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Developing students' citizenship skills through recognition of voluntary community work

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Abstract

The encouragement of the development of a set of graduate attributes in Australian universities is not new. Mostly this takes place within the formal curriculum. The University of New England's non-competitive award for extra-curricular participation and achievement at university support its graduate attributes policy. This recognises the valuable skills and attributes developed through non-accredited activities: extra-curricular learning and training; preparation for the workplace including part-time paid and voluntary work; and contribution to the university and local communities. This paper focuses on the impact of voluntary work, both in the workplace and in the community. Voluntary work appears an excellent vehicle for the development of graduate attributes and qualities including citizenship.

Introduction

Recently UNE established the New England Award (NEA), a non-competitive award which recognises and rewards participation in extra-curricular learning and training, work experience and community contribution. In its pilot period, the NEA was offered to UNE's 5,000 on-campus students. It was not made available to UNE's 13,000 distance education students. A key objective of the NEA is to support UNE's Graduate Attribute Policy based on the assumption that valuable skills and attributes are able to be developed through participation in non-accredited activities while at university, in addition to within the formal curriculum. This study is an investigation of the benefits that students derive, in terms of graduate attributes and other desirable personal qualities such as citizenship skills, from involvement in voluntary work within the university community and through organisations outside the university.

The UNE Graduate Attributes Policy lists communication skills, global perspective, information literacy, lifelong learning, problem-solving, social responsibility, and teamwork (The University of New England, 2005), all of which are fairly standard components of graduate attribute policies that contain lists of individual skills and attributes. Other common ones are citizenship; cross-cultural understanding; global leadership; critical judgment; ability to work autonomously; and management skills. Some graduate attribute policies have categories of capabilities and qualities such as learning to learn attributes, professional attributes and personal attributes rather than lists of individual skills and attributes (University of Technology, 2000; The Deakin Guide, 2005; Chanock, 2004, pp3-4; Deakin University, 2003; Flinders University, 2001; Gardner & Martin, 2003, p2; Leggett, Kinnear, Boyce & Bennett 2004, p301; Macquarie University, 2005; Milton, 1999; Nunan, 1999, p5; University of South Australia, 2005; University of Wollongong, 2005).

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In addition there is an emerging school of thought that contends that personal attributes and qualities transcend skills and capabilities in importance because graduates need these to be equipped to respond to an unknown future (Barnett, 2004, p254; Barrie, 2004, p 262; Barrie & Prosser, 2004, p 244; Rooke, 2003).

While the implementation of most graduate attribute policies has centered on the development or modeling of desirable skills and attributes within formally credited courses of study (Bruce & Middleton 1999; McLoughlin & McCartney 2000; Muldoon, 2000; Chapman, 2004), a small group of universities in Australia is also recognising the huge potential of extra-curricular activity. For example the Global Leadership Program at Macquarie University (Macquarie University, 2005), the Deakin Advantage Certificate at Deakin University (Deakin University, 2003) and the NEA described above. This study is part of a larger study of the outcomes of the NEA in its pilot period (2005-2006) across all eligible activities. The study was an interpretive one within the constructivist paradigm. Action research methodology was used because of the need for evaluation and change during the pilot period of the NEA. Data collection was via postal and phone surveys and these were augmented by student writing in the form of journals.

Fifteen students who claimed NEA points for voluntary work within the university community and through outside organisations were part of the study. Within the university community the students were involved with a voluntary group that supports international students and their families settle into life in the local community; as a volunteer tutor for students from non-English speaking backgrounds; as peer mentors supporting the transition to university study of beginning undergraduate students; assisting with promotional and marketing events; undertaking pastoral care work within the university residences; organising fundraising events for charity and working on university committees such as the Student Access and Equity Committee. Outside the university the students were involved in voluntary work for social activist groups; working as a Lifeline counsellor¹; for the St Vincent de Paul Society²; for the Salvation Army³; and for the Cancer Council⁴.

¹ Lifeline is a telephone crisis service which provides all Australians needing emotional support with access to 24-hour telephone counselling for the cost of a local call. In addition to telephone counselling, Lifeline Centres offer many services specific to the needs of their local communities (Lifeline 2007).

² The St Vincent de Paul Society is a Catholic organisation which seeks to shape a more just and compassionate Australian community. Its preferred option is to work with the poor, encouraging them to take control of their destiny (St Vincent de Paul Society 2007).

³ The Salvation Army offers caring support for every problem 'from the cradle to the grave'. Its services include chaplaincy, community services, financial counselling, court and prison services, youth support and telephone counselling (The Salvation Army 2007).

⁴ The Cancer Council's goal is to lead the development and promotion of national cancer control policy in Australia, in order to prevent cancer and reduce the illness, disability and death caused by cancer. It acts nationally to advise government and other bodies on appropriate practice and policies for the prevention, detection and treatment of cancer and is an advocate for the rights of cancer patients to best treatment and supportive care (The Cancer Council Australia 2007).

In order to qualify for NEA points for work experience students were required to present a form signed by their voluntary work supervisor declaring that the students had carried out the work to an acceptable standard. The students also had to record their skills development, including reference to the UNE Graduate Attributes.

Why do voluntary work?

Employability and personal satisfaction were given equally as reasons by two thirds of the students (n=15) for why they did voluntary work. In relation to employability, the students gave reasons such as wanting experience that was related to their course; needing work experience and a competitive edge; confirming their chosen direction through work experience; resume building; and developing workplace skills such as decision making, leadership and communication skills. In relation to personal satisfaction, students said, for example: 'Joining in things like this is for self satisfaction, knowing you are doing a good deed for someone else and it really doesn't take up a lot of your time'; and 'It can be a lot of fun too!'. They also cited adding to personal experience. For example: 'Working with people from different walks of life'; and 'I wanted to fill in my time and gain skills that will be valuable in all areas of my life, not only professional but personal'.

The following extract from an NEA student's journal presents a picture of one particular type of voluntary work carried out on-campus for the purpose of fund-raising for charity and the benefits he derived from the experience:

I believe that taking on the role of (fundraising sporting event) Convenor in 2004 for X College was one of the biggest learning points in my life. After undertaking this position I look back and see that through this journey I have learned many things. The skills that I have developed through out this role...(have) been very beneficial to me. I get great satisfaction from the achievements and the result that will go into researching and helping others. This is a very unique role, working as a team and college community member to achieve the goal of raising money for charity.

The (activity) has been raising money for (charity) for more than 20 years. ...Over the last few years the bar has been raised and the event is getting more support and publicity than ever. So as you can see the (experience) for me has been amazing, I've meet so many people and made so many friends through this position. I've gained so many skills and experienced more than I could have imagined (Male student 2004).

Five students (5/15) gave altruistic reasons for their voluntary work, expressing a desire to contribute to the general community, such as: '(It) is something I am driven to do, by a desire to create a better society'; or to the university community, such as: 'I wanted to give something back to the UNE community'.

A typical example of this is the experience of a student who volunteered his time to be on the executive of an undergraduate society, as described in his NEA journal:

I take great pride in being part of the X School of our university and I took even greater pride being able to contribute something back into the Faculty through being an executive member of the X Undergraduate Society... In future I would definitely become involved in similar organisations that would allow me to contribute something to a particular group (Male student 2004).

A student who did voluntary work with an organisation external to the university (the Salvation Army) said:

I have grown as a person as a result of my time with the Salvation Army. Unpaid dedication of time and effort to this organisation made me realise how rewarding it can be to “give” and not receive money in return. It is also refreshing to see other members of the community working together, dedicating their time to help. I know now the extent of the effort which is put into their unpaid work. I found it to be a valuable experience and look to do more voluntary work in the future. ... Working with the Salvation Army has also helped me realise that there is a degree of satisfaction in knowing that you are doing something to help others because you want to, and not because you are getting paid to do it (Female student 2005).

Just one student volunteered that he was influenced to do voluntary work by the NEA. When asked specifically if the NEA had any bearing on their decision to do voluntary work, five (5/15) said that it did. Most of these said it provided an incentive and motivation. For example: ‘(The NEA) gave that extra “push” and I saw that by doing certain activities I was “killing two birds with the one stone” (achieving qualifications as well as one step closer to getting my NEA!)’; and ‘(The NEA) made me get out of bed and do something in my life. I was cruising through uni. It made me take note and envisage my life goals’.

The majority (9/15) said that they were already doing voluntary work before the NEA was established. However most of these (8) said that the NEA did affect how they thought about the value of voluntary work. For example: ‘The NEA has made me look at it in a different way and take it more seriously’; ‘Was already doing voluntary work before signing up but it encouraged me to do more’; and ‘I was already doing a lot of voluntary work, but it did provide a little future incentive’.

Outcomes for the students of being registered for the NEA were the incentive it gave them to take part in other activities and the resulting sense of satisfaction; increased confidence and skills; the planning, recording and reflective component of the NEA; the recognition; and strengthened resumes.

What do students gain from voluntary work?

Both groups, the students (n=15) and their supervisors (n=12), were asked what they thought students gained from the experience of voluntary work. According to their supervisors there was a diverse array of lessons that students learn through voluntary work. They were unanimous that the most common was the enhancement of personal attributes such as responsibility, commitment, reliability, discipline, motivation, initiative, independence and life skills. For example: ‘Shows strength of character,

especially when work experience has been done in a voluntary capacity'; and 'A future employer will know that they are getting a sensitive, compassionate person'.

Learning altruism was mentioned by three supervisors of students involved in voluntary work: 'There is a place for altruism in our society'; 'Giving of your time and self and the inherent rewards'; and 'Learning that one can give without receiving'.

Three supervisors cited specific on-the-job training; learning about the difference between school and work; and the chance to put theory into practice: 'Work experience is the university of life'. Learned confidence was cited by two supervisors. For example: 'It brings them out'. Additionally the opportunity for students to be mentored in a work environment, thereby deliberately creating a learning environment in the workplace, was cited by one supervisor of a voluntary worker: 'Being mentored in a certain field. This is a two way street because volunteers are highly regarded. Also the student gains experience outside (his) own peer group and experiences different levels of society, learns people skills and people management skills'.

Several supervisors also offered the opinion that the experience sets graduates apart from others because it: 'Adds another dimension to a student'; and it also demonstrates that they have added value to their degree. For example: 'It adds to the fact of the degree'; and 'A good addition to academic record...it is the sort of thing that employers look for. It indicates that the student is willing to go beyond simply passing academic units of study and is interested in what goes on around them'.

About making the effort to gain the experience, supervisors said things like: 'It gives future employers knowledge of the student's background and shows dedication to seeking employment during uni. Lots of students do uni but no work so this gives them a clear edge. I would always prefer people with the work experience'. One commented on the importance of students stepping out of their comfort zones: 'It teaches them about the real world of work. It takes them out of their cocoons'.

There were also several expressions of the opinion that academic results alone in a job applicant are not attractive to employers. For example: 'A graduate with work experience is preferable to a graduate without work experience because they have an understanding of customer contact, dealing with the public and job responsibility'; and 'Allows them to speak about experience rather than theorise'. Every supervisor said that people skills followed by work skills were the most important things a student learns from voluntary work, although people skills far outweighed work skills.

When asked the same question about the most important things they have learned from voluntary work, the students placed far less emphasis on people skills and a greater emphasis on work skills. Just six students cited interpersonal skills, two giving more detail: 'Always listen to what someone else has to say before making a judgement'; and 'The importance of correct and appropriate communication at the correct and appropriate time/place'.

However, all but two students listed work skills. Described in descending order of frequency they were team skills including collaboration and participatory skills;

customer service/relations; time management; punctuality; organisational skills; attention to detail; and thinking skills – not very different to those listed by supervisors except that they were considered more important than people skills by the students while the supervisors thought the opposite. Students also mentioned developing a work ethic and learning to develop initiative. The two students who did not cite any specific work skills amongst the most important things that they had learned from their voluntary work, took a broader view: ‘Money is important, but not the world. Work to live, don’t live to work!’; and ‘My good fortune, it put my life into perspective. How much opportunity I have had to be able to pursue education. The importance of integrity, doing what you love...studying hard to get a job I enjoy...work has motivated me.’

Other personal lessons learned by students through work experience were patience; developing relations with the community and through networking; life skills; professionalism; integrity; responsibility; and general personal development.

A student who had been a volunteer with Camp Quality during university vacations said:

In being a part of this organisation I have grown immensely. Interacting with children that are living with cancer ... has allowed me to develop a further understanding of what families go through in this situation, and understand how lucky I am. Communication skills are extremely important. The characteristic of being able to bring out your inner child to motivate the child you are looking after to have fun but while also maintaining the role of the adult in the relationship so if they need to talk you can be there for them, is highly important. You become an ‘old brother/sister’ for them to trust and rely on while they are away from home, so you need to set the proper example by the way you behave and the language you use. This aspect of setting the example links to my social responsibility. The skills that I have gained from this experience will stay with me for life. I have grown immensely from being part of this organisation. You grow up very quickly and realise that the problems you class as important are nothing in comparison. It brings everything you have experienced into perspective (Female student, 2005).

A student volunteer with Lifeline said:

Working and training with Lifeline has enabled me to grow personally and professionally. The basic counselling skills I have acquired have assisted my relationships with people on a day-to-day basis.... The requirements of good counselling practice is essentially effective communication skills... Counselling has also given me an opportunity to talk to many people from all different walks of life, with varied backgrounds, beliefs, personalities and problems. I have developed awareness and appreciation of others and their different ways of living (Female student, 2005).

It is interesting to note the inverse emphasis placed on interpersonal skills and work skills by supervisors and students. The supervisors in this study appeared to value interpersonal skills and personal qualities such as confidence, responsibility and commitment much more highly. One possible explanation of this is that work skills are believed to be more easily developed when the interpersonal skills and personal qualities

are of a high standard. This is consistent with what other graduate employers have said – that the most sought after graduates are those with good interpersonal, transferable skills (Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary 1994; Maiden & Kerr 2006; Watts 2006, p7). On the other hand, the students rated work skills more highly than interpersonal skills and personal qualities. While they were very aware of the importance of certain personal qualities and attitudes such as integrity, initiative, responsibility, maturity and confidence, they did not rate them as highly as work skills. Ironically, it is these qualities that many others, as well as employers, believe best equip graduates to succeed in their unknown futures (Barnett 2004; Barrie 2004; Barrie & Prosser 2004).

Graduate attributes

The study indicated that voluntary work provides a good opportunity for students to develop specific graduate attributes. The students (n=15) were asked which of the UNE Graduate Attributes they believed they had developed through their voluntary work. They listed twenty different examples of voluntary work that they had participated in (not all the subject of NEA points claims) and indicated which of the seven UNE graduate attributes they thought had been enhanced through each one. The seven graduate attributes received 108 scores which were distributed as follows: Communication skills (20 scores); problem solving (19); teamwork (18); social responsibility (17); life-long learning (13); information literacy (11); and global perspective (10).

The supervisors were asked if they agreed that the UNE Graduate Attributes are important in a prospective employee. They were given four choices of answer: strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree. Interestingly, the order of importance of the UNE Graduate Attributes as rated by the supervisors (n=12) was the same as the order of frequency that they were developed during work experience according to the students: communication skills, problem solving, teamwork (the last two rated equal second by supervisors but second and third respectively by students), social responsibility, life-long learning, information literacy and global perspective.

All supervisors interviewed were unanimous about the value of communication skills, all strongly (n=12) agreeing that they are important in a prospective employee. In relation to problem solving, the majority of supervisors (10) interviewed said that they strongly agreed that it was important. One, the manager of a community organisation that takes on volunteers to assist with the care of children with life-threatening illnesses (The Cancer Council), said that problem solving played an important part in working with seriously ill, often over-indulged children. Similarly, the majority (10) also strongly agreed about the importance of teamwork skills, social responsibility (9), life-long learning skills (8) and information literacy (7). There was less certainty about global perspective. The majority (8) just agreed that it is important. None strongly disagreed with the notion that any of the UNE graduate attributes were important.

When asked what additional skills and attributes they had developed through their voluntary work the students gave more answers that can be categorised as personal attributes and attitudes than work-related skills, as opposed to their previous answers. Examples given of the former were: 'feelings of worth'; 'patience'; 'empathy';

'understanding'; 'being confidential'; 'compassion'; 'understanding'; 'honesty'; 'integrity'; 'leadership skills'; 'critical analysis of complex social issues'; 'ability to concentrate and relax'; 'becoming self-reliant and knowing my limits'; 'confidence'; 'more awareness in terms of self reflection'; 'life satisfaction'; and 'a willingness to get to know people unlike myself (different backgrounds, schooling, career paths etc) - I have met some awesome people over the last five years, a few that have changed the person that I am'.

Conclusion

This small study found that voluntary work supported the development of the UNE Graduate Attributes thereby confirming one of the original objectives of the New England Award. Voluntary work also contributed to the development of other desirable attributes and attitudes including those which enhance citizenship skills.

Additionally, the study found that while the majority of those involved in voluntary work were not influenced by the availability of NEA points in their decision to become volunteers, the NEA did however have the effect of positively influencing the way students viewed the value of involving themselves in voluntary work of the kinds described above. It also served to increase their satisfaction with their university experience.

Overall, the larger study, of which the one described above was a part, showed that extra-curricular activity offers a range of ideal opportunities for student development. The New England Award, by providing a means by which UNE is able recognise and reward student development through the broader university experience, offers a complementary approach to curriculum-based student development of UNE's listed Graduate Attributes resulting in well rounded graduates who have experienced a holistic rather than narrowly academic education. By focusing students' attention on the benefits to be derived from extra-curricular activity, particularly activities involving community service and working to support others, desirable personal qualities such as confidence, altruism, community spirit, personal responsibility, empathy, and life skills are also enhanced. These are the types of personal attributes, attitudes and human qualities being increasingly expounded in the graduate attribute literature. They make for proactive, well-rounded and community-spirited students who, while giving of themselves to their communities, their university and their peers, develop the skills and attributes of exemplary citizens.

As a result of the wider study of the NEA, the Council of the University of New England endorsed the continuation of the NEA beyond its pilot period to become a core feature of the University from 2007. The award will also be extended to UNE's 13,000 distance education students in 2008. This will include formal partnerships with national organisations similar to those described above which will provide NEA points earning opportunities, including voluntary work, to UNE students. The NEA will be the subject of ongoing research to determine the outcomes for all stakeholders: participating students, the national organisations and UNE.

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