

University Students' Volunteering During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Fazlul K. Rabbanee

Ingrid O'Brien

Kirsten Holmes

Megan Paull

Sumayyah Ahmad

Eunjung Kim

Majedul Islam

Jo Kestel



ENQUIRIES:***About this research:***

A/Prof Fazlul Rabbanee – School of Management and Marketing, Curtin University, WA.
f.rabbanee@curtin.edu.au

About Volunteering WA:

Volunteering WA Level 1, 3 Loftus Street West Leederville WA 6007, Ph: (08) 9482 4333.

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CONTENTS

1.0 INTRODUCTION	3
1.1 Research Questions	4
1.2 Objectives	4
2.0 METHODOLOGY	5
3.0 WHAT DID WE ALEADY KNOW? – A SUMMARY	7
3.1 Student Volunteering	7
3.1.1 Why do students volunteer?	7
3.1.2 Dominant areas of student volunteering	8
3.1.3 New trends in student volunteering during the pandemic	9
4.0 UNIVERSITY STUDENT VOLUNTEERING IN THE THREE UNIVERSITIES	11
4.1 Participation in qualitative data collection.....	13
4.2 Participation in quantitative data collection.....	13
5.0 WHAT DID WE LEARN?	15
5.1 COVID-19 Challenges for University Student Volunteering.....	15
5.1.1 Operational disruptions.....	15
5.1.2 Reduction in volunteers – short- and long-term effects.....	17
5.1.3 Changes in government policy and impact on international students.....	18
5.1.4 Hesitancy in trying new things	19
5.1.5 Trimming down resources	19
5.2 Effects of COVID-19 on University Student Volunteers	20
5.2.1 Loss of interest:.....	20
5.2.2 Student belongingness, resilience, and well-being	20
5.2.3 Effects on students’ future intention to volunteer.....	21
5.3 Emerging Trends in Student Volunteers during the Pandemic.....	22
5.3.1 Pandemic response volunteering.....	22
5.3.2 Virtual volunteering	23
5.3.3 Micro volunteering.....	23
6.0 THE WAY FORWARD	24
6.1 Differences in approach	24
6.2 The challenges of long-term impact	24
6.3 Word-of-mouth and bringing back a sense-of-community.....	25
7.0 CONCLUSION.....	26

REFERENCES29
APPENDIX: Additional data analysis from quantitative survey.....37

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

University student volunteering refers to student involvement in various activities and services to others either within the academic community or to citizens outside the university in curricular or extracurricular activities. Universities encourage student volunteering as they contribute to gaining valuable skills and experiences that are sought by employers while at the same time making a contribution to the university and the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse impact on all volunteering activities in Australia, particularly as traditional in-person volunteering was severely curtailed due to lockdowns, social isolation, and physical distancing requirements. Due to a dearth of existing research on how and to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic impacted university student volunteering, this research addresses four key objectives: (i) identifying the challenges experienced by university student volunteers due to COVID-19, (ii) examining the impact of the pandemic on university student volunteers' wellbeing and resilience influencing their future intention to volunteer, (iii) exploring the emerging trends of university students' volunteering in WA, and (iv) identifying the influence of COVID-19 on virtual and informal volunteering among university students in WA.

Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were adopted to address the research objectives. In the qualitative component, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with volunteering officials and student volunteer leaders at three Western Australian universities – Curtin University, Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, deidentified and thematically analysed. The quantitative component of this research saw only a small number of survey responses collected from existing student volunteers of the three universities (n=39), which were analysed through descriptive and inferential statistical tools using SPSS v28.

The findings of this report identify the impact of the pandemic, and the changing landscape of student volunteering. Findings include operational disruptions in terms of volunteering activities and roles, changes in priorities of students and universities, reduction in available hours and number of available volunteers, hesitancy among students in trying new things, allocating relatively less resources for volunteering, and changes in government policies.

The current research identified adverse effects of the pandemic on university students' volunteering such as loss of interest in volunteering, reduced level of resilience and wellbeing due to not being able to volunteer, and removal of social engagement through volunteering. It also identified a concerning possibility of a lack of intention to volunteer in the future.

Trends in student volunteering that have emerged during the pandemic include COVID-19 lockdown focussed activities taken up by students, as well as increased attention to virtual volunteering and micro volunteering. This research further identified an emerging likely long-term effect of the pandemic: the disruption to the typical cycle of attracting students to volunteering. It was also found that some students replaced volunteering activity with other activities such as paid work – that still gave them that community connection. There is the potential for a flow on effect as fewer student volunteers share their experiences, which is likely to significantly impact the word-of-mouth recruitment of new student volunteers.

The current research identified strategies that were found to be useful in addressing the challenges of the adverse situations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic such as offering more independent, informal (or less formal) and micro volunteering opportunities. Finally, the current research proffers specific strategy recommendations for student volunteering at the university level that include:

- (i) a renewed push to engage students in volunteering using tried and true methods such as word of mouth,
- (ii) reinvestment in centralised platforms to provide information on various volunteering opportunities available on campus as well as off-campus and online, and promote these platforms more widely, including to new students,
- (iii) continue to identify and work with community organisations that students can partner with to establish working relationships,
- (iv) continue to provide training and support to help student volunteers prepare for their activities,
- (v) continue to recognise and reward student contributions to their community in the form of transcripts and certificates, and
- (vi) seek to further integrate volunteering experiences into existing courses.

Collaborative partnerships with peak volunteering bodies, such as Volunteering WA, have the potential to further promote a culture of volunteering in universities.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is defined as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain” (Volunteering Australia, 2023). Universities promote student participation in a range of volunteering activities often referred to as ‘student volunteering’ or ‘university student volunteering’ (de Prada Creo et al., 2021; Paull et al., 2015). Student volunteering means being of service to others in either the academic community or to citizens outside the university in curricular or extracurricular activities, including environment-related volunteering (Evans & Yusof, 2023; Resch et al., 2022). Student volunteering takes place in different forms including formal placements such as internships or work integrated learning (WIL) or through extra-curricular programs (Holmes et al. 2021; Paull et al., 2015). In addition to creating student-community connection and awareness, volunteering helps students to gain valuable skills and experiences that are sought by employers (Biddle & Gray, 2022). It also contributes to the amelioration of many economic, environmental and social issues (Hoyle & Weeks, 2021; Volunteering Australia, 2023) and helps build relationships between the university, the students and the local community.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected all volunteering in Australia. Many organisations, including universities, experienced an acute shortage of volunteers due to government policies and safety regulations. Traditional in-person volunteering was affected severely by lockdowns, social isolation, and physical distancing requirements. There was a large drop in volunteer participation generally, with 65.9% of volunteers in Australia not engaging in any activity at the time of data collection for a study in early 2020 (Biddle & Gray, 2022).

Across Australia there was a dramatic curtailment of volunteer activities among existing older volunteers due to their vulnerable circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic saw an increased mobilisation of informal volunteers who emerged to fill this void (Biddle & Gray, 2022; Volunteering Australia, 2023). Western Australia (WA) was the least affected state (Biddle & Gray, 2022), however, little is known about the impact of the pandemic on WA university student volunteering. Volunteering among WA university students was affected in a manner similar to volunteering generally due to lockdowns and physical distancing requirements. Students were further affected by the massive job losses experienced in the retail and hospitality sectors where students usually work on a part-time basis. International students were forced to return to their home countries and were unable to return to Australia due to border restrictions. Anecdotal evidence suggests many student

volunteers experienced psychological distress due to not being able to participate in in-person activities and disengaged from face-to-face volunteering.

Past research shows that volunteering improves a student's well-being and resilience (Llenares, Sario, Bialba, & Dela Cruz, 2020). Therefore, a lack of volunteering activities could negatively impact a student's well-being and resilience, which may adversely influence his/her future intention to volunteer. The impact of the pandemic on WA university student volunteers' well-being and resilience is largely unknown.

1.1 Research Questions

The key purpose of the current research is to explore three broad research questions:

- What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university student volunteering in WA?
- Is there evidence of COVID-19 having an impact on student wellbeing and resilience?
- Were there changes to university student volunteering during the pandemic, which are likely to influence future trends?

1.2 Objectives

Guided by the research questions, specific objectives of this research were to:

- Identify the challenges experienced by university student volunteers due to COVID-19.
- Examine the impact of the pandemic on university student volunteers' wellbeing and resilience, influencing their future intention to volunteer.
- Explore the emerging trends of university students' volunteering in WA.
- Explore the COVID-19 influence on virtual and informal volunteering among university students in WA.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach was adopted for this research. The various stages of the mixed methods approach used in this research are provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research Approach



Literature Review

- A systematic review of existing knowledge on volunteering was conducted with a key focus on identifying how volunteering, including university student volunteering, has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews

- Eight in-depth interviews were conducted among volunteering program officials and student volunteer leaders from Curtin University, Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University between October and December 2022.
- Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify participants – to gain perspectives from individuals likely to know about university student volunteering activities in their university.
- The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed.

Online survey

- A quantitative online survey sought to obtain data from student volunteers at the three universities using Qualtrics software.
- The survey instrument included questions relating to volunteering participation over the previous 12 months, types of activities undertaken, demographic characteristics of the participants, future intention to volunteer, measures of belongingness (Pedler, Willis, & Nieuwoudt, 2022), psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002), and resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003) during the pandemic.
- A total of 39 useable responses were received despite numerous attempts by the researchers at their respective universities to increase the response rate.

Therefore, this report is the outcome of a small research project based on the transcripts received from eight in-depth interviews and an online survey (response collected from 39 respondents).

3.0 WHAT DID WE ALEADY KNOW? – A SUMMARY

3.1 Student Volunteering

Relevant literature on university student volunteering is summarised to provide context for this research.

3.1.1 Why do students volunteer?

In Australia, students volunteer for various reasons (Cnaan et al., 2010; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). These include:

- **Altruistic motivations**- many students choose to give back to their community and make a positive impact on society.
- **Build networks**- volunteering helps students make connections within their field of interest. Working in teams and communicating with others also helps with personal growth and development.
- **Cultural exchange**- many international students experience Australian culture through volunteering. Similarly, many students improve their communication skills and develop cross cultural competencies through volunteering.
- **To gain work experience**- volunteering provides university students with an opportunity to gain valuable practical knowledge and hands on work experience and develop skills that can be used in a specific field.

Volunteering offers a range of benefits including: :

- **Dealing with anxiety and stress:** Volunteering helps students deal with distress and anxiety, and contributes to life satisfaction, and optimal functioning. Connecting with others provides the social support, sense of belonging and social connections students need to overcome disconnection and loneliness (Brigati, England, & Schussler, 2020).
- **Recognition and enhancing employability:** Formal validation and recognition through awards and certificates or institutional support are important factors in encouraging students to volunteer (Resch, Knapp, & Schritteser, 2022). In addition, students volunteer to increase their chances of being employed upon graduation (Barton, Bates, & O'Donovan, 2019). Many Australian students' focus on graduate employment (Campbell, Cooper, Rueckert, & Smith, 2019) and the outcomes of the university volunteer programs that aim to increase employability (Barton et al., 2019).

- ***Resilience and Wellbeing:*** Volunteering helps build resilience (Llenares et al., 2020) and enables students to thrive despite adversity (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007). Volunteering also helps to enhance students' social and mental well-being (Geng et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2022).
- ***Self-image, esteem and identity:*** Volunteering helps students to obtain a positive self-image and enhances their self-esteem which are important motivators for students to opt in to volunteering (Carpenter & Myers, 2010; Musick & Wilson, 2007; Ramdianee, 2014; Wilson, 2012). Doing 'good' for their community can also help students to establish their identity through their positive role in society (Bacter & Marc, 2016).
- ***Social empathy and civic engagement:*** Students develop social empathy and civic engagement as a result of volunteering. It also leads them to make choices based on the well-being of all, rather than being guided by self-interest (Hyde & Knowles, 2013).

3.1.2 Dominant areas of student volunteering

Student volunteers participate in many different volunteering roles including both operational and leadership roles and are active in a range of sectors. The following sectors have been noted for student involvement:

- Aged care and intergenerational volunteering (Stephens et al., 2016);
- Culturally diverse programs (Moore-Hart & Karabenick, 2009);
- Emergency volunteering (Carlton & Mills, 2017; McDougall, 2011; A. Schmidt, Wolbers, Ferguson, & Boersma, 2018; A. P. Schmidt & Albert, 2022);
- Environmental groups (McDougall, 2011; McDougle, Greenspan, & Handy, 2011; Paull et al., 2015);
- Events and festivals volunteering (Cain, Orlowski, & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2021; Smith, Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, & Baum, 2014);
- Food pantries (Goldrick-Rab, Cady, & Coca, 2018; Ullevig et al., 2021);
- Gardening (Anderson, Maher, & Wright, 2018; Hoffman, Morales Knight, & Wallach, 2007);
- Homeless support (Buch & Harden, 2011; Forg & Paun, 2021);

- Local community organisations (Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001);
- Medicine and health (Chawłowska et al., 2021; Domaradzki, 2022; Pickell, Gu, & Williams, 2020; Williamson, Wildbur, Bell, Tanner, & Matthews, 2018);
- Mental health and general well-being (Balashov, Pasichnyk, Kalamazh, Dovhaliuk, & Cicognani, 2018; Nissen, Carlton, & Wong, 2022; Roncone et al., 2021);
- Sport and sport events facilitating social capital development (Kay & Bradbury, 2009);
- Student tutoring (Allen & Chavkin, 2004; Ritter, Barnett, Denny, & Albin, 2009).

While the restrictions associated with COVID-19 led to a substantial reduction in volunteer participation generally, a number of new ways of volunteering emerged and developing trends in volunteering gained significant momentum. These new trends are discussed further in the following.

3.1.3 New trends in student volunteering during the pandemic

The literature from around the world indicates that the following general volunteering trends have emerged among university students as well as in the general population.

- ***Increased emergence of digital matching platforms:*** Volunteers used digital matching platforms to link people in need with the supply of volunteers for those tasks (van der Vlies, 2022). Thousands of new ‘Mutual Aid’ Facebook groups appeared globally to link their members to neighbourhood groups who coordinated volunteers, including university students. Such groups also pooled topical information often shared by medical students in addition to details about lockdown measures, online mental health services and help for tenants facing eviction. Some important examples include nursing students’ community immersion classes that transitioned online in order to continue to respond to the needs of their community. This transition also enhanced their own educational experience (Flores et al., 2021). Some community groups that emerged online had over 15,000 members, for example ‘Love Your Neighbour Melbourne’ (Hall, 2020) included university students in general, as well as nursing and medical students.
- ***Healthcare emergency volunteering:*** The COVID-19 pandemic saw unprecedented pressure on traditional healthcare and community volunteering organisations. In response, many medical students globally volunteered in healthcare (Adejimi et al., 2021; Bazan,

Nowicki, & Rzymiski, 2021; Chermiside-Scabbo et al., 2021; Zhang, Peng, Zhang, & Li, 2021)

- **Increased informal volunteering:** COVID-19 saw an increase in flexible, informal crisis volunteering, generally defined as onetime and short-term response to emergencies, disasters, and socio-political crises (Trautwein, Liberatore, Lindenmeier, & von Schnurbein, 2020). For instance, ‘adopt a healthcare worker’ is a Facebook page¹ geared specifically towards supporting healthcare workers and reached over 54,000 members in just a couple of days. University students especially medicine and health science students are also part of such informal volunteering.
- **More micro-volunteering:** The pandemic saw a growth in micro-volunteering, especially replacing older volunteers, who were unable, or hesitant, to volunteer, with younger people. The NHS Volunteer Responder program (NHSVR) was a micro-volunteering scheme that offered a model to assist the elderly or support vulnerable people (Dolan et al., 2021). Students were also involved in new ways of community volunteering micro-projects such as sewing masks, providing food and meals, and shopping for the elderly (MARSZAL, 2020; Osipov, Dulalaeva, Fakhretdinova, & Kaybiyaynen, 2022).
- **Increased virtual volunteering:** Social media platforms played an important role in facilitating volunteers to help those in need with everything from sharing health guidelines, shopping for food, and cleaning homes to counselling and stitching home-made masks. Telehealth support teams emerged with medical students facilitating set up and engaging with patients while they registered for telehealth services (Rupley et al., 2020). Virtual volunteering also facilitated the use of digital matching platforms described above.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/666739964088379/>

4.0 UNIVERSITY STUDENT VOLUNTEERING IN THE THREE UNIVERSITIES

The WA universities included in this project – Curtin University, Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University- each have different volunteer program models. These student volunteering programs can be classified on a continuum of increasing direct management by universities from ‘no management structure’ to ‘high management structure’, as proposed by Holmes et al. (2021). Students undertake volunteering in all three types of University Student Volunteering identified by Paull et al (2017) – Academic Student Volunteering – related to their studies, Facilitated Student Volunteering – organised by the University or by the Guild, and Independent Student Volunteering – self organised. The three universities’ student volunteering programs are briefly outlined below.

Curtin University: Many student volunteering projects at Curtin University are managed through a ‘student-university partnership’ although there is also evidence of ‘independent (one-off) projects’. Under the partnership programs, students work with paid university staff to deliver volunteer programs although these programs are often initiated by students. The projects are usually managed by ‘Curtin Volunteers’ (CV), an organisation, which was originated by students but subsequently incorporated into the university structure and run as a partnership between volunteer student managers and paid university staff (Chavez, 2016). CV’s mission is ‘to provide volunteering and leadership opportunities’ which enhances the ‘student experience and benefits the wider community’ (Yeap, 2019). Independent one-off projects (e.g., John Curtin Weekend volunteering follows this model) also provide volunteer opportunities for students on campus. At CV, over 100 volunteer activities are organised, engaging more than 800 volunteers who collectively amass more than 18,000 hours of community services which encompass metropolitan, regional and remote areas in WA.

In addition, Curtin University encourages students to voluntarily participate in various extra-curricular activities and provides official recognition for students who make a significant contribution to these activities. These activities relate to an area of personal interest, relevant to the students’ degree or provide a step towards their future career and help them to attain transferable skills to complement their academic achievements. Furthermore, these activities help to expand students’ social and professional networks which can have a positive impact on their community. Extra-curricular programs at Curtin vary across different faculties. For example, The Faculty of Business and Law programs include AIESEC Youth Leadership Experience, Curtin Tax Clinic, ENACTUS Curtin. Irrespective of various extra-

curricular activities offered by different faculties, students receive a digital badge (called ‘Extra Digital Badge’) and a certificate (called ‘Extra Certificate’) in recognition of their voluntary efforts.

Murdoch University: Student volunteering at Murdoch University is a distributed activity, found across the university in academic units (for credit), across the Student Guild, and with clubs and societies as well as in self-directed independent volunteering activities. Volunteering is also promoted on the university website, including mentoring, and equity helpers such as peer note takers.

Murdoch has a specific additional transcript whereby students can obtain formal recognition for some aspects of their longer-term volunteering. The Community and Employability Pathway Transcript recognises endorsed eligible programs including those undertaken via the Murdoch Guild. This formal recognition of volunteering is considered to be “a great way to demonstrate your valuable contribution to future employers.” (Murdoch University, 2023). Programs which receive endorsement are approved by the University’s Academic Council.

Drawing on the continuum model of university student volunteering (Holmes et al., 2021), Murdoch students are involved in external programs, brokered programs, student driven programs, faculty-based programs, centralised programs and student-university partnerships as well as having access to information about volunteering where no university structure is in place.

Edith Cowan University (ECU): Student volunteering at ECU is primarily centrally administered and volunteering projects are organised by paid university staff. The volunteer program is part of the university’s careers and employability services and is closely aligned with enabling students to develop employability skills (ECU, 2022), where students have the opportunity to share input.

Currently enrolled ECU students can get involved in volunteer activities by signing up to ECU’s volunteer program organised by the Career Hub (ECU, 2022). At ECU, more than 600 current students have signed up using the Volunteer Expression Interest form, and logging into the Volunteer Hub (as part of Career Hub) website. Various volunteering opportunities are available to students such as internal volunteering (at ECU), event volunteering, conservation and eco-volunteering, sports volunteering, community and welfare volunteering, and arts volunteering (ECU, 2022).

Also, through the Volunteer Hub Website, students have access to a list of current volunteer opportunities, various resources related to volunteering, and links to external volunteer organisations. Therefore, there is evidence of the ‘information model’ where the university actively encourages students to volunteer and offers information about external volunteering opportunities (Holmes et al., 2021).

4.1 Participation in qualitative data collection

As outlined above, qualitative interviews were conducted in all three universities with individuals likely to know about the state of volunteering in each of the institutions, and about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on volunteering and student volunteers. Table 1 provides a profile of interviewees.

Table 1: Profile of Interviewees

Interviewee	Role Type	Model/Type of volunteering	University
CU1	Paid professional staff member	University centralised recruitment / co-ordination	Curtin University
CU2	Senior student volunteer leader	University centralised recruitment / co-ordination	
MU1	Academic staff member	Centralised for credit academic volunteering	Murdoch University
MU2	Paid Guild staff member	Facilitated student volunteer recruitment / co-ordination	
MU3	Senior student volunteer leader	Self-organised university recognised student volunteering	
ECU1	Paid professional staff member	University centralised recruitment / co-ordination	Edith Cowan University
ECU2	Paid professional staff member	University centralised recruitment /co-ordination	
ECU3	Senior student volunteer leader	Self-organised university recognised student volunteering	

4.2 Participation in quantitative data collection

The response rate to the survey component of this study was relatively low. Several attempts were made to increase the response rate, but in the end only 39 usable responses were received. This low response rate is in keeping with other data indicating that student engagement with online surveys is relatively low perhaps due to what has been referred to as “over surveying” (Maineri & Van Mol, 2022). This was further confirmed by a response from the communications team of one of the universities. Table 2 provides a profile of the 39 student respondents to the survey.

Table 2: Demographic profile of the student respondents

Demographic features	Mean	Frequency in percentage
Age	27 years (approx.)	18-25 years – 51.3% 26-34 years – 9 % 35-44 years – 2% 45-54 years – 4%
Gender		Female 72% Male – 21%
Fortnightly income	\$1425	Less than \$1000 – 53.8% \$1001-\$2000 – 20.5% \$2001-\$3000 – 10.3%
Ethnic origin		Australian – 41% Asian – 20.5% European – 12.8% American – 5.1% African – 5.1% Other – 7.7%

As evident from Table 2, the average age of the survey respondents is approximately 27 years. A total of 72% respondents were female and the average fortnightly income of the respondents was \$1425. Most the respondents were Australian (41%), followed by Asian (20.5%) and European (12.8%). 3 respondents' demographic information were missing. While it is recognised that this small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, this data provides valuable insights that complement the qualitative responses.

5.0 WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The key findings revealed from the data (both the in-depth interviews and the survey data) are outlined in this section under three broad headings:

- (i) COVID-19 challenges and student volunteering
- (ii) Effects of the COVID-19 on student volunteers
 - Student resilience and wellbeing
 - Student's future intentions to volunteer
- (iii) Emerging trends in volunteering during the pandemic period.

5.1 COVID-19 Challenges for University Student Volunteering

University student volunteering experienced severe challenges during the pandemic period. While the mask mandate within WA ceased in September 2022, it is recognised that the community continued to feel the effects of COVID-19 due to ongoing cases, concerns about social distancing, the emergence of new variants, and community hesitation into 2023. The challenges posed by COVID-19 for university student volunteering revealed in this research were:

- Operational disruptions
- Reduction in volunteers – short- and long-term effects
- Changes in government policy and impact on international students
- Hesitancy in trying new things.
- Trimming down resources

5.1.1 Operational disruptions

University student volunteering activities were disrupted considerably due to COVID-19. These operational disruptions have been broadly categorised as reductions in volunteering activities and roles, and changes in priorities.

→ **Reduction in volunteering activities and roles:** All three universities' student volunteering activities were disrupted in terms of reduced volunteering hours/opportunities, as well as a reduction in formal volunteer roles due to the adverse effects of COVID-19 restrictions. When survey respondents were asked what the biggest change in volunteering during COVID-19 was, students' perceived reduction in volunteering activities was the biggest change (41%), which was followed by other impacts (e.g., online shift, absent from

the university, lack of enthusiasm for volunteering) (23.1%) and health concerns (15.6%) (see Figure 2 in Appendix).

The interviewees from Murdoch university revealed that where volunteering was a component of a unit of study, accommodations were made by academics and host organisations to make the volunteering virtual, or project based, so as to ameliorate the impact on student progression.

Many in-person volunteering activities were stopped and/or postponed by the universities during 2020-21 due to restrictions and mandatory physical distancing. As can be seen from the following, all three universities experienced the same cessation of activities:

Well, it stopped. Just simple as that it stopped. There was nobody on campus. Because of the close contact nature of volunteering and it's hard to do volunteering on TEAMS
[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

During that peak period, basically it was a point where we shut down pretty much all activities. (...) we stopped doing things like flying to the remote towns
[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

We used to take students off campus for things like beach clean ups and stuff like that, and we haven't done any of that. We haven't even resumed that since COVID.
[ECU1, Paid professional staff member]

There were less volunteering opportunities available during restriction periods
[MU1, Academic staff member]

... they all stopped; most of our partners that we had, they all stopped accepting volunteers.
[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

Our interviewees mentioned that volunteering activities with vulnerable populations in particular were stopped during this period. For example:

We used to also take the students to cook for the families at Ronald McDonald House. And that that has completely stopped. So, we can't take them
[ECU1, Paid professional staff member]

...for example, a student was going to volunteer in a nursing home... and then changes or subsequent lockdowns meant that their rules changed, then they couldn't have people coming in
[MU1, Academic staff member]

a lot of organisations were saying we can't accept volunteers because we've got vulnerable people
[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

This cessation of certain COVID-19 restrictions has not resulted in volunteering activities and roles being automatically reinstated. At Murdoch University, the Guild Volunteer Hub was put into hibernation, and the role of running it has not been re-instated.

→ **Changes in priorities:** Due to the different barriers and restrictions (mentioned earlier) caused by COVID-19, participants reported that the priorities of the respective universities changed. This resulted in variations in the usual activities as well as changes in people who were responsible for dealing with the activities. As our interviewees stated:

(...) it (COVID-19) had an impact on our staff who were looking after the programs. Staff had to go and do other more urgent tasks that came up. They had to retrain to do different things (...)

[ECU2, Paid professional staff member]

[referring to impact on student clubs] they did, but not with much activity. It was more about just keeping the pilot light on and saying we're here, we're doing this, keep in touch, we love you.

[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

5.1.2 Reduction in volunteers – short- and long-term effects

COVID-19 impacts have resulted in there being fewer students seeking to take up volunteering:

(...) drop in engagement due to COVID restrictions, (...) could that be people actually not wanting to volunteer because [they're] still concerned about COVID (...)

[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

No one was putting their hand up for volunteering, we weren't having emails coming through saying I wanna volunteer.

[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

We've never returned to engagement levels that we had pre COVID. So, it feels like the students just have less time, they have less energy (...)

[ECU2, Paid professional staff member]

Volunteering programs that could be done virtually were moved online, but in many cases this led to fewer volunteers being required. While the changing nature of the volunteer activities to online kept some programs active, had an adverse impact on university student volunteering where activities could not continue. The MU student society leader reported that while existing volunteers were able to continue virtually in some capacity, it was with reduced numbers and lower activity levels.

There was a replacement online program, but it was dramatically reduced numbers of who could get involved.

[MU3, Senior student volunteer leader]

This reduction in the number of volunteers has meant that there are fewer who have prior experience with volunteering, which has then had an impact on the recruitment of new volunteers in 2022. Word of mouth recommendation is an important recruitment tool for university volunteer programs and there are fewer experienced student volunteers to recommend the programs to other students so the usual word-of-mouth recruitment among peers has decreased.

...we didn't have that volunteer base who has just done a program. To talk to their friends about it or go hey, good program. Love that.

[MU3, Senior student volunteer leader]

5.1.3 Changes in government policy and impact on international students

Travel restrictions and border closures led to international students being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as many of them were not able to enter Australia. There has also been a (temporary) change in government policy around restrictions on hours of paid employment for international students, allowing them to work more, and making them less available to volunteer. This policy change was still in place after other pandemic related changes had been lifted. As our interviewees mentioned:

Our international students were always our biggest volunteering [cohort]. (...) our international students were definitely disproportionately affected specially their working hours. (...) so previously they could only work a certain number of hours a week. And that was to make sure that they weren't coming to Australia to get jobs and they were coming as authentic students. But because of the industry labour market shortage, particularly for those sorts of service entry level jobs, the government uncapped the international student working hours and they can work as many hours as they want now. They're being given all of the hours that you know they can do and more and they just don't have the need to volunteer like they did before.

[ECU2, Paid professional staff member]

We heard reports of returning international students struggling to find volunteer placements. For example,

(...) for students in China in the final year of their degree who continuously couldn't get back ... and ... [then seeking to arrange volunteering for on their return] multiple organisations just refused to discuss (...)

[MU1, Academic staff member]

This interviewee went on to imply that the students from China continued to have a challenging time lining up volunteering opportunities even once they were back in Australia. Some volunteer involving organisations were less willing to accommodate the disruption caused by travel breaks for international students.

5.1.4 Hesitancy in trying new things

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected both university student volunteers and volunteer program managers' motivation to innovate and try out new ways of volunteering due to the risks of exploring unknowns. One of our in-depth interviewees compared this hesitancy to pre-pandemic norms:

(...) it's because of that detachment from human interaction that I feel there is a hesitance in going forward and trying it out, which perhaps existed in some way or form before, but not to the extent since we're coming down from that COVID wave.

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

5.1.5 Trimming down resources

Another significant adverse effect of COVID-19 is that resources across universities were put under pressure due to a reduction in student income. Many of our interviewees described how their respective university trimmed down resources allocated to various volunteering activities. For example:

We also had some staff leave at that time and we weren't able to replace them because of funding restrictions. So that impacted what we had the capacity to organise so we could organise less than we did before.

[ECU2, Paid professional staff member]

(...) most students would say they're just hasn't been the opportunity; we haven't provided them the opportunity. (...) Because everything was cancelled and delayed, (...) and lack of resources on our part.

[ECU1, Paid professional staff member]

And so again it made sense ... to hibernate things and that's what we had to do because we had a volunteering officer sitting there at home doing nothing ... it was a fixed term contract and when that it came up, we just didn't renew it so that would be the biggest casualty in my view.

[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

5.2 Effects of COVID-19 on University Student Volunteers

In addition to the COVID-19 challenges faced by the universities, individual students were also affected. The key themes identified in our interviews were loss of interest, student resilience, and wellbeing as well as a change in future volunteering intentions.

5.2.1 Loss of interest:

Participants reported that students lost their usual interest in volunteering during the COVID-19 period. This resulted in them refraining from volunteering activities. As one of our interviewees mentioned:

We used to like literally, pre COVID, with the release of our programs and I think it'd be like 200 or more positions, pretty much everything's full you know. But now that's far, far from what's happening right now. We've got programs going to schools with two people, one being the leader and one volunteer. You know what I mean like so it's not uncommon at all to go, like, 2-3 people join. The first weekend we sent the group to a regional town. There were like 4 people

[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

(...) we still don't have students volunteering. (...) and that's because of that commitment issue that we're just finding, they're just not [interested in volunteering]

[ECU1, Paid professional staff member]

It's kind of one of those programs where I feel like if you don't do it regularly, you kind of forget about it. And then it's harder to get people back into gear

[MU3, Senior student volunteer leader]

At the time of interviewing there was still limited return to volunteering – see below.

5.2.2 Student belongingness, resilience, and well-being

As previously mentioned, COVID-19 adversely affected students as many of them lost their part time jobs or contracted the virus. Some international students had to immediately return to their home country, particularly as government support for this cohort was not forthcoming. Furthermore, due to the reduction in volunteering activities during the pandemic, students' level of engagement in the university was adversely affected. Given this scenario, it was unsurprising to find in the student survey a tendency for students to feel a lack of belongingness to the university (see Figure 3 in Appendix) and a general lack of satisfaction of feeling safe and feeling part of the community (see Figure 4 in Appendix).

In spite of these circumstances, students who were involved in volunteering appear to have been relatively more resilient and better able to meet the crisis. This is evident from

both our in-depth interviews and student survey. For example, during the interviews we found the following views:

Volunteering brings people together. It's the fact that you get to know people and you get to work with people and you get to network with people and know people and I think once you do that – especially international students, but even domestic students, I think the larger networks that you have and that you develop and the more friends you make on campus the more resilient you are and that is what volunteering does.

[MU2, Paid staff member]

What became clear in the interviews, is that while a number of programs and activities moved to online where it was feasible, the general feeling is that students are keen to move back to face-to-face wherever possible. There was a recognition that a great joy in volunteering is the social engagement and connections that students are able to make, and this is very hard to achieve to a similar standard in an online environment.

It (COVID) has definitely taken away that social engagement aspect of volunteering

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

...there is still a want to have that face-to-face physical communication, which effectively gets people together and stops being as siloed.

[MU3, Senior student volunteer leader]

In the student survey, we asked questions about whether the students adapted to the changed situation and coped with the stress arising from COVID-19. As shown in Figure 5 in the Appendix, the majority of the students adapted to the changed situation and coped with the stress of COVID-19. The need for face-to-face physical communication is further discussed in relation to virtual volunteering below.

5.2.3 Effects on students' future intention to volunteer

Future intentions to volunteer provided some mixed results from the student survey versus the in-depth interviews. In the survey, participants indicated that most of them are likely to continue as a volunteer next year. The interviewees, however, reported that while the COVID-19 restrictions had reduced, students were not returning to pre-pandemic levels of volunteering. The 2023 academic year sees a return of international students to campus.

... I don't know what the initial willingness is, but like in terms of this semester, I thought we're gonna go back to normal. You know, I thought it'd be fine international students would come back but that's not been the case. I'm thinking about like it might have affected because of COVID. People have lost touch with the university, with peers, with our programs, and so they're just isn't that momentum. And so we're

trying to find ways now to rebuild that momentum and rebuild that connection with students to eventually, you know, bring up those numbers again. But as of now, it's still a bit slow going, (...) and they just don't want to participate in Group activities, you know.

[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

...I would say that we've never returned to engagement levels that we had pre COVID. So, it feels like the students just have less time, they have less energy, they have less bandwidth.

[ECU2, Paid professional staff member]

As international students have always been a strong cohort of university student volunteers, one can be optimistic about their return to volunteering. Interestingly, we investigated via the survey responses the relationship between future intention to volunteer and resilience during COVID-19 (see Figure 6 in the Appendix). We found that students' resilience is linked with their future intention to volunteer, offering useful insights for the universities to work on in future. Overall, however, university student volunteer participation remains low and there is clearly significant work to be done across all the WA universities to entice students back to volunteer programs. There is potential for this to change once the caps on working hours for international students are reinstated, as of July 2023.

5.3 Emerging Trends in Student Volunteers during the Pandemic

As COVID-19 restrictions limited the operation of traditional face to face university student volunteer programs, universities (or program managers/leaders) and students found new ways to continue their engagement.

5.3.1 Pandemic response volunteering

Evidence emerged in some of the interviews of activities taken up by student volunteers to assist during the pandemic in response to COVID-19 related community need. Of particular note was the response of student clubs affiliated to particular international student groups in relation to their community, as well as the university student union activities set up to help out students during lockdown.

The Indian Club got together and got various people from within the Indian community, and restaurants. ... producing meals and taking it to members of their organization and delivering it to them and giving them a hand whilst they can't work, and having food on the table I think the Filipino society did something similar and I believe that the Malaysian society did something on a smaller scale."

[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

Personal informal volunteering was also mentioned. For example -

I think I did hear a few stories of elderly people, where people would cook an extra meal at home and they take it to them stuff like that.

[MU2, Paid Guild staff member]

These types of activities were less necessary once the community emerged from lockdown and restrictions eased.

5.3.2 Virtual volunteering

Virtual volunteering is not a new trend, but its growth accelerated during the pandemic as a way of maintaining engagement during lockdowns and physical distancing restrictions. Virtual volunteering included moving existing volunteer activities online as well as starting new online volunteer programs. The different WA universities reported moving their programs, such as peer mentoring, online during COVID as a way of keeping the program going, the volunteers engaged, and continuing to support clients.

With COVID, we introduce some online a little bit more online engagement. But besides that the range of activities have been pretty much the same

[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

The effect of moving volunteering online was varied, even within the same university:

We still had peer mentors, but we definitely saw more dropouts throughout the COVID period and we did do Virtual Connect, which was online.

[ECU2, Paid professional staff member]

5.3.3 Micro volunteering

Micro-volunteering is defined as a form of ad-hoc volunteering. It involves volunteering for short amounts of time such as a few hours. For example, it could be making up packs for trauma patients or folding letters into envelopes (Volunteering Australia, 2023). These activities can be one-off engagements or repeated activities. This trend was growing prior to COVID-19 to encourage busy people, particularly younger age groups, to volunteer and offers considerable flexibility to participants. Curtin University was the only university where deliberately growing micro volunteering during the pandemic was mentioned.

...one other thing that we added a little bit more of was like our micro-volunteering stuff.

[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

6.0 THE WAY FORWARD

Strategies to Cope with the COVID-19 Challenges

In addition, building on previously discussed emerging trends in terms of virtual and micro student volunteering, various strategies were identified by participants from the three universities that are expected to assist future volunteering particularly in adverse situations.

6.1 Differences in approach

There seems to be a drive towards increasing independent volunteering opportunities. In the following quote, the participant suggested developing strategies that would enable students to source their own volunteering opportunities that are recognised by the university.

We are also currently trying to find a way to develop a system so we can let students source their own volunteering. So I think if you have online volunteering and you have students being able to source their own way, they might go as an individual and do some voluntary and still be able to, you know, get recognition to connector and stuff like that. I think we can develop those two sides of things in preparation should (hopefully not) another COVID happens (...).

[CU1, Paid professional staff member]

→ **Rethinking volunteering and focus on impact:** The landscape of volunteering more generally is changing, which is reflected in the comment below. The participant suggests that COVID-19 challenged existing perceptions of student volunteering and forced people to rethink what volunteering is all about; including what volunteering means, how it is perceived and its operational scope.

People who have volunteered, and people who facilitate the programs for volunteering opportunities have had to think about defining what volunteering means. Because if someone has a set definition of, well, this is what it is, you have to go out in the field. This is how it's done. Well, that standard won't apply to all cases now since the changes of COVID have applied. So if volunteering equals impact, how do we define impact and how can we have people be aware of the types of impact we can make. I think that was a conversation that came forth from there.

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

The comment also identifies another important issue for university student volunteer programs; understanding the different ways volunteering activities to make an impact.

6.2 The challenges of long-term impact

Our participants identified the need to modify existing strategies, be flexible and proactive to provide instant communication and feedback that immediately acknowledges

impact. Students find it difficult to continue performing tasks where the impact is really on seen in the longer term, because they are used to a fast-paced world.

The world that we live in now, it's so reliant on instantaneous impact and feedback and change being delivered. Even the manner in which we consume information.

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

That makes it a little bit difficult because some things you work towards, like it's a long-term impact, you continue doing and then that's how you make the impact. So that was one of the discussions we've had with our team members as well, where we were thinking about, well if the volunteering opportunities we've always had still continue to exist, then why is it that there is a disengagement from the people who would previously be engaged and inclined to sign up for those activities?

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

6.3 Word-of-mouth and bringing back a sense-of-community

Interviewees at all three universities reported struggling to get students to re-engage with volunteering now that COVID-19 restrictions were reduced. One participant commented on how much student engagement had been lost due to campus closures and subsequent university restructures. This points to the challenge of how to reinvigorate student volunteering post-COVID, now that students have returned to campus for the start of the new academic year.

But we also had a sense of community earlier which I think is so important. It's such an important part of university life to have that sense of belonging and that feeling of community engagement within that because of COVID because of the fact that people weren't on campus and, you know, everything was just kind of up in the air, everything was being restructured. I suppose in a way what I mean by we've lost that engagement.

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

Both Curtin and Murdoch Universities talked about the importance of using word of mouth recommendations from student to student to bring people into volunteering.

(...) word of mouth is always the strongest way to get across when you know someone who's been involved and they share. And when we have opportunities for volunteering.

[CU2, Senior student volunteer leader]

A large part of volunteering [recruitment] is word of mouth in terms of people having good experiences and that – they're talking to their friends... [who think] 'that's great, I'd love to do that too.

[MU3, Senior student volunteer leader]

7.0 CONCLUSION

This research explored key challenges in university student volunteering due to the COVID-19 pandemic, considers the impact on student volunteers' wellbeing, and looks at future intentions to volunteer. It further explores the trends in university student volunteering at universities in Western Australia. For this purpose, data were collected through eight in-depth interviews conducted among volunteering officials and experienced student volunteers at three WA universities – Curtin University, Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University. In addition, 39 survey responses were collected from the existing student volunteers of these three universities.

The key challenges that student volunteers experienced include (but are not limited to):

- (a) operational disruptions in terms of volunteering activities and roles,
- (b) changes in priorities,
- (c) reduction in available hours and number of available volunteers,
- (d) hesitancy in trying new things,
- (e) trimming down resources, and
- (e) changes in government policies.

The findings revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic had adverse effects on university students' volunteering in terms of:

- (a) loss of interest in volunteering,
- (b) reduced level of resilience and wellbeing due to not being able to volunteer, and
- (c) lack of student's future intention to volunteer.

New trends in student volunteering were accelerated by the pandemic including increased virtual volunteering and micro volunteering. The project has also identified strategies that were found to be useful to deal with the challenges of the adverse situations posed by COVID-19 such as offering more independent, informal (involving relatively fewer formalities) opportunities.

Based on the project's findings, the research team puts forward the following:

- ⇒ The universities, in partnership with Volunteering WA, should initiate a renewed push to engage students in volunteering using tried and true methods such as word of mouth.

Since international students are returning, it is timely to promote and re-engage with students about volunteering. It will be important to recognise that due to the current accommodation crisis, however, many students are under pressure and are struggling to find housing and meet costs of living. This has the potential to interrupt connections with previous volunteers, who might otherwise promote volunteering activities. Therefore, universities will need to incorporate steps into reinvigoration of volunteering to support connections between previous and new student volunteers. There is the potential to initiate new forms of volunteering (e.g., support in arranging accommodation for new students) and may consider leveraging some of the more recent trends volunteering that were accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., virtual, and micro volunteering).

- ⇒ Reinvest in centralised platforms to provide information on various volunteering opportunities available on campus as well as off-campus and online, and promote these platforms more widely, including to new students. It will be important to ensure opportunities to take up new forms of volunteer are highlighted. Resources and staffing need to be allocated for this purpose.
- ⇒ Continue to identify and work with community organisations that students can partner with to establish working relationships and facilitate processes that bring in new students at commencement and allow student volunteers to move on or continue volunteering after graduation. Such partnerships will help students engage in meaningful volunteering work, observe the impact of their activities, and experience a range of volunteering opportunities to enhance their own skills as well.
- ⇒ Continue to provide training and support to help student volunteers prepare for their activities. Such training includes topics such as communication skills, team building and problem solving. Regular check-ins and debriefing sessions would, in addition to offering support, serve as opportunities to gain feedback on their experiences.
- ⇒ Continue to recognise and reward student contributions to their community in the form of transcripts and certificates. Promotion of this recognition has the potential to attract new student volunteers and help to rebuild a culture of volunteerism. It will be important to ensure clear benefits such as career development, resume building, mentoring, and training opportunities are articulated.

⇒ There is also an opportunity to further integrate volunteering experiences into existing courses. There are already specific courses and units that focus on volunteering and some of these provide recognition of students' contributions by way of credit. Growth in these types of units may offer potential for increased focus on volunteering.

For all of the universities collaborative partnerships with peak volunteering bodies, such as Volunteering WA, have the potential to further promote a culture of volunteering on campus and encourage faculty and staff to volunteer as well, while also recognising the importance of student volunteering in building a better community.

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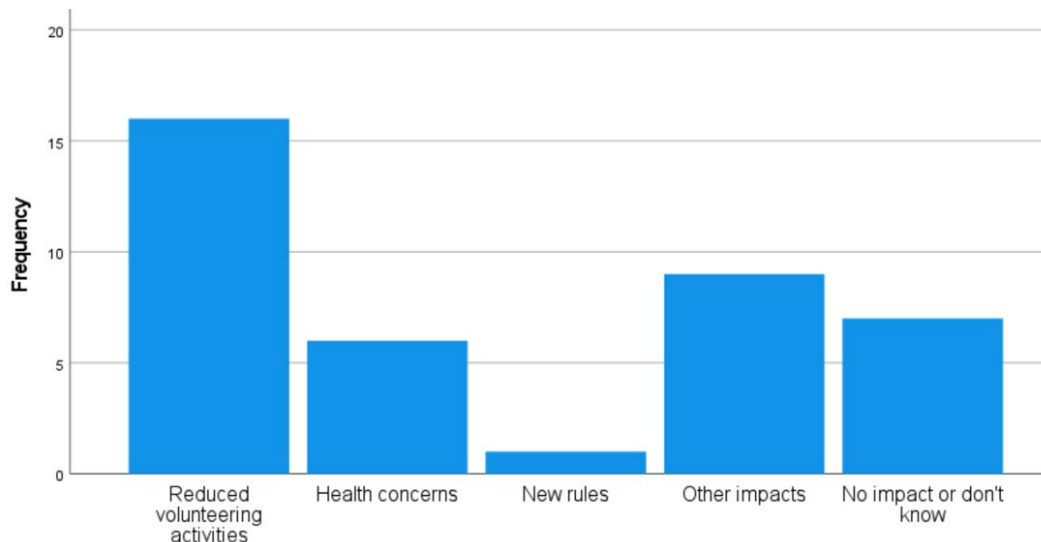
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APPENDIX: Additional data analysis from quantitative survey

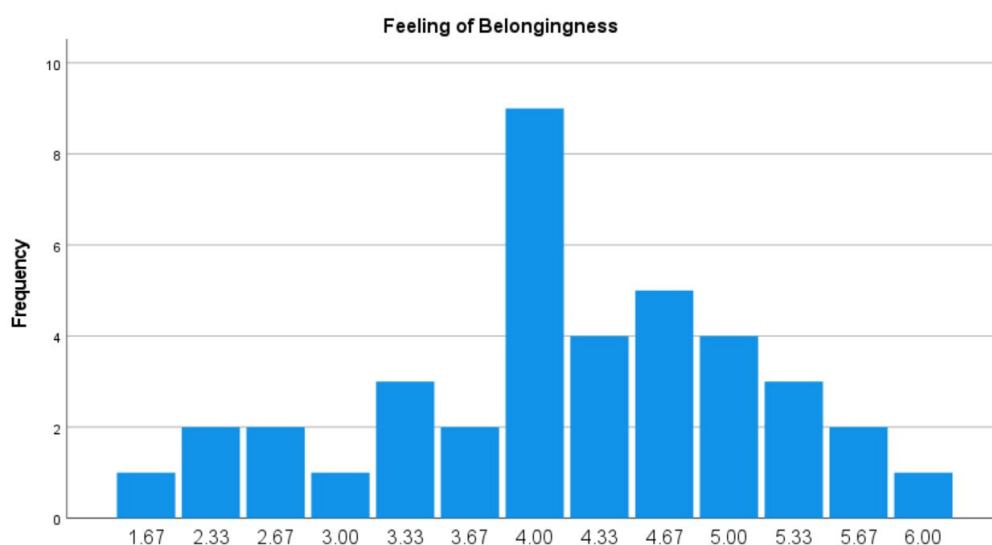
This appendix includes data from the survey to supplement the text in this report. The low response rate means that these figures and percentages must be used with caution.

Figure 2: Biggest changes in student volunteering due to COVID-19



The survey included an open-ended question asking respondents to identify the biggest change to volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Responses were recoded and grouped (based on their similarity in meaning) into five categories. Figure 2 shows that student respondents perceived reduction in volunteering activities was the biggest change (41%) during COVID-19 which was followed by other impacts (23.1%) and health concerns (15.6%).

Figure 3: Students' feeling of belongingness during COVID-19 period



Respondents were asked if they felt lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic, if they had a feeling being felt left out and if they felt lack of belongingness towards the university during the COVID-19 (2020-21). These items were measured using 1 to 7 points anchoring with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 7 being *strongly agree*. The average score of these three items was 4.15 showing that students' felt some lack of belongingness towards the university. The most frequent response falls on the scale point of 4.0 reflects neither disagree nor agree.

Figure 4: Feeling safe and feeling a part of the community during COVID-19

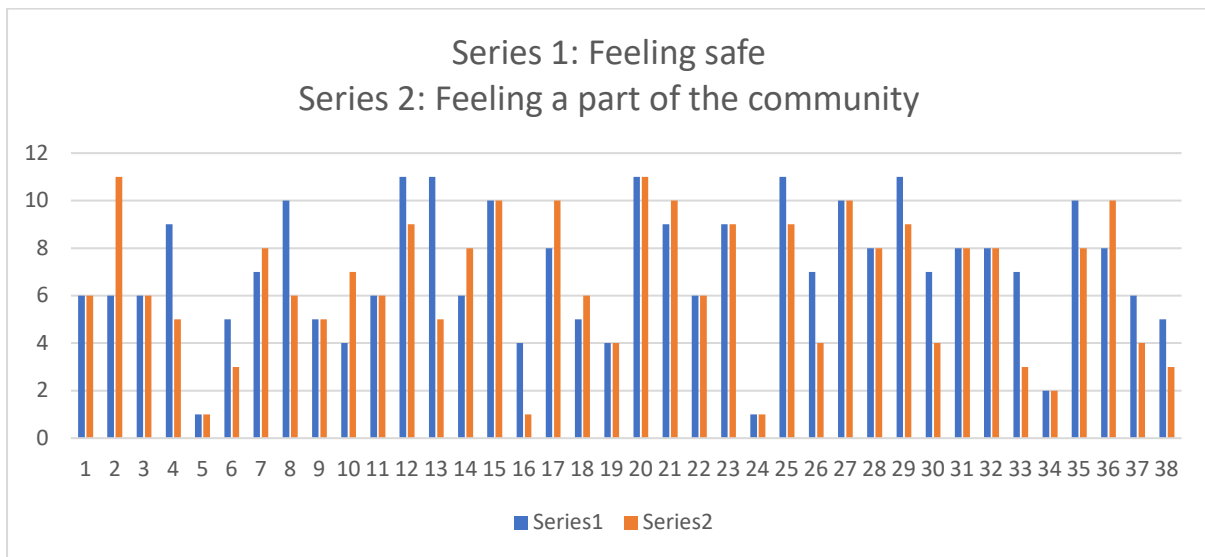


Figure 4 illustrates how COVID-19 impacted students' satisfaction relating to feeling safe and part of the community. These items were measured using 1 to 11 points anchoring with 1 being *not satisfied at all* and 11 being *completely satisfied*. Figure 4 shows that the respondents' opinions spread across all the scale points from 1 to 11 reflecting that many respondents were largely not satisfied with their feeling of safety and feeling of part of the community [with average scores of 7.05 (SD of 2.75) and 6.41 (SD of 2.94) respectively].

Figure 5: Student volunteers' resilience during COVID-19

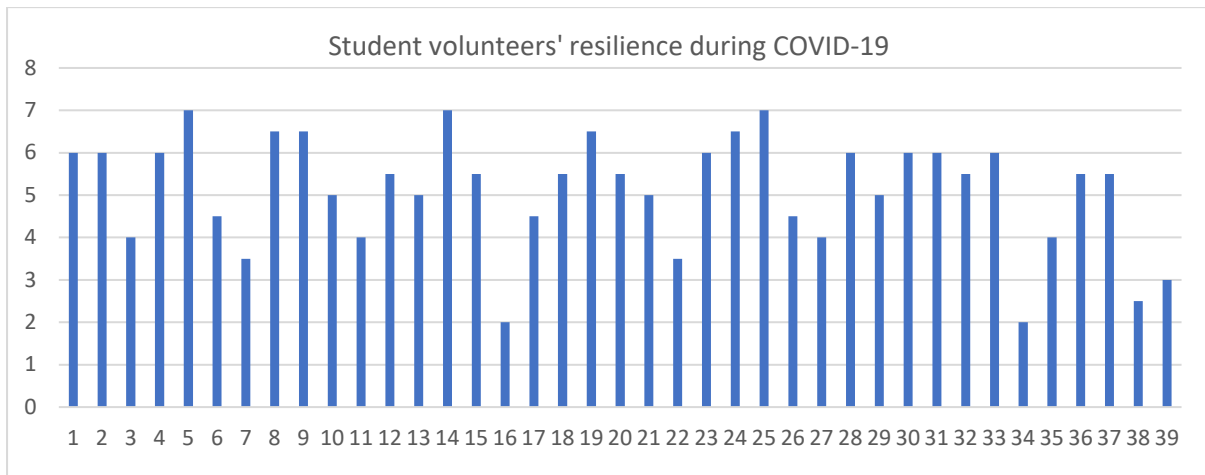


Figure 5 shows that majority of the students who responded to the survey adapted to the changed situation and coped with the stress of COVID-19. This is also reflected in the average score of 5.11, which is higher than the mid-point 4 (neither disagree nor agree) and falls within the domain of agreeing with the statements.

Figure 6: Students' resilience and future intention to volunteer

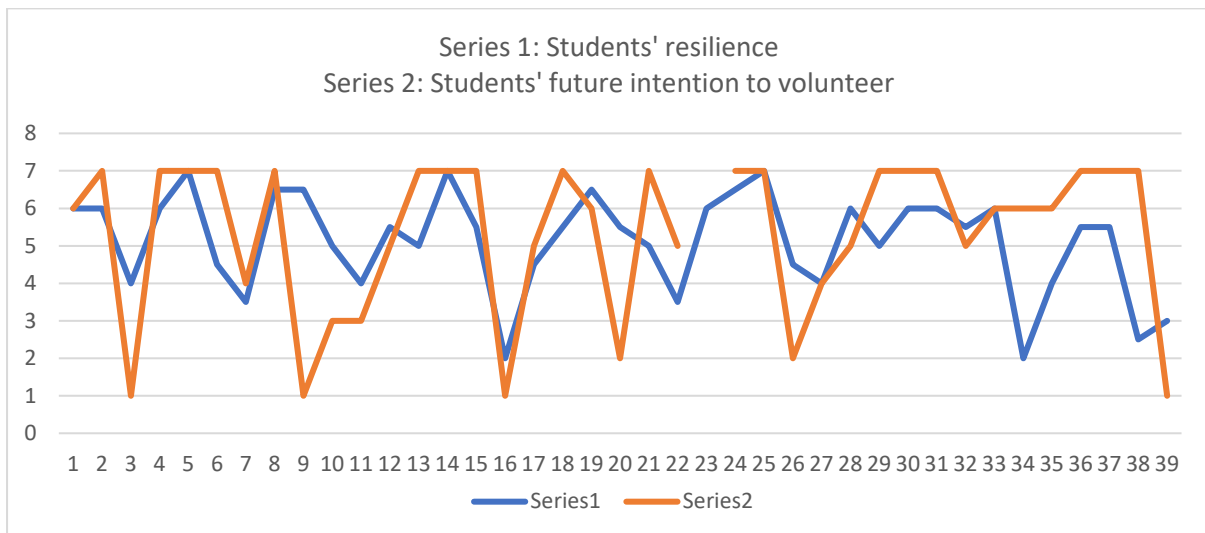


Figure 6 showed that students' future intention to volunteer is in line with their resilience during COVID-19 as shown in Figure 5.

We tested if their resilience and future intention to volunteer are correlated with each other. We ran Pearson correlation between these two variables and found that they are correlated with each other with Pearson Correlation value of 0.43 and significant at 0.01 level. This reflects that students' resilience is linked with their future intention to volunteer.