

**Submission
No 4**

VOLUNTEERING AND UNPAID WORK PLACEMENTS AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

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Submission to the Inquiry into volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in NSW

NDS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in NSW. As the peak body for disability service providers, NDS represents a large cohort of organisations which engage volunteers in a wide range of functions. For a number of these organisations, this includes engaging children and young people in voluntary work. These member organisations have been consulted in the preparation of this paper.

NDS also delivers projectABLE, a NSW government initiative now expanding into all National Disability Insurance Scheme trial sites across the country. projectABLE aims to increase disability awareness and promote career opportunities in the disability sector to children and young people in high schools. A key element of this program is the exposure that it gives these high school students to opportunities to work with people with disability in a range of support settings. In response to high demand from participants, projectABLE now employs a Student Placement Coordinator to focus on assisting students who have completed the projectABLE program to secure volunteering roles within the sector.

This paper will look at both the experience of member organisations in engaging children and young people as volunteers as well as lessons from the delivery of projectABLE.

Good practice in supporting and promoting volunteering

About projectABLE

projectABLE offers a unique 'soft entry point' to volunteering for children and young people in Years 10, 11 and 12 at high school.

projectABLE was initiated by the NSW government in 2010 to address a looming critical workforce shortage in light of significant projected growth as the numbers of people receiving disability and aged care support increase. Coupled with a broader disability and aged care sector recruitment strategy known as carecareers, projectABLE works to encourage people to investigate a career in the disability and community care sector. Where carecareers is aimed at adults already in the workforce, projectABLE is a 'junior' program, aimed at reaching students before they enter the workforce.

A significant secondary aim of projectABLE is focused on community development and awareness raising amongst the school-aged cohort about the experiences of people with disability as well as the people who support them. Through participation in the workshops, training and other follow-up activities, including volunteering, students increase their awareness and understanding of issues faced by people with disability, contemporary perspectives around choice and control, and what other things they can do to contribute to positive outcomes for people with disability in their community. While many students leave a workshop saying that they will now consider a career in the disability and community care sector, many other students leave a workshop reflecting on the different ways that they will change their responses to people with disability in their community.

In 2013, students completing a projectABLE workshop or training gave the following feedback:

“The highlight of the workshop was learning about all the different roles within the [disability and community care] sector and how I could use my skills and interests within the sector.”

“The highlight was talking to the presenters and learning about opportunities to help out.”

“I will take action to volunteer in some way for people with all different types of disabilities and encourage others to change their attitudes also.”

“I pledge to spend some of my school service hours aiding people with disabilities in the community.”

“I will volunteer in the disability sector now in order to promote change and make a difference.”

“I would absolutely love to achieve the establishment of my very own organisation that supports, services and assists people in need of guidance and support and to bring forth the power of EQUALITY.”

“I pledge to further my knowledge, accept people for who they are and aspire to be a better person.”

Over its four years of operation, projectABLE has engaged with 2,330 students from over 80 schools, experiencing significant growth as awareness of the program spreads. In 2013, in response to such high demand from students for support in pursuing volunteering opportunities following completion of a projectABLE workshop or training, a Student Placement Coordinator position was created.

Soft entry to volunteering: The workshop and training model

projectABLE uses a stepped approach to engaging students in its own activities as well as encouraging students to think more broadly about ways that they can become involved.

In 2013, of the 716 students who participated in a projectABLE workshop:

85% said that the workshop had challenged their perception of disability;

84% said that they would like to know more about career opportunities in the sector;

86% said that they were interested in becoming involved in the disability and community care sector;

96% said they would recommend projectABLE to their friends.

Commencing with a class-based workshop, students may choose to pursue a series of further opportunities according to their interest. These further opportunities include accredited training or school-based traineeships and offer an opportunity to 'try before you commit' to formal employment or a course of study.

Following completion of a workshop or training, students are encouraged to ask 'What's Next?' in terms of their contribution to their community and their career development. Options facilitated by projectABLE include social media engagement and avenues for volunteering. Many students who have completed a projectABLE workshop indicate an intention to pursue volunteering opportunities as a result of the workshop, with an increasing number approaching project staff to request assistance with this.

Student placement coordination

The experience of projectABLE has been that school students seeking volunteering opportunities experience barriers to making their own direct approaches to organisations. Such barriers include lack of awareness of the opportunities which exist in the local community, uncertainty about expectations and in some cases a lack of organisational awareness about the support requirements of student volunteers as a distinct cohort.

To address these challenges, projectABLE has created a Student Placement Coordinator position. This role bridges the gap between students seeking volunteering opportunities and potential host organisations by assisting students to locate suitable placements and liaising between the student and the organisation to secure the placement. The Student Placement Coordinator remains available as a support to both student and organisation for the duration of the placement.

Early signs are that this model is achieving improved engagement between student volunteers and disability and community care organisations. Specific elements of the role which have contributed to this are discussed in the following section.

Measures to encourage volunteering among children and young people

projectABLE's Student Placement Coordinator has several key functions, focused both on encouraging children and young people to volunteer and promoting this cohort of volunteers to prospective host organisations within the disability and community care sector. The strategies used to encourage children and young people to volunteer are outlined below.

Awareness of the benefits of volunteering

Many students complete a projectABLE workshop or training with a good understanding of both the benefits of volunteering to the organisation and the people it supports and the range of career opportunities available in the disability and community care sector. Ongoing work of the Student Placement Coordinator involves ensuring that the students understand the benefits that they will personally gain from a volunteering experience. This includes:

- Discussing how and why volunteering will enhance their resume in preparation for entry to the workforce;
- Explaining how volunteering could be a pathway to a paid role;
- Exploring the idea of volunteering as an opportunity to gain insight into a sector the student may be interested in but unsure about committing further study to;
- Ensuring the student understands the range of volunteering opportunities available to them, such as weekend roles, after school roles, one-off events, block placements during school holidays, etc. This helps the student see that there are opportunities which are a fit for their preferences and circumstances.

Safety while volunteering

Placement success – and by extension the success of future placements for a child or young person and their peers – relies heavily on positive initial and ongoing volunteering experiences. Ensuring that the student feels safe at all times when volunteering is a key part of this.

The Student Placement Coordinator assists organisations to ensure they are providing safe work environments for student volunteers through:

- Ensuring that the student is well-briefed beforehand about the tasks they will be performing and has opportunities to ask questions if there is anything they do not understand or are unsure of;
- Prompting the organisation to give the student a full induction to the work site, including Work Health and Safety training and direction as appropriate to the role;
- Encouraging one-on-one catch-ups between the student volunteer and the supervisor are a regular and non-threatening occurrence, so that any issues which do arise can be resolved within a supportive working relationship;
- Ensuring appropriate work practices are in place to safeguard against the student volunteer being left responsible they are not qualified or appropriately trained to do.

Promoting volunteering

In addition to the roles of the Student Placement Coordinator outlined above, a key aspect of student engagement is the promotion of volunteering through a range of avenues which reach the target group of children and young people. These include:

- Social media – projectABLE has a number of social media platforms and also links through to carecareers social media platforms where volunteering opportunities are advertised. This is also a key vehicle through which projectABLE can track alumni and their ongoing engagement with the sector;

- In-school promotion – projectABLE has, in addition to its workshops, assisted schools to host other events which promote volunteering. This can be done through school assemblies, guest speaker events, information stalls and school fêtes and others.
- Natural school linkages – Linking students with their career advisors, work experience coordinators and others can assist them to have ongoing conversations about how current volunteer activities can support their longer term career goals.

The role of the CCYP and the OCG

NDS member organisations indicated a good level of awareness of both the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) and the Office of the Children’s Guardian (OCG) and their respective roles, though had some evident confusion around specific operational matters regarding their interface with the OCG since the commencement of the new Working With Children Check procedures. NDS has worked and will continue to work with the OCG to ensure clear and effective communication to the sector about the new requirements.

A number of members gave positive feedback on the organisational resources disseminated by the CCYP regarding child safe organisations. Many members reported using these resources to ensure the safety of their services for the children and young people they support. No member on consultation, however, identified that their organisation also uses these or other CCYP resources in respect of volunteer placements for children and young people. Some further thought about tailoring child safe resources to the student volunteer context and targeting their dissemination to the right staff in the sector could be warranted.

Other related matters

Other cohorts

It should be noted that many organisations offer student placements to young people in the context of tertiary course requirements, primarily for allied health or social and community welfare qualifications but also for courses as diverse as marketing, graphic design, business studies and others. It is understood that these placements are out of scope for this Inquiry as the ‘young people’ they affect are generally young adults (i.e. over 18 years of age). NDS would urge that any recommendations regarding student volunteering placements take account of this additional cohort insofar as these older students’ placement needs may interact with the placement needs of children and young people under 18 years of age.

Demand for placements

On consultation, member organisations flagged the issue of supply and demand vis-à-vis volunteer placements for children and young people. Placements are sought variously by schools, universities, TAFE campuses and other co-curricular programs such as the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme, as well as by individual young people who are motivated to contribute to their community in this way. Some members reported that the level of demand

for volunteer placements outstrips what they are able, or what they feel they ought, to supply.

Members recognised the great value that student volunteering placements can have, both in terms of personal development for the individual students as well as the social value of community based organisations playing their part in providing these opportunities. Some members were keen to point out, however, that any volunteer recruitment is not a resource-neutral exercise. These organisations reported that they were still happy to provide volunteer placement opportunities and relevant supervision, but felt that there was a limit to how many of these placements they could offer to children and young people, whose supervisory requirements are typically higher, in a given year.

One member reported that their organisation is introducing a program of partnerships with a select number of schools in order to manage demand for volunteer placements, and suggested that some thought be given to strategies for other organisations to do similar. Existing resources developed by the School of Volunteer Management, a division of the Centre for Volunteering, may have application here. NDS would be willing to investigate options for disseminating such resources to the sector, either through projectABLE or more broadly, subject to the recommendations of the Inquiry.

Duration of placement

There is appetite for both brief and longer term engagement of student volunteers within the disability sector.

Some members reported a higher return on investment from volunteers or students on longer placements, citing third and fourth year university placements – which in some courses are up to 600 hours in duration – as providing a good amount of time for the student to be inducted to the organisation, to learn the functions of their role and then to contribute a meaningful level of outputs to benefit the organisation as well as to support their own learning. Members commented that these students can be given more in-depth tasks and projects, which can go on to greater impact on the team and organisation and the people they support.

It has to be noted, however, that students nearer the end of their degree program are generally adults and have had a significant level of specialised training in their chosen course. The same could not be said for school-age students looking for volunteering opportunities. Nonetheless, mechanisms and strategies for supporting appropriate longer-term volunteer placements for school-age students ought to be explored.

Other members reported great success with very short-term volunteering activities for high school students, such as single-day roles buddying people with disability to participate sports events (this included activities organised through projectABLE). These very brief volunteering opportunities were still highly valuable to the local community and to the people with disability who might otherwise not have been able to participate. Feedback forms completed by the students involved showed that the experience had had positive impact on them personally, with comments ranging from 'I enjoyed working in a team' and 'I enjoyed supporting my buddy' through to 'We need more days like this' and 'I am now going to look for more volunteer work in the disability field.'

About National Disability Services

National Disability Services is the peak body for non-government disability services. Its purpose is to promote quality service provision and life opportunities for people with disability. NDS's Australia-wide membership includes more than 900 non-government organisations, which support people with all forms of disability. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.