Engaging young people in volunteering: what works in Tasmania?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. WHAT WILL THIS RESEARCH TELL US?

Given the Tasmanian Social Inclusion Unit's current interest in youth volunteering,[1] this *'Engaging Young People'* research was developed to complement Volunteering Tasmania's (VT's) State of Volunteering Report[2] by offering a spotlight on what works in youth volunteering in Tasmania. It provides an original contribution to research by building on existing Government-funded Tasmanian research that focused on youth volunteering in Home and Community Care (HACC) organisations[3] and rural volunteering.[4]

The research explores:

a) *What approaches do Tasmanian volunteer-involving organisations use to successfully engage and retain young people as volunteers?* Do these 'fit' with models of good practice in youth engagement in Tasmania, Australia and the UK?

b) *Are there similarities and differences in these approaches across sectors?* If so, what part is played by organisational cultures, strategies and practice?

c) *What recommendations can be made to other Tasmanian volunteer-involving organisations to engage and retain young people successfully?*

2. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?

The research was conducted between June and October 2010 and focused on case studies of three Tasmanian volunteer-involving organisations that currently recruit young people and two peak bodies representing volunteering and young people in Tasmania.

Each case study included:

*   ***semi-structured interviews*** with a member of senior management and, where available, a separate interview with a staff member responsible for youth volunteer recruitment and retention. For peak bodies, one person was interviewed in each organisation. Six people were interviewed in total;

*   ***focus groups*** with up to five young volunteers from each organisation. Eleven young people participated in total;

*   self-completion of an ***organisational culture tool*** for volunteer managers to reflect on their management and leadership values in seven areas of their practice.

The literature review and the final report are divided into the three elements VT identify as essential for a healthy volunteer sector to develop:[5]

*   *Willing volunteers* – what it takes to cultivate interest in volunteering amongst young Tasmanians and to successfully recruit them;

*   *Meaningful roles* – what it takes to develop volunteering roles that are appropriate for young people;

*   *Effective leadership* – what characteristics might be present in successful youth engaging organisations.

This research defines young people as *16 to 24*[6] and it defines volunteering as it is defined by VT's State of Volunteering Report survey research. i.e.: young people who, *"willingly give unpaid help, in the form of time, service, or skills, to or through an organisation or group."*[7]

1   Adams, D., 2009, A Social Inclusion Strategy for Tasmania

2   Webb, M. and Bird, L., 2010, *State of Volunteering Report: Tasmania 2010*

3   Adams, N., 2009, *Generation Y Volunteer: an exploration into engaging young people in HACC funded volunteer involving organisations*, Volunteering Tasmania

4   Crowley, S., Stirling, C., Orpin, P., Kilpatrick, S., 2008, *Sustainability of Rural Volunteers in Tasmania*, University Department of Rural Health, Tasmania.

5   The three-legged stool is taken from Andy Fryar, www.ozvpm. com. Cited in Volunteering Tasmania, 2009a, Positioning Paper for the *State of Volunteering Report: Tasmania 2010*. p.8 and was used to structure the findings in VT's State of Volunteering Report (Webb, M., et al, 2010, *ibid*).

6   See *appendix 1* for an explanation of why we have chosen this age range.

7   Webb, M., et at, 2010, *ibid.*, State of Volunteering Surveys. This definition was used to aid comparison with VTs' SOV report. However, please note that within its work, VT follows Volunteering Australia's definition of volunteering, which includes reference to volunteering taking place in the not for profit sector and being in a designated volunteer position. See *appendix 2* for a more detailed exploration of volunteering definitions and how the recommendation was made for the definition used in this report.

Creating young willing volunteers - - -

Being 'youth ready': making roles accessible and speaking 'Generation (Gen) Y'

Comparing this fieldwork to previous Tasmanian, Australian and United Kingdom (UK) research,[8] findings suggest that these young Tasmanians are not particularly different to other volunteers in experiencing the challenge of making time to volunteer, and no different in what motivates them to volunteer; although their motivations may be held in different priorities to older volunteers, with more value for most young people on *skill development*, as well as giving something back to the community/pursuing personal interests/being with friends. But there may be particular issues to address in creating young willing volunteers, like *reassuring their confidence* through offering *peer ambassadors and mentors*, accessing their *influencers* (including *schools* and other educational institutions, *families* and *peers*), adapting the *length or regularity of their volunteer role* to address their *transient time commitments*, addressing their *access to transport*, and understanding how young people *prefer to communicate* – in terms of media and styles. *(More info — see full report, sections 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.7; Figs 4.3-5, 4.10-12).*

Tasmanian challenges: keeping up volunteer momentum and confidentiality

For Tasmanian organisations, there seem to be some Tasmanian-specific challenges within the size and scale of the state, particularly in *maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity* when volunteering within smaller communities, and *maintaining volunteers' momentum* between the infrequent state event-based opportunities and between the relatively short volunteering 'seasons' for sports and outdoor volunteering activities compared to other Australian states. *(More info — see full report section 4.1).*

8 Tasmania - Adams, N., 2009, *ibid.*; Crowley et al, 2008, *ibid.* Australia - Ferrier, F., Roos, M., Long, M., 2004, *Passions, People and Appreciation: making volunteering work for young people*, National Youth Affairs Research Scheme: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Australia. UK - Hill, M., and Russell, J., 2009, *Young People, Volunteering and Youth Projects: a rapid review of recent evidence*, London: V; Pye, J,. Lister., Latter, J., Clements, L., 2009, *Young People Speak Out: attitudes to and perceptions of, full-time volunteering*, IPSOS MORI and V Research: London; V Informed, 2008, *Youth Volunteering: Attitudes and Perceptions*, V Informed: London; V, 2007, *Barriers Preventing Passionate Young People Acting on the Concerns: a report from the V youth volunteering charity detailing the findings of a survey of 1000 16-25 year olds*, V Informed: London

Volunteering in the digital age: embracing websites and social networking

Understanding how to effectively use digital communication media to target young volunteer audiences is clearly a huge development area for Tasmanian volunteer-involving organisations; although this is by no means unique to Tasmania, the current *lack of consistently provided web-based information and application processes* and the *under-use of social networking*, such as Facebook, for keeping volunteers updated, is clearly showing as a disconnect with Gens Y and Z. *(More info — see full report sections 4.5 & 4.7)*

Targeting recruitment is key

To successfully recruit more young people, most volunteers suggested that *application processes need to be kept as short as possible*. Targeted recruitment was essential to attract young people into the organisations. *Digital and non-digital recruitment mixes*, using existing *peer networks, schools, colleges, universities, youth centres and VT's Volunteer Connect* were essential for state-wide organisations to recruit young volunteers and *a web presence was key as a first port of call* for marketing information; *personal approaches* through *peer networks, schools and families* were more successful for the local, community focused organisation. Using *young people as ambassadors*, talking about what they get from their roles, helps potential young people to put themselves in volunteers' shoes. Having a *personal point of contact* within the organisation was key for maintaining young people's interest once they had made contact. *(More info — see full report section 4.5).*

Creating meaningful volunteer roles for young people - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Young volunteers without boundaries

This fieldwork and previous Tasmanian research[9] suggest there may be a disconnect in Tasmania between what young people say they are looking for from volunteering and organisations' confidence that what they have to offer could be a fit for young people. Certainly the young Tasmanians in this research did not have any boundaries around the type of activities they would consider in Tasmania, as long as they felt they were *able to contribute*, it was a *positive volunteering experience* and was a *practical fit* for their abilities and their lifestyle. *(More info — see full report section 5.5)*

9 Adams, N., 2009, *ibid.*; Crowley et al, 2008, *ibid.*

Creating positive experiences: understanding volunteer motivations, role asks and benefits

Experience from these case studies suggests that to create a positive volunteering experience for young people, organisations need to understand, not only what is inhibiting young people from volunteering (for example, time, transport, confidence), and what is motivating their volunteers to want to contribute (personal or community-based reasons, or a mixture of both), but also what their volunteers want from their experience; whether it be some of the main personal features, such as *flexibility*, having *interesting tasks* and opportunities for *skills development*, *being listened to* and feeling acknowledged, *enjoyment*; or some of the main community-orientated features, such as *making a difference to their community*, *being with friends*, ensuring *opportunities for co-working*, and *seeing outcomes* for themselves and others; or a mixture of both.

Using volunteers' motivations and role asks, this research has started to distinguish volunteer 'types' (which could be applied to volunteers of any age group), which – after further research - may help organisations to target their volunteer marketing, role design, support and development. *(More info — see full report sections 5.1 to 5.4 and Figs 5.1 to 5.3, 5.5 to 5.7).*

Learning and development: a key selling point and benefit

The range of personal and vocational skills volunteers had gained through their experiences – all *key skills for young people in their transition to adulthood and in becoming active citizens* – highlights that *all organisations have something to offer young people*; the issue is identifying these and articulating them effectively to the volunteer market. Vicarious learning through experiences was the most common way to learn. *Peer mentoring* was valued by these young volunteers and, where formal training was necessary, the key was to make it *brief, fun and as practical as possible*. *(More info — see full report section 5.6).*

Measuring success in youth volunteering: developing the volunteer habit for life

Very positively all young volunteers in this sample felt they would continue to volunteer after their current role, so they were all on the way to making a habit for life. And the case study organisations all saw this in itself as a success; engagement was often more important than retention in gauging success with this age group and was measured not simply with numbers of volunteers, but also diversity in volunteers through to the quality of interactions and positive exits. *(More info — see full report section 5.7).*

Effective leadership for young volunteers - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Organisational success = positive attitude to young people + understanding Gen Y and Z challenges

The findings suggest that organisations that are successfully recruiting young people seem to fit with Ferrier et al's (2004) leadership profile; most importantly, they see *young people's volunteering contributions positively* (or are in the process of ensuring this culture is developing/spreading across their organisation); and they *understand the challenges* faced by their young volunteers (usually through consultation/conversation) and, where this is causing an issue, *develop specific strategies* to tackle these. They also work within models of *social inclusion* and *community development*. *(More info — see full report sections 6.2-3).*

Towards understanding organisational culture: balancing leadership control with flexibility in volunteer management?

The case study organisations all seemed to strike a balance within their organisational culture between *controlled adherence to regulation* (steered from strong leadership) and offering *flexibility and development to the volunteers* (steered within their volunteer management approach). This needs exploring further with other organisations. *(More info — see full report section 6.4).*

The need for community coaching

Although organisations felt most volunteer management skills are the same for all volunteers (*communication, empathy, flexibility*), there is one area of development that stands out – the need for an *effective model of community coaching*, that enables adults to work with and develop young people on terms that work for both of them. *(More info — see full report section 6.5.b).*

Strengthening the Tasmanian volunteer community

There is a clear need to develop *more effective Tasmanian volunteer sector links*, to enable organisations to develop coaching and other important skills, and to help open up facilities and assets within local communities and to encourage debates about how to build volunteering capacity and social inclusion locally. There are key facilitation roles here for peak bodies and local councils. *(More info — see full report section 6.2.c)*

4. CONCLUSIONS

What's unique about the Tasmanian experience? - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Tasmanian challenges and assets

The Tasmanian experience looks similar to the national picture in youth volunteering, except for a few important local factors:

- *having a declining proportion of the Tasmanian population who are young*, compared to those nearing retirement. This may have a significant effect on where resource-strapped Tasmanian volunteering organisations choose to target their recruitment;

- *the significant gender difference* in Tasmanian youth volunteer participation, which needs to be better understood before it can be effectively addressed;

- *the tendency for some volunteer-involving organisations to undersell their benefits to young people and underutilise communication media* that young people commonly look to, such as emails and texts, websites and on-line applications and social networking. These need to be prioritised as areas for development within organisations' youth volunteer recruitment and retention strategies;

- *the temperate climate and size and scale of the state* causing a challenge for organisations to keep up volunteers' momentum in between activity seasons and between state events, compared to other Australian states;

- *the poor public transport system* and mainly regional and rural residents limiting volunteer choices for some young Tasmanians;

- *the need to be mindful of maintaining confidentiality* when volunteering in small communities;

- despite having a very strong and active peak body, having an *under-developed Tasmanian 'volunteering community'* between organisations and between volunteers, leading to challenges in sharing sector information and good practice across the state and potentially inhibiting volunteer referrals between organisations.

Tasmania also has huge advantages:

- in its *strong sense of community cohesion*, as highlighted within the Social Inclusion Strategy;

- with its size and scale offering the *potential ability to share lessons and resources across the state* and trial new thinking; with some very *successful organisations engaging young people as volunteers*, through which good practice can be cascaded;

- *a very strong and active volunteering peak body*, willing and able to capture good practice and able to support the sector to develop, which is *supported by federal and state governments* that understand the important role of volunteering. [10]

These advantages give Tasmania a great foundation from which to develop a healthier volunteer sector and attract more young people into voluntary activities. But, given the prevalence of traditional views of young people being too hard to engage, the agenda needs to be driven.

Recommendations for organisations - -

To create willing young volunteers and meaningful roles for young Tasmanians, findings suggest that Tasmanian organisations need to:

- *see young people's participation in volunteering positively* and see that their organisation has something to offer young people;

- *recognise that young people are not that different to other potential volunteers* in many aspects. But there may be issues to recognise about what their challenges are (particularly in the transient nature of their commitments, their lack of confidence and access to transport), what is motivating them to participate (particularly in their need to develop their skills and experience, as well their desire to contribute to community), or what they want to gain from their role, how they prefer to be communicated with (in terms of media and styles) and what skills the organisation has to support young people effectively;

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10 Current VT government funding includes federal grants from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Department of Health and Ageing through the Home and Community Care programme (HACC). Current state policy agendas that support volunteering include Supporting Tasmanian Volunteers Programme, the Tasmanian Social Inclusion Strategy and Tasmania Together.

- *talk to young people* about their perceptions/ experiences of the organisation; understand what attracts young people to the organisation; familiarise themselves with how young people's challenges impact on potential and existing volunteers' participation and consider appropriate consultation methods;

- *make strategic decisions about who they can effectively recruit* (and that might include a limited range of young people, or for limited activities, or not recruit young people at all in the short term, whist they are developing appropriate support); specifically target their resources and activities around these identified groups;

- *embrace opportunities for new thinking and different ways to communicate* and be open to learning and using new media and language styles, to ensure the organisation can maintain itself as being 'youth ready';

- *understand and utilise local networks* for volunteer recruitment and organisational development, including schools, families, existing peer networks, employers, peak bodies and state networks;

- *consider whether their organisational culture is fit for purpose*. For example, strike a balance within their organisational culture between control of the regulatory environment, but offering flexibility and development opportunities for young volunteers within leadership and volunteer management; *embrace the breadth of volunteering roles* – from more traditional formal ones to more informal, short-term/sporadic opportunities;

- *capture all activity* (informal and formal) in reporting on volunteering;

- *share knowledge* about what works.

Recommendations for further research

There are a number of areas where further research would be useful within Tasmania. For example:

- exploring the types of volunteering young Tasmanians are involved in and, for potential volunteers, those they would be interested in;

- case studies of those young people who have stopped volunteering;

- exploring reasons for the gender gap in young Tasmanian volunteering;

- exploring the scope and diversity of informal volunteering in Tasmania;

- effective use of IT and social networking in volunteer recruitment and retention;

- roles of public and private schools, faith and CALD networks in cultivating volunteering amongst young people;

- the potential role of corporate volunteering in boosting a healthier volunteer sector in Tasmania;

- the challenges and potential solutions to transport issues in facilitating volunteer access;

- strategies to boost social inclusion in volunteer recruitment and retention;

- is a model of volunteer typologies useful in helping organisations understand what Tasmanian volunteers need?

- exploring the skills needed by adults to work effectively with young volunteers;

- further explore whether there are aspects to organisational culture that are effective in developing a healthy Tasmanian volunteer sector.

We encourage the use of this information, but request that, where used, the source is cited.