool that can resource future community initiatives; and
- » Enrich student pathways that also strengthen relationships with the local community.

### Student outcomes

- » Increased connection to the NSW community;
- » Increased social connections with their peers and local VIOs;
- » Increased skills & confidence in: teamwork and communication; and

- » Increased awareness and knowledge of the Australian community and culture.

## Engagement

Between August 2022 and March 2023:

- » 236 students volunteered (230 international, 6 domestic), of the total 898 expressing their interest and 453 inducted.
- » 237 arriving students and 979 members of the general public were provided support through the Study NSW Welcome Desk.
- » 1751 volunteering shifts were attended, totalling 5428 hours, and an average of 23 hours per volunteer.
- » 20 nationalities and 15 universities were represented by student volunteers.

## Student experience

Key motivations of students for getting involved:

- » 90% - supporting other international students
- » 71% - making connections with other students
- » 65% - developing skills for the workplace

Outcomes, on a scale of 1-6:

- » 71% of students selected a 5 or higher in how much they progressed with their initial motivations.
- » 94% of students selected a 5 or higher when asked how much they enjoyed their time volunteering.

### Transformative stories

#### Vishwesh Narayan, University of NSW, 12 hours of volunteering

*"My volunteering experience with Communteer and Study NSW was crucial in getting my first job. The skills and references I gained enabled me to ace the interview, which turned out to be a wonderful experience in itself."*

#### Thao My Nguyen, Western Sydney University, 36 hours of volunteering

*"Volunteering has helped my mental health a lot, as I was lonely in the first months. Being a Study NSW Volunteer also helped me realise my self-worth and learn how I can build success and dreams from small steps."*

### *Thrive, with UTS Business School*

In January 2024, the UTS Business School and Communteer delivered a work-integrated learning experience in the undergraduate subject, Business and Social Impact. Collaborating with

Senior Lecturer Dr Mihajlia Gavin, a Hackathon was selected and the experience was embedded in class and assessments.

The Heart Foundation provided a course-relevant and real-world challenge: develop a Community Fundraising online initiative or campaign that will help The Heart Foundation inspire and attract a younger demographic (20–30-year-olds). This was supported by volunteers with relevant skills from Commonwealth Bank and Allianz to help facilitate the experience and increase student engagement.

### Student outcomes

The UTS Business School's desired graduate attributes and course learning outcomes were distilled into five measurable concepts;

- » Communication
- » Collaboration
- » Problem-solving
- » Teamwork
- » Employability

### Engagement

- » 4 corporate facilitators: 2 each from Allianz and Commonwealth Bank Australia.
- » 52 students participated, totally 312 hours of volunteering.

- » 10 solutions were created.
- » 1 winning group receiving further opportunity to collaborate with the Heart Foundation to realise their solution.

### Student experience

- » 74% felt the program had improved their employability.
- » 85% felt like the program was an easy way to volunteer.
- » 68% responded 4 or 5 out of 5 that the program was an opportunity to make professional connections.
- » 68% responded a 7 or higher out of 10 to volunteering again in the next 3 years, and 29% selected a 10.
- » 75% responded 4 or 5 out of 5 that the program had engaged them in the 'real world' beyond university.

### Transformative stories

#### Mihajlia Gavin, Senior Lecturer, UTS Business School

*"Described by our industry partners as producing "outstanding quality and ideas" and by students as "one of the best assessments I have completed in my business course", here's to more collaborative programs that generate social impact from UTS Business School for 2024!"*





**Bijal Patel, Associate Agility Coach,  
Commonwealth Bank Australia**

*"Loved facilitating my 2nd Hackathon. The groups came up with some creative ideas. Heart Foundation's Moana Wood and Amanda Beardmore will be using this idea in their upcoming campaign. Yay!"*

### *Succeed, with UNSW Business School*

Operated by the UNSW Business School, Australian Business Essentials (ABE) is a hands-on personal and professional development program designed for international postgraduate students.

Communitier was engaged to co-deliver the compulsory volunteering component of this program and facilitate UNSW's connection with community organisations. The program has so far run over 3 semesters: 2022 Term 3, 2023 Term 1 and Term 2, with 2024 Term 1 currently underway.



ABE aims to provide students with opportunities to:

- » Develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence to engage in an Australian professional context;
- » Develop and demonstrate an understanding of Australian culture;
- » Apply new knowledge about Australian business culture and practice communication skills in immersive experiences; and
- » Participate collaboratively, respectfully and responsibly in culturally diverse team environments.

### Student outcomes

- » Increased skills and confidence in; Leadership, Teamwork, Communication, Project-Management & Work-readiness
- » Exploration of self-identity and community values
- » Increased employability
- » New professional & community connections

### Engagement

The following volunteering opportunities were selected by student volunteers:

- » **Pathly:** Virtual volunteering to support start-up organisations conducting market research in their sector;

- » **AASHA Australia Foundation:** In-person volunteering at events in set up, the running of events and the pack-up;
- » **Thoughtful Foods:** Weekly shifts staffing the till, assisting shoppers, and cleaning;
- » **Boomalli Art Gallery:** Skilled volunteering offering marketing support; and
- » **Study NSW:** In-person welcoming of international students arriving in NSW at the Sydney and Newcastle International Airport Welcome Desks.

From the 3 cohorts facilitated with UNSW ABE:

- » 81 students enrolled in the program;
- » 47 participated in volunteering;
- » 775 volunteering hours were generated, an average of 16.5 per volunteer; and
- » 40 students completed the program requirements and received formal recognition.

### Student experience

100% of students who volunteered provided a 4 or 5 out of 5 to the following surveyed statements:

- » My professional communication skills have improved;

- » I am more confident about entering an Australian workplace;
- » I have developed a deeper understanding of Australian culture; and
- » I have grown my professional network.

### Transformative stories

#### Prishanti Mishra

*"With most international students, we want to be comfortable with our communication and networking skills. Volunteering really gave us an opportunity to talk to so many different people and get comfortable with speaking in another language."*

#### Apoorv Maroo

*"This was by far the best program because it did not burden me with a lot of work, and yet I learned so much through this well-designed structure. It was almost THERAPEUTIC."*

### Challenges and learnings

Volunteering is an effective way to support student success and meaningful community engagement. By using the arrive, thrive, succeed model it is possible to demonstrate how volunteering can be customised to different student, community and university needs to allow reciprocal benefit to all stakeholders.



Throughout implementing the model, key challenges included:

- » The need for thoughtful and deliberate co-design to meet student and community need, including outcomes and goals and timing of activities;
- » Development of resources and communication that was clear and attractive to different groups; and
- » Coordination of multiple different stakeholders with very different needs and perspectives.

Learnings that could be implemented by other areas looking to embed volunteering include;

- » Managing expectations is pivotal to managing multiple stakeholders, for example working to align student interest with volunteer involving organisation (VIO) needs, by educating both stakeholders on skills held, skills needed and how to set up experiences that students want to do and VIOs can benefit from;
- » Student voice must be embedded into program design and refinement;
- » Utilise and work with the seasonal nature of volunteering and student experience, increasing engagement at key times and allowing for students and volunteer involving

organisations to move on and return as their needs change;

- » Create community with your student participants, simple interventions such as WhatsApp chat groups are incredibly effective;
- » Recognition events remain a great motivator and the celebration improves buy-in across all stakeholder groups; and
- » Independent and self-led student journeys require clear pathways.

### **The future of student volunteering**

Through volunteering, students can cultivate a deep sense of civic responsibility, empathy, and social consciousness. The social, economic, and wellbeing benefits of student volunteering create a virtuous cycle of positive outcomes for governments, universities, and communities. By recognizing and supporting student volunteering initiatives, stakeholders can collectively leverage the transformative power of volunteering to build stronger, more resilient societies and empower the next generation of leaders and change-makers.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge the university, volunteer involving organisation, industry and government partners who's work formed part of the projects outlined in this Case Study:

- » Study NSW and the NSW Department of Enterprise, Investment and Trade (DEIT)
- » University of New South Wales, Business School
- » University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Business School
- » The Heart Foundation
- » Pathly
- » Thoughtful Foods
- » Boomalli Art Gallery
- » Commonwealth Bank
- » Allianz Australia