

## Column 3 : Outcomes from selected examples of each of the three NEA Activity Types.



### Introduction

There are three categories of extra-curricular activity which are eligible for New England Award (NEA) points. They are non-accredited learning and training; preparation for the workplace; and community service. The third research question, set out on Table 3.1 below, sought the outcomes for students engaged in each of these activity types. One example of each of these activity types was selected for analysis. They were a non-accredited student leadership program as an example of a Category 1 NEA activity; part-time paid and voluntary work as an example from Category 2; and a peer mentoring program as an example of a Category 3 activity. While the student outcomes described in *Column 2* were generated from across all NEA activities undertaken by the 2005 and 2006 NEA Cohorts, the outcomes described in this Column were the result of a finer-grained analysis of these particular activities which were selected for the reasons described in the *Linking Paper* (page 4).

As in *Columns 1* and *2*, the outcomes were analysed using tools borrowed from the process approach to the study of change and development which views outcomes as positive, negative or mixed in relation to the original context and idea events (Poole et al. 2000, 107-08). Evaluation research principles (Weiss 1998, 4) were also applied to the analysis of outcomes. Evaluation research, as defined in *Column 2* (page 2.2), involves the comparison of outcomes of what is being evaluated with a set of standards. In this case the standards derive from the two original assumptions, or core ideas, underlying the NEA and two related ideas that emerged during the study. The original assumptions were that participation in the types of extra-curricular activity that were eligible for NEA points assisted the development of the UNE Graduate Attributes and that the NEA would promote participation in extra-curricular activities. The emergent related ideas (from *Column 1*) were that such participation also had the potential to increase students' feelings of engagement with the institution and to enhance the development of other desirable personal qualities. Related to the latter and also to the

emerging outcomes pertaining to the core objective about the UNE Graduate Attributes, was my growing certainty that the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy was in need of revision as discussed in the *Literature Review* (page 26) and *Column 2* (page 2.44).

Table 3.1: Research Question 3

3. What were the outcomes for three selected activities (one from each NEA activity category: extra-curricular learning and training; preparation for employment; and community contribution)?
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## 3.1 NEA Category 1

### A Student Leadership Program

Non-accredited learning and training is difficult to ‘sell’ to university students who are becoming increasingly pragmatic about how they spend their time (Pantelides 1998, 137; Schirato & Wallace 1998, 189-190; Wong-Toi 1998, 232). Student patterns of engagement in university life in general have changed (White 2006, 232). Many tertiary students now need to engage in paid work to support their time at university (Clegg et al. 2006, 103; McInnes, James, & Hartley 2000, 39-40; Parry & Debowski 2004, 12) and are preoccupied with their employability (Lichtenberg & Howell 2005, 2; Watts 2006, 5) and the related need to achieve high grade point averages. They have little free time to engage in extra-curricular programs. The purveyors of non-accredited learning and training programs, including tertiary learning support, careers development units and university libraries, are continually seeking new methods of encouraging students to participate in their programs (Clegg et al. 2006, 104; Schirato & Wallace 1998, 189).

The Vice-Chancellor's Student Leadership (VCSL) Program at UNE is an extra-curricular course for students which runs every semester for one morning per week. It was established by a past Vice-Chancellor who possessed a strong interest in student development. It is presented jointly by academic and general staff with expertise in the various components of the course. The program's objectives are to develop and enhance the practical skills of leadership; understanding of the distinction between leadership and management; appreciation of different leadership styles; knowledge of employer expectations of leadership; the principles of strategic thinking and planning; a life-long

learning approach to leadership; conflict resolution strategies; emotional intelligence; personality types and effective communication skills (University of New England 2006). The course is designed to enhance the leadership skills of students already in leadership positions and those aspiring to leadership in their chosen professions. Placements are competitive and require written applications supported by referees. On successful completion of the Vice-Chancellor's Student Leadership Program, participants receive a certificate from the Vice-Chancellor and notation on their academic transcript. VCSL students can apply for NEA points.

NEA registered students who participated in the VCSL Program in 2004 and 2005 were surveyed (Survey 7 described in the *Linking Paper*, page 46) about their experience of the program to explore question 3.1 and its sub-questions set out in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Research Question 3.1 and sub-questions

3.1	What do students gain from extra-curricular training such as the Student Leadership Program?	3.1.a	Why do students take on extra-curricular training such as the Student Leadership Program?
		3.1.b	What do students gain from participation in the Student Leadership Program?

There were twelve responses, a response rate of 35%. The aim of the survey was to ascertain why the students enrolled in the leadership program, what they gained from it, especially in terms of graduate attributes, and the impact of the NEA.

### **3.1a Why do students participate in extra-curricular training such as this?**

When asked why they applied to do the VCSL Program all respondents (N=12) said they hoped to increase confidence and to improve practical skills such as communication skills. Six spoke about wanting to develop leadership skills and there were six mentions of other personal and professional development. They were also asked specifically about the impact of the NEA on their decision.

All respondents said they had expected to gain, in addition to greater knowledge about leadership, increased confidence and practical skills. For example:

- *I expected to be able to identify what skills good leaders possess, which of these skills I currently had, and how I could further develop these as well as how to pick up the skills I didn't have; and*
- *A range of skills that would be beneficial to applying for and working in positions requiring leadership and responsibility.*

Also, improved communications skills was a common expectation. For example:

- *I expected the VCSL to provide me with skills that would allow me to confidently lead and assist others. Communication skills are essential in all areas, and I was hoping to build on mine. I hoped to come out with a greater confidence in knowing how to successfully lead and encourage people by example; and*
- *I particularly wanted to do the course to work on my communication skills, leadership skills in general and conflict resolution skills.*

Six students said the primary reason for applying for the course was to gain leadership skills to prepare for leadership positions they were considering or as personal development. A typical response from those wanting to hone their leadership skills for a specific reason was:

- *After learning about the course...I found that the idea really appealed to me and I was interested in completing it. I had the intention of applying for a position at College in the following year either as an RF (Resident Fellow in residential system) or Academic Senior, and felt that this would be very beneficial for me not only to give me an advantage over other applicants but to build on my abilities as a leader.*

Two of those seeking general personal development said:

- *I thought it seemed like a fantastic opportunity to expand areas about myself that I knew needed improving. The course was very broad in the fact that it really went through all what a leader should be and should do. It was a fantastic opportunity/experience to grow my knowledge of what a leader should be and do it in a fun way; and*
- *I thought I could gain something from it and further develop as a leader and an individual.*

Additionally there were four responses about doing the course for professional development, including:

- *I felt that as I was intending going into the army once finished it would be good to gain leadership skills; and*
- *Leadership is crucial to my career in teaching and (I) believed it to be an excellent professional development opportunity.*

One student very pragmatically stated that participation in the program was to bolster his CV:

- *It would look good on a resume.*

Another said he/she participated to be involved:

- *I wanted to be involved in as much as possible in my final year at UNE.*

Yet another baldly announced: *Initially for NEA points and to meet the Vice-Chancellor.*

The VCSL participants were asked if the NEA had any bearing on their decision to do the VCSL Program and the result was an even division between the respondents with six saying that the NEA did not influence their decision and six saying that it did. A typical response from the latter was:

- *I was trying to think of ways to get points for the NEA because I wanted to complete the award, and the VSCL was worth a good percentage towards the NEA.*

Interestingly the Vice-Chancellor at the time, Professor Ingrid Moses, asked the same question of a more recent VCSL group and a clear majority indicated by a show of hands that the opportunity to earn NEA points had played a part in their decision to apply to do the VCSL. Later, when I asked her if she thought there was value in tying a course like the Vice-Chancellor's Student Leadership Course to the New England Award, Professor Moses said:

- *I do believe so yes because it rewards students who do it. I also know that it has encouraged students to do it because I asked them once and many said they were doing the course for the NEA points. This is both a good and bad thing. I*

*have mixed feelings about this. I would hope that they are doing it not just for the points. It's a difficult one isn't it?*

In fact three of the six who said they were doing the VCSL Program for the NEA points in this study said they were doing it not *only* for the points:

- *It posed an opportunity to gain from the VCSL but also gain points for the NEA. Killing two birds with one stone (but also) it seemed like a challenge;*
- *Points, expansion of awareness (and) development of skills, and*
- *Points for NEA, graduate attributes and trying to gain more skills.*

Clearly there was a degree of pragmatism amongst some of the VCSL participants. An examination of other extra-curricular learning and training opportunities taken on by this group indicated that motivation to participate consisted of a mixture of pragmatism and reasons other than the availability of NEA points. Just two of the respondents had not participated in any other extra-curricular learning or training opportunity at university and one of these was a person who said that the incentive of the NEA points - *'did not influence me at all'*. All the other respondents had participated in other extra-curricular learning or training opportunities including those that had admitted to being influenced by the NEA points. The types of extra-curricular learning or training that these students had done previously were: WorkReady training<sup>11</sup>; UNESMART training<sup>12</sup>; academic skills workshops; fitness instructor training; training to be an academic assistant in the residences; and peer mentor training. Participation in these programs indicate an interest in personal, academic and professional development and also, judging by the last two, a desire to be involved and assist others. All these programs are eligible for NEA points.

The types of extra-curricular learning and training that the other respondents, those that said they had not been influenced by the availability of NEA points, had completed were: peer mentor training; academic assistant training; Anaiwan Enrichment Project

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<sup>11</sup> Workplace readiness training (5 hours) run by the UNE Counselling and Careers Service covering workplace expectations, occupational health and safety issues, customer service skills and graduate recruitment methods.

<sup>12</sup> Student marketing team training (5 hours) run by the UNE Marketing and Public Affairs unit covering customer service, public relations, communication skills and marketing strategies.

training<sup>13</sup>; coaching courses (soccer, basketball, cricket); Austswim training<sup>14</sup>; Rotary Youth Leadership training<sup>15</sup>; a suicide awareness course; and training as a Camp Quality<sup>16</sup> companion. All of these activities involve assisting others in a mentoring, coaching or supporting role and would seem to indicate the possession of a sense of social justice and social responsibility on the part of highly motivated students. The desire to contribute to one's learning community in this way is a sign of involvement and engagement with that community which is a recognised factor in student retention (Astin 1993; Nagda et al. 1998; National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition 2001; Tinto 1993).

Reasons for participation in the leadership course ranged from the desire for personal and professional development through to the more pragmatic goal of gaining NEA points. However, half of the respondents who said that they sought NEA points also said that there were other reasons for the participation as well, such as for the challenge, and skills development. This desire for personal and professional development was borne out by an examination of other extra-curricular involvement of the respondents. The majority of respondents (10/12) had engaged in other extra-curricular learning and training opportunities while at university, including 5/6 of those that said they had applied for the leadership course for the NEA points. Many of these activities had been completed before the advent of the NEA. These results indicate that the majority of the respondents possessed the desire to extend themselves and also, based on the nature of the activities, to be involved with and assist others. This is evidenced by student involvement in Camp Quality, suicide awareness, Anaiwan Enrichment, peer mentoring and student support programs in the UNE Residences as described above. This was a positive outcome for the emergent related idea that the NEA promotes the development of desirable personal qualities such as altruism.

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<sup>13</sup> Peer support training for students involved in the Anaiwan Enrichment Project in which UNE education students are linked with indigenous secondary students.

<sup>14</sup> Training to become a swimming instructor

<sup>15</sup> The Rotary organisation's international training program for young leaders which emphasises leadership, citizenship and personal growth

<sup>16</sup> Camp Quality is a non profit organisation that is committed to bringing hope and happiness to every child living with cancer, their families and communities through ongoing quality recreational, educational, hospital and financial support programs (Camp Quality 2006) .

At the same time, it also appeared that the NEA points did encourage participation but that it was already active students that were encouraged. This is a mixed outcome for the original context and ideas underpinning the NEA: that the NEA would promote the on-campus experience and increase participation. That was not clearly the case. However, it was found that active and involved students did respond to institutional recognition of their efforts and achievements and feel spurred on to do more. This is a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA had the potential to increase students' feelings of engagement with the University.



### 3.1b What do students gain from participation in the VCSL Program?

The students were asked what they thought were the most important things they had learned in the VCSL Program. All the respondents (n=12) gave positive answers with more about various skills and attributes that they felt had been enhanced than actual leadership ability per se. There were ten mentions of development of skills and attributes; nine mentions of personal qualities; and seven mentions of leadership skills. In separate questions the VCSL students were asked if their leadership skills had been enhanced and if they thought they had developed personally and professionally through the course.

Out of ten comments about skills developed as a result of participation in the program, eight were about communication and interpersonal skills, such as:

- *Effective communication is essential to leadership; and*
- *Leadership skills such as conflict resolution and communication skills.*

The other two were:

- *Time management skills; and*
- *Building on my multi-skilling and prioritising abilities.*

There were nine responses to the question about what was learned through the program about personal qualities, three of which specified increased confidence, such as:

- *Further confidence in my abilities to lead and make decisions that will affect others.*

The remainder were about having gained a heightened understanding of human nature and social responsibility. For example:

- *Everyone has different personality traits and leadership styles, not necessarily bad. However, people with the same traits, etc, may work better together. This was particularly important for me as I have decided I may want to work in the human resources side of management; and*
- *The importance of relationship building in leadership. The importance of people's value systems. How I can change myself to be a better leader.*

There were seven responses to the question about what was learned that specified leadership skills without any further information and one response from a future teacher that reflected her thinking about leadership in the classroom:

- *I need to model leadership to develop leadership in my students. Leadership is about working with people.*

The students were asked if the course had enhanced their leadership skills. Again they gave the most answers about increased skills, particularly communication and interpersonal skills, followed by feelings of increased confidence, assertiveness and also empathy. Typical of the ten responses about skills development were:

- *I now work harder at communication with others;*
- *I know positive ways in which to interact within a team in order to complete a set task;*
- *I am more equipped to manage time, resources and the delegation of duties; and*
- *It made me realise how you present the information can impact (on) the way the message is received. It greatly improved my public speaking ability.*

About increased confidence typical responses were:

- *Confidence is an undeniable asset when speaking to others and trying to gain their respect and confidence in your ability to lead and make decisions; and*
- *Building more confidence in me to step up to leadership more often.*

Students also said:

- *I now try to be more assertive; and*
- *I am more empathetic, in answer to this question.*

When asked how they developed personally and professionally through the VCSL Program students gave more responses about personal development, particularly in relation to increased confidence about their communication and interpersonal skills. Of the eighteen answers received, the following are a sample:

- *I became more confident when working in a group situation;*
- *I realised I need to continually communicate with people as a leader and understand their view;*

- *More aware of the consequences of my actions; and*
- *Deeper understanding of my own strengths/weaknesses. Deeper appreciation for my intimate relationships. New found outlook on life and optimism for the future.*

There were seven responses to this question about professional development as a result of the VCSL Program, such as:

- *I have a better understanding of how to work with others on a more professional level; and*
- *I don't hesitate to mention it when applying for jobs.*

The VCSL Program participants were required to write an assignment in which they reflected on the success of their past and current leadership activities and also to present a twelve month plan for their own personal leadership development. They were also required to present an audiovisual presentation summarising what they gained from the course, their own ideas about the attributes of good leader and an overview of their own leadership development plan. The participants were asked what value they had derived from these activities. Most of the answers were about the value of thinking about the future and setting goals. For example:

- *It made me actually plan and develop a strategy to further develop personal skills;*
- *This required me to set goals for the future, having something to strive for;*
- *More clarity about my future. An understanding about my present life situation. Personal satisfaction from having shared my ideas with other potential leaders; and*
- *Speaking about my leadership plans I gained reassurance from my audience. I was required to think and organise goals. I was required to formalise and set these plans for the future.*

The second most frequent response was about the opportunity to practise their communication skills, such as:

- *It provided another opportunity to develop public speaking skills; and*

- *Testing my communication skills at the end in front of people that had become my friends was great because I felt if I couldn't do it in front of them I wouldn't be able to do it all.*

Others said that they felt more positive and confident about their leadership ability as a result of the VCSL assignment. For example:

- *Telling other people my plans made them seem more real, and also made me realise that it was possible to achieve them;*
- *I realised that I am committed to achieving a leadership role; and*
- *Being asked what I intended to do after completing the course and after completing uni, made me think what I actually wanted to do with my life.*

A student who wrote about her experience of the program in her NEA journal said:

The VCSL Program resulted in significant personal growth. I have learnt characteristics about my inner-self... I have learnt these same qualities are there to be discovered in others. The program has completely changed the way I view people around me (Female student 2005).

Another VCSL participant said in his NEA journal:

The VCSL Program...taught me some valuable concepts and strategies that I would not have otherwise learned. Many of these...I still use...with remarkable success and I have no doubt that I will continue to do so (Male student 2004).

VCSL participants gained skills such as communication, conflict resolution, time management, the ability to prioritise and interpersonal skills; and enhanced personal qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, empathy, optimism, social responsibility, self knowledge, personal goalsetting and better understanding of human nature. This is a positive outcome for the emergent idea that the NEA, because it promotes involvement in extra-curricular activity, has the potential to support the development of desirable attributes, attitudes and personal qualities.

## **Graduate Attributes**

About the graduate attributes, a VCSL Program participant said in her NEA journal:

Participating in the VCSLP has enabled me to develop a number of skills and attributes which will certainly contribute to helping me become a valued UNE graduate. I developed skills in communication, problem solving and team work. I developed a global perspective and as a life-long learner. In

almost every class...I was...involved in teamwork often involving problem solving. Working with people as a team to solve a ...problem not only developed those skills, but led to an immediate development in my communication skills. The other students...were extremely different in personality and values. Developing...understanding of others is very valuable to me. I am studying...to become a teacher and it is important that I am able to identify such differences in the classroom (Female student 2005).

The respondents to Survey 7 said they believed that participating in the VCSL Program had assisted their development of the majority of the UNE Graduate Attributes.

Responses ranged on a three point Likert type scale from 'a lot' through 'a little' to 'not at all'. As summarised in Table 3.3 below, teamwork, communication skills, life-long learning skills and problem solving scored highly, followed by social responsibility, global perspective and information literacy. One student did not development global perspective and two students did not develop information literacy.

Table 3.3 : UNE Graduate Attributes developed by students (n=12).

	A lot	A little	Not at all
Teamwork	11	1	
Communication skills	9	3	
Life-long learning	7	5	
Problem solving	6	6	
Social responsibility	5	7	
Global perspective	2	9	1
Information literacy		10	2

Clearly the skills of teamwork, communication skills and problem solving, and an appreciation of life-long learning, are able to be enhanced through a program like the VCSL and able to be understood by students as being enhanced. The less clearly definable attribute of social responsibility seemed to be less understood by these students. On the one hand they demonstrated through their actions and their responses that they do understand social responsibility, and that their understanding of it has been heightened through the VCSL Program, as evidenced by the responses cited above relating to leadership aspirations and the desire to understand and assist others. On the other hand, they rated it relatively poorly when asked about it specifically. Global perspective was not particularly well developed through the VCSL Program but given that its enhancement is not an objective of the Program that is not surprising. Similarly

increased information literacy is not a goal of the VCSL Program but it is likely that the ten students who said it was enhanced ‘a little’ through the course were referring to the session in which they learned how to use the *PowerPoint* program for their audiovisual presentations.

Despite being a very positive outcome for some of the listed UNE skills/attributes, this was a mixed outcome for the core idea underpinning the NEA: that the NEA would support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy through recognising student development through extra-curricular activity because of the uneven pattern of development across the whole list of UNE skills/attributes.

## Summary

The students reportedly participated in the VCSL Program to develop themselves personally and professionally. While half of them cited the availability of NEA points it appeared that the majority of the respondents also possessed the desire to extend and challenge themselves and possessed a degree of altruism. From the Program the students stated that they gained skills such as communication, conflict resolution, time management and interpersonal skills and the ability to prioritise; and personal qualities such as confidence, assertiveness, empathy, optimism, social responsibility, self knowledge, personal goalsetting and improved understanding of human nature. These results were positive outcomes for the emergent related idea that the NEA, through recognition of such activities, supports the development of desirable attributes, attitudes and personal qualities.

The influence of the availability of NEA points was more that it encouraged participation amongst already active students. This is a mixed outcome for the original core idea underpinning the NEA: that the NEA would promote the on-campus experience and increase participation. Additionally, it was found that active and involved students did respond to institutional recognition of their efforts and achievements and saw the NEA as further incentive to get involved. This is a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA had the potential to increase students’ feelings of engagement with the University.

That the UNE Graduate Attributes appear to have been mostly developed through participation in the VCSL program is a mixed outcome for the core idea underpinning the NEA, that the NEA would support the Graduate Attributes Policy. That they were unevenly developed supports my view that the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy in its current form was in need of review to allow for more consistent applicability.

## 3.2 NEA Category 2

### Part-time work

It is a fact of university life nowadays that large numbers of full-time students need to have part-time paid work to support themselves (Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy 1999; Clegg et al. 2006, 103; McInnes & James 1995, 84-85; McInnes et al. 2000, 39-40; McInnis & Hartley 2002, 1; McMillan 2005, 23; Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education 2006). This study was an investigation of the benefits that students derive from part-time work, as an example of an NEA Category 2 activity. It addressed Research Question 3.2 and its sub-questions set out in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4 : Research Question 3.2 and sub-questions

3.2	What do students gain from part-time work?	3.2.a	Why do students choose to participate in part-time work?
		3.2.b	What do students gain from paid and voluntary part-time work?

In the first two years of the NEA (2004 and 2005) there were 37 claims submitted from NEA registered students for points for part-time paid or voluntary work to meet the criteria regarding the second category of NEA eligible activities: preparation for the workplace. The type of work ranged from retail sales (9), catering/food preparation (6), office administration (3), customer service (2) and farm work (1) through to work in professions (6) and the arts (4). There was also work carried out in security (1), as a pool attendant/lifeguard (1), in an abattoir (1), and event management assistance (1) and with charitable/humanitarian organisations (2). Half of these students were paid and half worked voluntarily.

The students who made these claims had been employed or supervised by 33 different people. Of the 33 employers/supervisors, 23 agreed to be interviewed giving a response rate of 70%. Of those that were contacted but not interviewed, none actually declined but pressure of work, lack of confidence about ability to contribute and in one case, poor English skills, resulted in friendly termination of the interview. In general, those



that were most keen to be interviewed were experienced employers and those that were less keen were inexperienced young people in assistant manager positions in retail and food chains. In three instances the managers who had signed for the NEA points were no longer in their positions and the matter was not pursued with their replacements.

NEA students were also surveyed about their work experience. Twenty-six surveys were distributed (Survey 8 described in the *Linking Paper*, page 46), and seventeen were returned, a response rate of 65%. This group, comprising ten females and seven males, collectively made thirteen claims for paid work and fifteen claims for voluntary work. In order to qualify for NEA points for work experience students were required to present a form signed by their work supervisor declaring that the students had carried out the work to an acceptable standard. The students also had to record their skills development, in terms of the UNE Graduate Attributes, in an electronic portfolio designed for the purpose called the unE-portfolio.

### **3.2a Why do students choose to participate in part-time work?**

While it is understood that earning money is the primary motivation for having a part-time paid job, the students (n=13) were asked if there were other reasons for doing paid work. Just two said that there were no other reasons apart from the money. Eight respondents said that they valued experience of work. For example:

- *Money was the primary reason, secondary was experience; and*
- *Getting used to real work and real work situations;*

and the opportunity to develop work skills such as customer service skills, teamwork skills and skills in people management and communication. One student studying to be a high school teacher and working part-time as a boarding house assistant at a local private girls' school was pragmatic about why she was doing it apart from the money:

- *Experience with people and teenagers.*

To develop life experience and life skills was part of the reason for working for three respondents. For example:

- *Life experience. I feel work grounds me and gives me a greater awareness and understanding of many things i.e. life, etc.*

Three students mentioned having fun or a change from normal routines. For example:

- *I have basically always had a job in hospitality since the age of 18. I enjoy it as a job that you don't really have to think about outside of your work time, and you meet lots of people.*

One student said that he worked because of the NEA:

- *It was the NEA that made me get out and actually seek employment.*

So, apart from the funds, students expressed a range of reasons for being employed with just one (1/13) citing NEA points as a factor.

In regards to voluntary work, employability and personal satisfaction were given equally as reasons by more than half the students (n=15) for why they did voluntary work. In relation to employability, nine cited 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, there were also nine examples given such as:

- *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.*

Personal enjoyment was another factor:

- *It can be a lot of fun too!;*

as was 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 (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. Let me ...paint the picture of what this role entails.

Many procedures and safety issues must be addressed, with back ups in place and qualified people on hand. Over two days 35-40 take part in this event and sponsors are relying on media coverage at certain parts of the journey. There is a lot to organize from vehicles to first aid, sunscreen to Traffic Management Plans. Things must be checked and double checked for safety issues, to prevent delays, prevent miscommunication and to provide overall success of the event... Lastly money that comes in throughout the year to raise funds for the (Charity) must be well recorded... If something goes wrong it comes back to the Convenor, it is (my) responsibility to make sure everything is done properly and in the best interests of everyone.

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 trip 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).

An additional five 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 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 back towards a particular group (Male student 2004).

Just one student specifically volunteered that he was influenced to do voluntary work by the NEA. This was the same student who sought paid work because of the NEA:

- *The NEA was invaluable in getting me out seeking employment.*

When asked specifically if the NEA had any bearing on their decision to do voluntary work, five (5/15) students involved in voluntary work 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 2 birds with the 1 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:

- *I already undertook these positions but doing them for the NEA has made me look at them in a different way and take them 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; the ensuing recognition and strengthened resumes.

When asked if they had noticed if the NEA had encouraged more students to get involved in extra-curricular activity this group gave mixed responses with equal numbers saying 'yes' and 'no'. Those that said 'yes' indicated that they had noticed increased attendance in extra-curricular learning and training programs. One put this down to the incentive that recognition provides:

- *They can see the value of what they do, they get a tangible reward, they see what they can gain skills and confidence-wise.*

Another was quite cynical about this effect:

- *I did in a way, but I also noticed some students trying to cheat their way around it, like participating in library courses but not really taking any of it in, they just attended to get the NEA points.*

A more even-handed view was:

- *I don't think the NEA is an incentive so much as it is a reward.*

Clearly students have an eye on their employability after graduation. Work experience and the development of work-related skills were the prime motivators for paid work, apart from income, and also for voluntary work. However, the students surveyed also demonstrated that they are interested in personal development through the pursuit of life skills, interpersonal skills and doing deeds for the good of others. This was a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA supported more than the development of skills: it also supported the development of desirable personal qualities. Additionally, the finding that students seek to enhance their work-related skills and consequently their employability is an indirectly positive outcome for the core idea that participation in NEA eligible activities supports the UNE Graduate Attribute Policy because an underlying objective of the graduate attribute movement is to enhance the employability of graduates (see *Literature Review*, from page 8).

That the majority of the group involved in voluntary work were not influenced by the NEA is a mixed outcome for the core idea that the NEA would encourage students to participate in NEA-eligible extra-curricular activity. While many would have become involved anyway, the NEA did have the effect of influencing the way they perceived the benefits of work and increased satisfaction. Similarly, that the students were evenly divided about whether they had noticed that the NEA encouraged more students to get involved is a mixed outcome. However, the fact that the NEA changed how they thought about the value of their voluntary work, expressed by the majority, is a positive outcome.

### **3.2b What do students gain from paid and voluntary work?**

Both groups, the students (n=17) and their employers (n=23), were asked what they thought was learned by students from the experience of part-time work. Every single employer interviewed said that people skills and work skills are the most important things a student learns from part-time paid or voluntary work. In relation to people skills there were 23 different comments, more than twice as many as those for work skills, with communications skills (especially dealing with the public) receiving the most

emphasis, followed by listening skills, negotiating skills (especially in real-life situations), and being able to build relationships with people. One employer emphasised that experience outside of students' peer groups was useful; another stressed that real-life learning about organisational structures was important. The most frequently cited work skill was customer service/relations which could also be categorised as people skills thus underlining the overall importance attached by employers to communication skills. The next most frequently cited work skill was ability to work in a team and understanding roles and responsibilities in a team environment. For example:

- *Opportunity to apply in a practical sense things learned like teamwork skills in tutes.*

Organisational skills, time management, punctuality, the need for accuracy and attention to detail and

- *learning to think on feet*

were also listed by employers as important lessons learned from work experience.

In addition to people skills and work skills, there was a diverse array of other lessons that students learn through part-time work, according to employers. The most common was personal attributes such as responsibility (7), commitment (3), reliability (3), discipline (1), motivation (1) and life skills (1). 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.*

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 own peer group and experiences different levels of society, learns people skills and people management skills.*

Also cited were 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.*

Finally, learned confidence was cited by two employers. For example:

- *It brings them out.*

When asked the same question about the most important things they have learned from part-time work, the students placed far less emphasis on people skills and a greater emphasis on work skills. Just six students cited interpersonal skills, three giving more detail:

- *Always listen to what someone else has to say before making a judgement;*
- *The importance of correct and appropriate communication at the correct and appropriate time/place; and*
- *A good way to present your argument is to start a sentence with 'I understand what you are saying, but....'!!!.*

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 employers except that they were considered more important than people skills by the students while the employers 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 work experience, took a broader view:

- *Money is important, but not the world. Work to live, don't live to work!! This was really important in my decision to return to uni for another 6 years!!<sup>17</sup>; and*

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<sup>17</sup> This student went on to another university after graduating from UNE to start another degree in pursuit of her dream career.

- *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; lifeskills; professionalism; integrity; responsibility; and general personal development.

The students were also asked a specific question about how they thought they had developed personally and professionally as a result of their part-time work. All (n=17) but one student (who did not answer the question) said they believed they had grown personally as a result of their part-time work, both paid and voluntary and gave 21 examples of that growth related to maturity, interpersonal skills and confidence. Nine examples of increased maturity were given including:

- *Am able to better engage and adapt knowledge to unfamiliar situations;*
- *I've become a much more patient person and am willing to listen and take on board the ideas and opinions of other people, before I try and get my point across; and*
- *Personally I feel I have a greater understanding of the struggles that some people have in life. I have gained appreciation for the family, opportunities and life I have been given.*

Improved interpersonal skills, particularly in relation to better communication and leadership skills were cited by eight students. For example:

- *Communication skills have enhanced exponentially.*

Increased confidence was cited by four students, including:

- *Confidence and self-esteem has been boosted.*

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).

All students also thought they had grown professionally, apart from the one who did not answer this question, giving ten examples of improved work-related skills and six examples of a better understanding of the work environment. In addition to the previously cited interpersonal and team skills, time management and organisational skills, students said:

- *The ability to problem solve and think analytically; and*
- *I have developed more serious and professional attitudes as well as better networking skills.*

The six students who believed they had developed a better understanding of the work environment said things like:

- *Better understanding of hands- on work;*
- *Learning through practical experience; and*
- *Understanding of what I'm learning at uni and how it is practised in reality.*

It is interesting to note the inverse emphasis placed on interpersonal skills and work skills by employers and students. The employers 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 et al. 1994; Maiden & Kerr 2006; Watts 2006, 7). On the other hand, the students rated work skills more highly than interpersonal skills and

personal qualities. Again, a possible explanation is that they mistakenly believe that they are the most important pre-requisites for graduate employment. 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).

These results are a positive outcome for the core idea that NEA eligible activities support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy, which in general is about preparedness for work, through developing work-related skills and also the related emergent idea that they enhance desirable personal qualities. The individual UNE Graduate Attributes are dealt with below (page 3.30).

## **Employability**

When the employers (n= 23) were asked in what ways they thought that part-time work enhanced students' employability they gave many more examples of improved people and life skills and personal qualities (40) than better work skills (26). People/life skills included:

- *Able to give specific real examples in an interview situation of 'soft' skills like interpersonal skills;*
- *Demonstrates life skills; and*
- *People skills. (When this student started was quite reticent and withdrawn, possibly shy. He became much more relaxed and his interpersonal skills improved greatly).*

Personal qualities included initiative, independence and being a more rounded person.

Examples of such responses are:

- *It demonstrates that the person can take responsibility in a job or work situation and work independently;*
- *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 (from the manager of a charitable organisation).*

Several employers also offered the opinion that work experience sets graduates apart from others without it 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;*
- *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. Employers also like to see people as individuals and this helps by illustrating the student's extra-curricular activity while at uni and what they learned through it. It is an extra string to the student's bow; and*
- *Runs on the board.*

With work skills there was less emphasis by employers on actual skills than an understanding of the workplace in general and the effort involved in gaining the workplace experience. About understanding the workplace sample responses were:

- *The experience of work in general and in particular fields is valuable;*
- *At interview it is immediately apparent that they understand the work environment; and*
- *Having had the benefit of experiencing the real world of work they are more likely to stay (important to professional firm in country town).*

About making the effort to gain the experience, employers said things like:

- *It gives future employers knowledge of 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, job responsibility; and*
- *Allows them to speak about experience rather than theorise.*

Particular work skills gained through work experience, thereby enhancing employability according to employers, were:

- *Interacting with clients;*
- *Customer relations; and*
- *Understanding role of staffing in organisational/administrative processes.*

Two employers expressed a preference for young people trained in work skills by the fast food chain McDonalds:

- *Job experience is critical - most employers would want young people with experience like McDonalds Restaurants and willing to work (real estate agent); and*
- *The best trainers are other staff eg young people trained at Maccas' make good staff in other areas (such as retail) because they have a well developed work ethic and work skills. (This interviewee is the proprietor of a women's clothing store in a country town. He is clearly a great admirer of McDonalds Restaurants as a staff trainer saying that 80% of top CEOs in US have worked for 'Maccas' at some stage<sup>18</sup>).*

There was also a response about how the work experience can assist in an individual's decision making:

- *Increases a student's understanding of work skills and situations to aid in future decision-making about career choices. He/she is therefore better able to assess the fit of work opportunities to his/her experience.*

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<sup>18</sup> This has not been verified by the researcher; it is believed to be fact by the interviewee and used by him to support an opinion.

When the students were asked about how they thought work experience might have enhanced their employability they again placed much greater emphasis on improved work skills with twice as many responses elaborating on the value of work skills for increasing their employability than people and life skills and enhanced personal qualities. They listed customer service skills, teamwork skills, organisation skills, communication skills, leadership ability, problem solving and analytical skills. A typical comment was:

- *YES!!! Gaining experience makes me more employable, and gives me a competitive edge over those who don't have any experience.*

Students who said improved people and life skills and enhanced personal qualities would increase their employability listed versatility, work ethic, adaptability and confidence. One said:

- *I feel every university student should engage in work, not only to motivate study, but it better prepares for a lifetime in the workplace. I have had part-time jobs since I was 15 and I feel these experiences have shaped who I am today by enlightening me about hard work, making a living and starting at the bottom brings you back to reality in a cushy environment such as a university college.*

One student showed an awareness of a negative view held by some employers about university students:

- *Showing initiative beyond studies. Simply by 'staying in touch' with working while studying. There appears to be a stigma attached to 'uni students'. I was determined to prove against the negative stereotype.*

This student was not employed by either of the employers quoted above who expressed a reluctance to employ a student or graduate because of academic results alone.

Again, students and employers placed different emphasis on the value of personal attributes and work skills in terms of employability. This finding that employers place a much higher value on personal skills such as initiative, independence, responsibility and strength of character when they are assessing employability is further vindication of the trend in the graduate attributes literature towards personal qualities and supports the emergent related idea that NEA eligible activities enhance their growth.

## Graduate attributes

The study indicated that work experience provides a good opportunity for students to develop specific graduate attributes. The students (n=17) were asked which of the UNE Graduate Attributes they believed they had developed through their part-time work experience. Together they listed 42 different part-time paid jobs or voluntary work that they had been engaged in. There were several jobs listed in this section that were not the subject of NEA points applications meaning that the students nonetheless believed that they were effective training in some or all of the graduate attributes. Examples were volunteering for St Vincent de Paul, working as a security officer, being a tax help volunteer with a student organisation, bar attendant, Lifeline telephone counsellor, babysitting, radio announcing and working in a pharmacy. These jobs would have been carried out by the respondents before the advent of the NEA but are nevertheless good examples of the broad range of part-time employment and volunteer work that students do. They all represent an enormous, usually unacknowledged and mostly unharnessed, opportunity for personal and professional development.

The students indicated which of the UNE Graduate Attributes they believed had been enhanced through each of the jobs they listed. The seven UNE Graduate Attributes received 211 scores which were distributed as summarised in Table 3.5 below.

Table 3.5: UNE Graduate Attributes developed in 42 different jobs as scored (n=211) by students

Communi- cation skills	Problem solving	Teamwork	Social respons- ibility	Life-long learning	Inform- ation literacy	Global perspective
38	36	35	34	26	22	20

Communication skills was the most frequently cited with problem solving, teamwork and social responsibility following closely behind. According to the students these attributes were enhanced by carrying out jobs as diverse as working in a pizza outlet and being a clerk in a law firm. Life-long learning was not cited as frequently. Information literacy rated lower than the other skills and attributes and second lowest of all, followed by social responsibility, the lowest scorer.

These results were a mixed outcome for the core idea that the NEA would support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy. That life-long learning was not cited frequently may be the result of a lack of understanding of what life-long learning is. If students are acknowledging and reflecting upon the fact that their work experience has enhanced their communication skills, teamwork skills and social responsibility then in actual fact they are engaging in a life-long learning process. Also, the score for information literacy may be misleading given that there are now very few areas in which some knowledge of information literacy is not required and given the high levels of information literacy possessed by the current student cohort, particularly the students that are the subject of this study -largely recent secondary school leavers, rather than mature age students- it is highly likely that opportunities for the enhancement of information literacy skills were taken for granted as normal and therefore overlooked by this group.

It is not surprising that global perspective was the lowest scorer because it is far less likely that it is developed in many of the unskilled positions listed. Also, people have different understandings of concepts like global perspective. For example, the abattoir worker did not list global perspective but his supervisor did as described below (page 3.33).

The employers were asked in their interview (described in the *Linking Paper*, page 48) 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. Their answers are summarised in Table 3.6 below.

Table 3.6: UNE Graduate Attributes believed by employers (n=23) to be developed through work experience

	Communi- cation skills	Problem solving	Team work	Social respon- sibility	Life-long learning	Information literacy	Global Perspect- ive
Strongly agree	23	21	21	18	16	13	3
Agree	0	2	2	5	7	7	16
Disagree	0	0	0	0	0	3	4
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Interestingly, the order of importance of the UNE Graduate Attributes as rated by the employers (n=23) 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 employers but second and third respectively by students), social responsibility, life-long learning, information literacy and global perspective. All employers interviewed were unanimous about the value of communication skills, all strongly agreeing that they are important in a prospective employee. In relation to problem solving, the vast majority (21) of employers interviewed said that they strongly agreed that it was important. One, the real estate agent, said that his business is about problem solving; another, the manager of a community organisation that takes on volunteers to assist with the care of children with life-threatening illnesses, said that problem solving played an important part in working with seriously ill, often over-indulged children. Just two simply agreed that problem solving was important. Similarly, the majority (21) also strongly agreed about the importance of teamwork skills in prospective employees. Again, just two simply agreed. The majority (18) also strongly agreed about the importance of social responsibility. The principal of the law firm was one of those, saying:

- *We all have a duty in this regard but it is essential in a lawyer.*

Similarly the real estate agent stressed that all people should be treated fairly and the farmer said that respect for people is crucial. The remaining five just agreed that social responsibility was important. Again, the majority (15) strongly agreed that life-long



learning skills were important in prospective employees. One, a principal of a law firm, said that life-long learning was essential in law; another, the proprietor of a women's clothing store said:

- *The day you stop learning is the day you stop (get left behind).*

The abattoir manager said,

- *You must stay ahead of the game or lose it!*

The remainder (7) just agreed that lifelong learning skills were important in prospective employees. One of those commented that he was not certain if

- *life-long learning ability was on students' radar,*

which is consistent with my observation above. The majority (13) also strongly agreed that information literacy was important. One of these, an accommodation manager, stressed the value of being able to do web searches and generate reports from databases; another, a real estate agent, commented on the rapidly growing importance of information literacy. Those that disagreed were the supervisors of students carrying out volunteer work with an arts organisation and a charity, and also the manager of a girls' clothing store franchise.

There was less agreement about global perspective. Just three strongly agreed in its importance; sixteen just agreed that it is important; four disagreed; none strongly disagreed. Of the three that strongly agreed, one was the manager of an abattoir which exports to 75 countries and another was an employer that hosts visitors from around the world. The other was a national food franchise. One that just agreed was the manager of the boarding house of a private girls' school that has international students and understands the need for an understanding of cross-cultural issues. Those that disagreed were the charity representative, and surprisingly, the proprietor of the women's clothing store who was a great admirer of McDonalds Restaurants' staff training regimes and the farmer.

When asked what additional skills and attributes they had developed through their work experience 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 5 years, a few that have changed the person that I am.*

Additional work-related skills given were: work competence, work responsibility, safety issues and procedures, customer service skills, organisational skills, job specific skills and:

- *Time management skills - juggling uni with work with social and family life is very demanding.*

Again, this is a mixed outcome for the core idea that the NEA would support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy by recognising skills development through activities like part-time work. Clearly valuable skills and attributes are developed but the employers' focus differed somewhat from that of the UNE Policy. The employers rated the UNE

Graduate Attributes in the same order of importance as the students did, as described above. However, that there was so great a variation between the most frequently mentioned attribute, communication skills, and the least frequently mentioned one, global perspective, by both groups, is a clear indication that the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy is unbalanced and that a list of narrowly defined skills and attributes is not easily evenly applied to real life situations. This supported my view about the need for revision of the UNE Graduate Attribute Policy.

The personal attributes gained through work experience by the students such as leadership ability, becoming self reliant, self-confidence, feelings of worth, empathy, compassion, honesty and integrity are a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA supports the development of desirable personal qualities through this example of a Category 2 activity.

## Summary

In addition to income, students took on paid part-time work for the work experience and the development of work-related skills. However, the students also demonstrated that they were interested in personal development. This was the case for why students participated in voluntary work as well. These results were positive outcomes for the emergent related idea that the NEA supported the development of desirable personal qualities as well as skills. Additionally, the finding that students sought to enhance their work-related skills and consequently their employability is an indirectly positive outcome for the core idea that participation in NEA eligible activities would support the UNE Graduate Attribute Policy because an underlying objective of the graduate attribute movement is to enhance the employability of graduates (see *Literature Review*, from page 8).

The majority of the group involved in voluntary work were not influenced by the availability of NEA points in their decision to become volunteers. This is negative outcome for the core idea that the NEA would encourage students to participate in NEA-eligible extra-curricular activity. The NEA did however have the effect of positively influencing the way students viewed the value of participating in part-time work, especially voluntary work, and increased their satisfaction so overall it was a

mixed outcome. Similarly, that the students were evenly divided about whether they had noticed that the NEA encouraged more students to get involved is a mixed outcome.

Students believed the most important benefits of work experience were work skills followed by people skills but their employers placed more value on people skills and personal qualities such as confidence, responsibility and commitment. These views were repeated in each group's views about employability: the students thought it was about possession of work skills and the employers saw it as a product of good people and interpersonal skills. Despite the inverse emphasis placed by students and employers on work skills and people skills, these outcomes were positive ones for the core idea that the NEA, by recognising work experience, would support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy, which in general is about preparedness for work and also the emergent related idea that it enhances desirable personal qualities. The views of the employers were also consistent with the recent trend towards incorporating personal qualities, attributes and attitudes in graduate attribute policies as discussed in the *Literature Review* (from page 17).

In relation to the UNE Graduate Attributes, all were practised but to varying extents. This was a mixed outcome in relation to the core idea that the NEA would support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy, by recognising student development through extra-curricular activity, in this case, work experience. Another result was that the rate at which the UNE Graduate Attributes were practised or enhanced through work experience according to the students and the importance that employers placed on each of them were the same. That is, the most frequently practised skills were also the ones most sought by employers in potential employees. The least frequently practised ones were the least sought by employers.

## 3.3 NEA Category 3

### Peer Mentoring

Australian university campuses have long provided opportunities for students to become involved in their university communities through voluntary participation in a range of activities including peer support programs.

Student mentoring carried out by peer mentors is becoming increasingly popular in higher education for two main reasons. Firstly, it is resource effective. In the current era of increasing class sizes and little hope of increased budgets to improve staffing ratios, it makes good sense to view the student body as a resource (Topping, Watson, Jarvis, & Hill 1996, 341). Secondly, advice and guidance from a peer is often more meaningful and therefore more effective than when it is given by a superior (Cheah & Christie 1996; Fowler 2004, 18; Jacobi 1991, 505; Kelly 2000; Sutherland, Ingleton, Cowie, & Marshall 1996; Worthington, Hansen, Nightingale, & Vine 1997; Zeegers & Martin 1999). Usually the incentives offered to senior students to act as peer mentors are the chance to increase and practise their own skills base and the personal satisfaction derived from helping others. Another form of incentive is to offer official recognition of the activity. This is becoming increasingly relevant as students become more pragmatic about how they spend their time, as suggested above (page 3.2).

### The tUNE-in Program

Participation in the tUNE-in Peer Support Program at UNE is eligible for NEA points, for both completion of the training and demonstrated success as a peer supporter. The Program links senior students with internal students who do not reside on campus to assist them with transition issues in their first year. It seeks to redress the imbalance between the support historically provided by the residential system to live-in students and the perceived lack of support for the growing number of students living in the nearby town of Armidale, known as 'townies'. The peer supporters are recruited with the assistance of academic staff, trained in communication skills, interpersonal skills, problem solving and referral techniques, and then linked with beginning townie students enrolled in the same or similar degrees on the first day of their orientation period. They attend a number of orientation functions together and then the supporters are required to meet with their allotted mentees throughout first semester. The main objective of the

program is to provide a safety net for the first year townies and to assist them to settle into study and university life.

This study was an investigation of the benefits that students derive from being peer supporters. It addressed Research Question 3.3 and its sub-questions set out in Table 3.7 below.

Table 3.7 : Research Question 3.3 and sub-questions

3.3	What do students gain from participation in community activities such as Peer Mentoring?	3.3.a	Why do students participate in community activities such as peer mentoring?
		3.3.b	What do students gain through participation in community activities such as peer mentoring?

In 2005 the 35 senior students who had volunteered to become peer supporters were surveyed (Survey 9, described in the *Linking Paper, page 48*) about their experience with twenty surveys returned, a return rate of 57%.

### 3.3a Why do students participate in community activities such as peer mentoring?

The overwhelming reason given for becoming a peer supporter was the desire to help. This is consistent with findings in the mentoring literature (Jacobi 1991, 512). Eighteen respondents (n=20) said they had wanted to help a townie first year student. For example:

- *I wanted to help first year students settle into university life. I also thought that it was important for students to have someone that they can go to for advice on services offered by the university and so on.*

Of these eight referred to their belief that their own first year at university might have been easier if they had been mentored. For example:

- *I wanted to be able to help new students as I knew how hard it was for me when I started out; and*
- *Because initially uni was very lonely and confusing and I wanted to help others past this stage.*

Five of the respondents had been mentored or participated in a peer support program in their own first year. Two of these spoke of their positive experiences:

- *I was allocated a supporter in my first year. This was very useful and we built an effective relationship; and*
- *I decided to become a peer supporter because I felt that it assisted me in settling in to university life when I had one in my first year.*

One had had a negative experience of mentoring and clearly felt inspired to do a better job:

- *I had one ... and they didn't help! I wanted to be a good mentor.*

One peer supporter felt that she was already doing the job so felt motivated to do it on a more formal basis:

- *I was already harbouring one 'lost duckling' under my wing on an informal basis.*

Other reasons given for becoming a peer supporter, sometimes in addition to wanting to help, were to meet people (2); to get more involved (1); to give something back to the university (1); and to develop skills and personal attributes (5) such as mentoring skills, communication skills, confidence levels and leadership skills. For example:

- *I thought it was a good opportunity to expand my learning and to put into practice my learning in the Vice-Chancellor's Leadership Program.*

Three said they were doing it for the NEA points.

Of the 20 respondents to the survey targeting tUNE-in Peer Supporters, 14/20 were registered for the NEA. Eight of these said that the availability of NEA points was a factor in deciding to be a tUNE-in peer supporter. This group was asked if there had been any unexpected benefits from the experience of being a peer supporter in addition to the NEA points. All but one replied positively with the additional benefits being related to skills development, personal development, personal satisfaction and enjoyment. The skills described were personal skills such as communication skills and mentoring skills with one peer supporter saying that she felt that she had also been mentored herself by the university staff involved in the program. The personal development appeared to be about developing patience and empathy. For example:

- *Mainly the patience I learned regarding new and inexperienced people. Often it can be all too easy to ignore people who need help. The more people are willing to help others assimilate into new environments, the more effective and efficient that assimilation will be.*

An Education student said:

- *The skills I have developed are very valuable to me as a future teacher.*

In relation to the satisfaction gained and enjoyment of the experience, typical answers were:

- *Benefits included the knowledge that I had helped students settle into university life; and*
- *Personal satisfaction of helping others. Had prior experience of the feelings that occur when in a new setting. Enjoyed assisting mentees settle in and to enjoy university life just as much as I do.*

One said she enjoyed getting to know the other peer supporters.

That the majority of the respondents became involved as peer supporters out of a desire to help others demonstrates that students possess altruistic qualities and actively seek opportunities to utilise these qualities. This is a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA supports and recognises the development of desirable personal qualities. That 8/20 of students said they were motivated by NEA points to become peer supporters is a mixed outcome for the core idea that the NEA would promote participation in extra-curricular activity, particularly given that all eight also said when first asked why they became a peer supporter that they were motivated mainly by the desire to help others, with just three saying that NEA points were a factor. However, the availability of NEA points might have acted as an impetus for these three. On the other hand, a complete lack of a desire to help others in a person motivated only by the prospect of recognition would not be a positive outcome for the peer support program itself. Nor would this type of purely self-motivated behaviour be a positive outcome for the NEA.



### 3.3b What do students gain through participation in community activities such as peer mentoring?

When the tUNE-in Peer Supporters (n=20) were asked what they liked best about being a peer supporter or mentor the majority (17) said that they liked being able to help others. Typical responses were:

- *Being able to be helpful to other people;*
- *To make the transition into university life and all that it entailed easier and more fun overall;*
- *Knowing that I have assisted in helping students settle into university life;*
- *Having them come to me for information and advice; and*
- *I enjoyed introducing 'newies' to UNE.*

The second most enjoyable aspect of being a peer supporter, cited by eleven of the respondents, was making new friends through the program. For example:

- *Getting to know the students and watching them thrive at university; and*
- *Meeting new people, knowing someone benefited from my actions, interacting with a different group of people.*

The opportunity to learn new skills was the third most enjoyable aspect of being a peer supporter, cited by ten of the respondents. For example:

- *Learning new skills from training as a peer supporter;*
- *Learning different skills when dealing with others; and*
- *The training will be useful in other areas of my career as a teacher.*

Just one person said that he liked being recognised for his efforts by the NEA. This person had already indicated that the NEA was one of the motivations to take on the role of peer supporter.

The tUNE-in Peer Supporters were asked what they gained personally from participation in the tUNE-in Program. The most frequently cited gain, from thirteen of the respondents, was new skills with the majority of these about mentoring skills. Interest in improving their ability to empathise with others was clearly articulated. For example:

- *What to do in situations not just with mentees but with friends (e.g. emergencies, depression, etc.);*
- *I gained an understanding of how to look after new freshers and to be able to effectively help them in their problems, and grow in my ability to help with new problems that kept arising; and*
- *Experience in how programs like tUNE-in work, being aware of difficulties and challenges in the program and knowing/learning how to be a responsible 'leader' and an example for others.*

Other skills learned were communication skills cited by four respondents and referral skills cited by two respondents. There were also two comments on the general usefulness of the training; one positive comment about the personal learning styles component of the training; and another comment about improved time management skills.

Seven respondents said they gained personal satisfaction from being peer supporters, particularly through being able to help others. For example:

- *Personally gained from the program through the knowledge that I was able to assist students in settling into university life;*
- *I was able to make life easier for a lot of the new students. I took a lot of pride and joy from this; and*
- *A sense of achievement.*

Four of these coupled personal satisfaction with increased confidence. Two respondents added that the friendships they made were significant personal gains from being peer supporters.

In his NEA journal, a student wrote the following about what he gained personally from being a peer supporter:

One has to remember to be tolerant of new and inexperienced people, as we've all been in that situation at some stage. In later life I will be sure to be mindful of this as a result of participating in the program. Having a guiding hand makes for an easier, quicker and much more effective transition between environments. For the guider, or mentor, providing the guiding hand is also a rewarding experience. I take a lot of satisfaction out of helping other people, and this program has allowed me to do this to a greater extent (Male student 2005).

The tUNE-in Peer Supporters (n=20) were asked how they thought the experience of being a peer supporter might benefit them in the future. There were 11 responses about enhanced personal skills with four placing emphasis on the ability to empathise with others. For example:

- *Understand again how it feels to be on own and how to cope with surroundings; and*
- *It will help me exert myself in situations where I may have not contributed. It enables me to communicate with and understand others.*

The latter comment also indicated increased self awareness. Two students said that they had gained leadership skills that would be useful in the future:

- *It has given me an awareness of my responsibilities as an adult and perhaps as a person of an authority in even the simplest ethical situations, like knowing that I can and must set a good example for others; and*
- *This experience ... will be able to help me when I am in similar circumstances to take up the role of leader and do what I can to help others in my organisation or the like.*

Other feedback about the usefulness in the future of the experience of being a peer supporter related to improved communication skills. For example:

- *It will give me more confidence in my communication skills and in my participation with groups of people, especially those who have similar goals as mine;*

and being better prepared for the future. For example:

- *I feel I will be better rounded as a person; and*
- *Skills for life's challenges.*

An education student said that she felt that the experience had given her more skills for teaching and insight into responding to children. Other skills for the future developed through being a peer supporter were self-management, leadership, problem solving, teamwork and of course, mentoring skills.

The desire to be involved in the university community; to get to know other community members; to assist newcomers to join in and flourish; to contribute to the positive experiences of others; and to gain personal satisfaction and a sense of achievement from doing so, shows a commitment to the students' community of learning which is indicative of student engagement, as discussed in the *Literature Review*, page 25. The desire to be more involved and to seek fulfilling experiences is also indicative of the growth of a range of personal attributes, attitudes and personal qualities. Furthermore, when the peer supporters were asked specifically about what skills and attributes they believed they had developed through acting as peer supporters, the large majority opted for personal skills and qualities such as increased confidence, diplomacy, tolerance, patience, leadership, self awareness, sensitivity, energy and enthusiasm. There were six specific skills listed in answer to these questions: communication skills, problem solving, life-long learning, team skills, listening skills and negotiating skills.

The key benefits for the future derived from being a peer supporter were related to skills development, specifically empathy, self awareness, leadership skills, communications skills, self-management and mentoring skills.

This was a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA had the capacity to support the development of desirable personal qualities and my view that the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy is not broad enough because it does not encompass these qualities. It was also a positive outcome for the emergent related idea that extra-curricular activity, and by association, the NEA, encourages student engagement.

### **Graduate Attributes**

The peer supporters were asked in Survey 9 (described in the Linking Paper, page 48) which of the UNE Graduate Attributes they believed had been developed or enhanced as a result of being a peer supporter. The results (see Table 3. 8 below) in descending order of frequency were communications skills (cited by eighteen); teamwork skills (12); social responsibility (11); problem solving (10); life-long learning skills (9); information literacy skills (5); and global perspective (1). Clearly the role of peer supporter enables the development/enhancement of communication skills particularly well; of teamwork, social responsibility, problem solving and life-long learning reasonably well; and of information literacy and global perspective not well at all, especially the latter.

Table 3.8: UNE Graduate Attributes developed through being a peer supporter (n=20)

Communi- cation skills	Team work	Social responsibility	Problem solving	Lifelong learning	Information literacy	Global perspective
18	12	11	10	9	5	1

This is a mixed outcome for the core idea that extra-curricular activity has the potential to develop the UNE Graduate Attributes, although for some of those attributes, like communication skills, it was a positive outcome. It is also positive outcome for the emergent related idea that the UNE Graduate Attribute list is too narrowly defined and is in need of revision to enable it to be more applicable to a wide range of skills development opportunities. For example, the experience of peer mentoring is clearly a valuable one in terms of developing some of the UNE Graduate Attributes, some such as communication skills to a high degree, and many valuable personal qualities. However, it is not an ideal vehicle for the development of a global perspective.

## Summary

The students became involved as peer supporters for altruistic reasons. This is a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA supports and recognises the development of desirable personal qualities. That less than half of the students said they were motivated by the availability of NEA points to become peer supporters is a mixed outcome for the core idea that the NEA would promote participation in extra-curricular activity, particularly given that all of these students also said when first asked why they became a peer supporter that they were motivated mainly by the desire to help others.

However, the desire to be involved in the university community demonstrates engagement with that community. This aspect of student participation in the peer support program is a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA, through recognising such participation, encourages engagement and related student satisfaction as discussed in the *Literature Review* (page 25).

The desire to be more involved and to seek fulfilling experiences is also indicative of the growth of a range of personal attributes, attitudes and human qualities. According to the students it was enhanced personal attributes that were the most important benefits of

being peer supporters. This was a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA might also support the development of desirable personal qualities.

Additionally, most of the UNE Graduate Attributes were enhanced by more than half of the respondents. This was a mixed outcome for the core idea that the NEA would support the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy. However, combined with the outcome about the development of other attributes such as desirable personal qualities, it was a positive outcome for my view that the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy would benefit from revision to make it more inclusive of a range of skills and attributes and more easily applied across a range of activities and learning opportunities.

## Column 3 Conclusion

A comparison between the outcomes described in this column with the core ideas, or assumptions, underlying the NEA - that participation in extra-curricular activities assists in the development of the UNE Graduate Attributes and that the NEA had the potential to promote participation in extra-curricular activity – showed mixed results overall. The UNE Graduate Attributes were developed through participation in each of the three selected activity types but to varying degrees. Some, such as communication skills, teamwork and problem-solving were enhanced far more successfully than others, particularly global perspective and information literacy.

The availability of NEA points influenced half of the VCSL group, a third of the group doing voluntary work, and less than half of the peer supporters. However, the majority of these students were already active in extra-curricular activity and had other reasons for their participation so it appeared that the NEA acted simply as an additional incentive to these students. Very few non-active students were attracted to these particular examples of extra-curricular activity by the prospect of NEA points alone so this was a negative outcome for the core NEA idea that it would promote participation in extra-curricular activity.

However, these outcomes were positive results in terms of two related ideas or considerations that emerged during the study. Firstly, participation in extra-curricular activity does appear to enhance the development of the kinds of desirable personal qualities that are being increasingly touted in the graduate attribute literature. Not only that, the majority of the students demonstrated possession of, and in many cases, knowledge of the importance of these types of attributes by giving reasons such as the pursuit of personal skills, life skills and altruism for their involvement in NEA eligible activities such as the peer support program, voluntary work and the leadership course. So the related emergent idea that the NEA had the potential to encourage and support the development of desirable personal qualities, discussed in the *Literature Review* (page 17), was found to be true.

Secondly, the results showed that students derived feelings of engagement with the university community through activities like the leadership course and being peer mentors and with other communities through their voluntary work. They also felt satisfied by the recognition of their efforts and achievements in these activities by the

university through the NEA. This is a positive outcome for the related emergent idea that the NEA might result in more engaged and therefore satisfied students, as discussed in the *Literature Review* (page 25). This is also a positive outcome for UNE because of the known links between engagement and student satisfaction with retention, as discussed in *Column 2* (page 2.11).

My view that the UNE Graduate Attribute Policy would benefit from revision to make it more relevant to students and employers of graduates and more reflective of the opportunities that existed at UNE for student development was well supported by the outcomes described in this column. Graduate attribute policies that consist of narrowly defined, discrete skills and attributes, like UNE's, are not easily applied to all student learning and development opportunities. Nor are they all relevant to all students. For example, information literacy is developed in specialised situations. Also, in its most basic form, it is an anachronism to increasing numbers of students. Similarly, global responsibility is developed only in certain contexts. In addition, employers place very different values on the individual UNE Graduate Attributes indicating that they do not really need to be valued equally by UNE and expected to be equally embedded or demonstrated in student activities, an expectation which is unrealistic anyway as already discussed. These findings strengthened my resolve to recommend to the Vice-Chancellor that a revision of the UNE Graduate Attributes Policy was timely.