Volunteering to learn in Australian universities

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Student volunteering is a practice adopted by universities to enhance student learning, yet little is known about how and why this learning occurs. In Australia, student volunteering is increasing and has been identified as a priority area by both government and universities (DPMC, 2011) with the aim to develop and provide programs that increase students’ sense of social responsibility, connectedness to community, leadership potential and employability skills. In England, student volunteering peaked in 2002-2009, when the government funded higher education volunteering as part of its push for increased volunteering country-wide (Darwen & Rannard, 2011). Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) argue that promotion of student volunteering is based on a number of largely untested assumptions about the benefits to students, universities, communities and beneficiaries. Despite expectations of positive outcomes, they argue “volunteering has not been integrated into mainstream higher education” and call for “a more critically engaged perspective on the purposes of volunteering” (p. 390). In the USA the focus has been on service learning with research illustrating the need for focussed and structured approaches to ensure learning outcomes (Lee & Won, 2011).

The project reported in this paper aimed to investigate: the nature and goals of Australian university student volunteering programs; the learning outcomes desired and achieved by students who volunteer; expectations of both universities and host organisations; and available options for locating programs within universities. Data collection included a desk audit of student volunteering opportunities in all Australian universities and interviews in six universities using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013), enabling in-depth exploration of the experiences of 70 institutional stakeholders, student volunteers, alumni, hosting organisation representatives and peak body and related stakeholders. Kezar and Rhoads (2001)’s four tensions in student volunteering and associated questions around learning, location, organisation and implementation provided a basis for examination of volunteering programs.

The research identified a broad spectrum of student ‘volunteering’ in Australia and a range of terminologies used by different universities for similar activities, necessitating an analysis of changing understandings of volunteering and its relationship to work-integrated-learning (WIL), community engagement and service learning, and to broader elements of graduate attributes. This paper presents an overview of the findings and case studies of two universities with similar strategic purposes to integrate volunteering into university activities, engage students with the community and develop employability, but with different implementation approaches and outcomes for students. The implications for further development of student volunteering in universities are discussed.