



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Volunteering Australia
Submitting as a: Peak body
State: ACT

Summary

As the national peak body for volunteering in Australia, Volunteering Australia has outlined ways in which volunteering can improve educational outcomes for young people, and why it should be embedded in the Australian Curriculum.

Research demonstrates that a significant proportion of young people are volunteering, evidencing the value of further investment. Volunteering Australia highlights the need for additional resourcing for both schools and Volunteer Involving Organisations with the information, tools and training to understand how to create and manage structured volunteering programs for young people. In addition, there would be great benefit from the implementation of Volunteering and the Australian Curriculum in Australian schools.

Main submission

Introduction

Volunteering Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools.

Volunteerism continues to engage Australians in increasingly diverse ways. It is at the centre of Australia's national identity, with 5.8 million Australians or 31 per cent of the population engaging in volunteering, making an estimated annual economic and social contribution of \$290 billion.

Volunteering is critical to the delivery of the Australian Government's priorities of building strong and resilient communities, by encouraging economic participation, mitigating isolation and loneliness, and increasing social inclusion, community resilience, participation and social cohesion.

Volunteering doesn't just represent one sector or organisation, with volunteering extending to many areas across society, including the arts, education, emergency services, sports, environment, health, aged care and disability, community welfare

and other vital community programs. Volunteering is incredibly diverse, and Australian society is increasingly dependent on volunteering activities and programs.

As the national peak body for volunteering in Australia, Volunteering Australia has outlined ways in which volunteering can improve educational outcomes for young people, and why it should be embedded in the Australian Curriculum.

Demographic Overview: Youth Volunteering

According to the 2016 Census, 3.6 million people or 19 per cent of the population aged 15 years and over are engaged in voluntary work through an organisation or group. This is a 1.2 per cent increase from the 2011 Census results, where 17.8 per cent of people responded they were engaged in voluntary work.

There were 130,292 males and 155,255 females, engaged in voluntary work through an organisation or group. Overall, 285,547 people aged between 15-19 were engaged in voluntary work.

The largest proportion of volunteers aged 15-19 were found in NSW at 88,039, followed by Victoria at 70,480, and then Queensland at 58,121. The data also indicates that majority of the people volunteering between the ages of 15 and 19 had completed at least Year 9 or equivalent studies, or higher.

Mission Australia's 2016 Youth Survey has highlighted some interesting findings in relation to volunteering rates for youth, with females more likely to have participated in volunteering. This is at 59.1 per cent compared to 47.4 per cent for males. Over half of respondents (53.3 per cent) indicated they had engaged in volunteering out of school hours. The findings of the report indicated that volunteer work was the third most popular response, after playing sport as a participant, and watching sport as a spectator.

Mission Australia's 2016 Concept of Community Report surveyed 21,049 young people aged between 15-19 years. The report recommends a broad range of "social, cultural and volunteering and mentoring activities at school or within the(ir) local communities", to overcome young people's barriers to participation. The report also identifies place-based approaches to intervention, to improve community safety, participation and engagement within low socio-economic status (SES) communities.

Mission Australia has also released a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Report that highlights 49 per cent of females and 41 per cent of males indicated that they engaged in voluntary work. These figures represent just under half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth respondents had participated in volunteer work (45 per cent). This compares with 51.8 per cent of young people from a Non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, who stated they had engaged in some form of volunteer work.

Volunteering and the Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum is designed to help all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Following on from its 2013 research, Volunteering ACT partnered with Volunteering Australia to undertake a project to align volunteering with the Australian Curriculum.

The project produced resources for teachers for core subjects taught in years Foundation to Year 10. The resources were designed by teachers, for teachers, and show how principles and practices in volunteering can be embedded into everyday classroom activity. These resources are available for download from the Volunteering Australia website.

These findings are supported by Associate Professor of the University of Canberra Dr Thomas Nielsen, who stated that, “Of all the strategies I have observed in the implementation of values education, the single most transformational strategy is when students are allowed opportunities to be something for others – to give. Giving to others makes for meaningful happiness, which is higher and more stable than pleasurable happiness (for example, eating ice creams or playing video games). Worldwide, there is now a body of evidence showing that service to others is a strong predictor of increased mental and physical health into adulthood and reduced adolescent depression and suicide risk.”

Case Study: ACT Research Findings

In 2013, Volunteering ACT (now Volunteering and Contact ACT), published a research report entitled, ‘Promoting youth engagement and wellbeing through student volunteer programs in ACT schools’. The purpose of the project was to foster an understanding of the value of structured volunteering programs in ACT schools. The target group for the research was students aged 15-18 attending school in the ACT.

The report found that 26.5 per cent of young people aged 15-18 were actively engaged in volunteer activities of all types. Further, 97 per cent of students noted they were engaged in informal volunteering activities. The report noted that students identified they would continue to volunteer into their adult lives on the proviso that their first experience of volunteering was positive. This demonstrates a strong need to foster a culture of giving at a young age by investing in effective and meaningful volunteering experiences for young people. However, the majority of schools surveyed did not offer structured volunteering programs to students, despite 76 per cent being interested in doing so. Resourcing was the biggest barrier to the establishment and maintenance of a structured volunteering program for young people.

The report sought to understand the benefits of volunteering for young people. The top three benefits were, “enhanced feelings of personal worth and contribution, refinement of values, and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.” While all

students benefitted from participation in volunteering, these benefits were pronounced for vulnerable and/or disengaged young people. For disengaged youth the report found that, “the development of a sense that they are good at something and can contribute leads to success and better engagement.” However, the report noted that it was often disengaged young people “who were least given access to the programs in the school setting.” Reluctance on the part of organisations to take on young people as volunteers had an additional impact on volunteering rates for students.

What should educational success look like?

Volunteering Australia emphasises that volunteering can provide a lucrative pathway toward educational success, and a means to prepare for employment.

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that there is only 1 job available for every 10 people looking for paid work. Mission Australia’s Youth Survey highlighted that a lack of jobs in remote locations contributed to disengagement for many young people. In addition, those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be disengaged from education, training and future employment.

As a result of volunteering, there is also increased engagement and participation in society, particularly from vulnerable or at-risk groups, such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or people with disability.

Volunteering can be particularly useful for many vulnerable groups, providing:

- a chance to establish new friendship circles for people who have recently moved to a new area.
- professional development opportunities for those looking to enhance their skills or to apply their skills to a role, or
- a chance to give back to the community.
- an opportunity for people with barriers who may be precluded from certain activities to become more engaged with the community.
- additional linkages for older Australians and people with mental health issues to engage with their local community, thereby reducing isolation.

The social capital derived from volunteer engagement is also of profound benefit to both volunteers and the wider community. Volunteers can play a uniquely important role in assisting people they engage with to develop meaningful relationships, and in reducing social isolation. The community resilience resulting from volunteering is enormous, and will be an essential component of a national strategy.

Organisations who engage volunteers have stated that there is a difference between the outcomes achieved by paid staff and their volunteers, with volunteers providing

an extra social connection, community participation, genuine relationships and the value of lived experiences.

Volunteering can be an effective way to engage in society, act as a pathway back to gainful employment, encourage economic participation, build work skills, and keep people healthy and active. Volunteering Australia's *State of Volunteering in Australia 2016* report identified that there needs to be more recognition of the "economic impact of the contribution of volunteering".

Volunteering Australia recognises the benefits of volunteering for people from low socio-economic backgrounds, with increased engagement and participation in society. Volunteers gain valuable skills and develop personally and professionally from their involvement in volunteering activities, with research indicating that those who volunteer are happier and healthier individuals.

Recent studies have indicated that 96 per cent of volunteers say that engaging in volunteering "makes people happier", while 95 per cent of volunteers say that volunteering is related to feelings of wellbeing. Only a few hours of volunteer work has an impact on an individual's happiness and mood, and sustained volunteering is associated with better mental health.

In addition, the experience of helping others provides meaning, a sense of self-worth, a social role and health enhancement. Volunteers have also identified personal benefits from their involvement in volunteering activities including, "improved wellbeing and a community connection, and (they) believe they have made a notable contribution to common good."

Barriers to volunteering

The biggest barrier to volunteering noted by young people was after school commitments. Students suggested that they wanted their school to facilitate volunteer opportunities for them. Awareness of opportunities and initial engagement with Volunteer Involving Organisations were noted as further barriers for young people.

The biggest barrier for Volunteer Involving Organisations is resourcing. Research undertaken in 2016 found that Volunteer Involving Organisations generally lack resources, both human and financial, and this can inhibit their ability to engage volunteers. Nationally, 86 per cent of Volunteer Involving Organisations need more volunteers. Young people are a growing pool of prospective volunteers, but can be hindered in their efforts to participate with the difficulty finding a volunteering role or engaging with an organisation.

Research demonstrates that a significant proportion of young people are volunteering, evidencing the value of further investment. Volunteering Australia highlights the need for additional resourcing for both schools and Volunteer

Involving Organisations with the information, tools and training to understand how to create and manage structured volunteering programs for young people. In addition, there would be great benefit from the implementation of Volunteering and the Australian Curriculum in Australian schools.

Recommendations

- Implement the Volunteering and Australian Curriculum resources in all Australian schools.
- Resource both schools and Volunteer Involving Organisations with information, tools, and training to create and manage structured volunteering programs for young people.

Conclusion

Volunteering Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Education and Training on the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools. We strongly encourage the Department to consider the impact of volunteering in Australian schools, for the learning of young people, and through the reform process.

We are committed to working with the relevant agencies to advance these measures and would welcome further opportunities to consult or expand on our recommendations raised in this response.