

CASE STUDY

Who Takes the Lead?

How Listening to youth can improve volunteer practices

Background

There is enormous opportunity to engage youth in volunteering in regional centres. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, regional Victoria has a youth volunteer rate 43 percent higher than metropolitan Melbourne for formal volunteering. However, there is still room for improvement, with many young people engaging in informal volunteering because they are unable to find organisations willing to take on volunteers under 18 years of age.

The Ballarat Foundation, in partnership with the Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network and the City of Ballarat, hosted a Youth Volunteer Forum to provide an opportunity for high school students to discuss the barriers they face when trying to engage in formal volunteering. The forum was also attended by volunteer organisations, so they could hear directly from young people and, together, identify ways to break these barriers down.

Why the need for a Youth Forum?

The experience of volunteer organisations

Despite an increase in volunteer numbers since COVID-19, volunteering organisations in Ballarat are facing an increasingly aging volunteer population and high attrition rates. Some volunteer organisations, particularly smaller or lesser-known groups, are still struggling with a lack of volunteers. Others, such as the Food Bank, the Ballarat Community Care Centre, and opportunity shops that handle furniture, require volunteers for heavy lifting and labour-intensive roles that are unsuitable for older volunteers.

The experience of students

Since 2019 there has been a five-fold increase in participation in the Certificate II in Active Volunteering delivered through the Victorian Education and Training delivered in schools. This means many secondary school students looking for opportunities to



complete their mandatory 20 hours of volunteering with a volunteering organisations. According to the latest National Youth Survey undertaken by Mission Australia, the biggest personal challenge faced by 15- to 19-year-olds is studying and a lack of confidence about entering the workforce.

The Youth Forum therefore provided a perfect opportunity for students to understand the benefits of volunteering, particularly in building confidence and workplace skills, and for volunteering organisations to gain insight into the barriers young people face when seeking placements.

The purpose of the Youth Forum

The Forum aimed to:

- Introduce students to the benefits of volunteering
- Understand the barriers youth face in seeking volunteer opportunities
- Dispel some myths about young volunteers
- Facilitate connections between students and local volunteer organisations

A pre-forum survey was sent to participants. For volunteer organisations, it sought to understand their current engagement with youth and readiness to accept young volunteers. For students it explored their interest in volunteering and what motivates them to get involved.

What did we find out?

Learning from the volunteering organisation's perspective

Interestingly, more volunteering organisations in Ballarat accepted volunteers aged 15-17 than expected, with 61 percent of respondents stating that they did accept this age range. Many of the barriers identified by organisations were organisational or structural, relating to legislative checks, insurance restrictions, or not having enough volunteers to allocate a mentor to a young person.

We also found out that several misconceptions existed about young volunteers, including beliefs that young people:

- Struggle to fit in with older people
- Don't see the benefit of unpaid volunteering
- Don't have the motivation to volunteer



Learning from the youth's perspective

We learned that youth are motivated to volunteer and that the main drivers to volunteer include:

- The desire for social connection, including with older generations
- Wanting to do something meaningful in the community was the second highest driver for youth to volunteer
- Wanting to learn workplace skills.

These three findings helped to dispel misconceptions held by some volunteering organisations.

However, students also reported that their skills were often undervalued, leading to less meaningful or satisfying tasks when they did volunteer, causing boredom and dissatisfaction. The students also expressed nervousness about not meeting the time expectations of volunteering organisations due to schooling and other work commitments.

New realisations

One of the Youth Forum activities involved assigning a group of students to a participating volunteer organisation and asking them to create a one-minute video advertisement encouraging youth volunteering. This activity proved eye opening for both the students and the organisations. It showcased the creativity, fresh ideas and perspectives, and technical skills that young people bring - skills often beyond the experience of the organisations they work with. The State Emergency Service advertisement, for example, was so compelling that the Ballarat Branch hoped it may be used more widely.

Follow-up steps

Based on the findings of the workshop, the Ballarat Foundation has developed a fact sheet outlining the barriers facing young volunteers and offering some solutions. Participating organisations have committed to sharing this resource with their executives to explore ways to make their organisations more inclusive and welcoming for youth.