Policy Submission: Indigenous Skills and Employment Program

September 2021

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Volunteering
AUSTRALIA

Overview

This submission concerns the value of volunteering as a pathway to employment for the First Nations people in Australia. Volunteering – when understood as including cultural obligation and reciprocity – is embedded in the everyday cultural life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The submission emphasises the need to recognise the social and economic value of indigenous forms of volunteering to the Australian economy, alongside efforts to inclusively integrate indigenous 'volunteers' within mainstream organisations. In the development of the new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP), we recommend that the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA):

➢ Recognise and explicitly articulate the importance of volunteering in mitigating barriers to employment and enabling stronger economic participation of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities

➢ Recognise indigenous volunteering as a crucial form of cultural and social capital, as well as the concurrent value of the indigenous skill set for the Australian economy

- This would include a genuine, locally embedded co-design process that considers the indigenous skill set, cultural competencies, and local knowledge of indigenous communities in keeping with their geographical and regional diversity.

➢ Incorporate a consideration of, and investment in strengthening the volunteer ecosystem of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This would include:

- Strengthening the indigenous volunteer ecosystem - in consultation with the community elders, and in line with the principles of self-determination to ensure that 'an ongoing process of choice' is made available for the First Nations People to meet their social, cultural, and economic needs.[1]
- Promoting the skill set inherent in indigenous volunteering to mainstream organisations and employment service providers.
- Enhancing access of formal volunteering opportunities to indigenous communities and reducing multiple, structural barriers to their participation.

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[1] Right to Self-Determination. Australian Human Rights Commission
https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-self-determination

About the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program

The Australian Government announced in the 2021-22 Budget a commitment to develop a new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) to replace the Vocational Training and Employment Centres (VTEC), Tailored Assistance Employment Grants (TAEG) and Employment Parity Initiative (EPI) from 1 July 2022.

As part of the announcement, the Government has committed to co-designing ISEP with Indigenous Australians through extensive consultation to ensure that the new program increases economic opportunities for Indigenous Australians, and drives actions that connect Indigenous Australians to jobs, targeted skills acquisition, and career advancement opportunities.[2]

About this submission

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies. It has also solicited feedback from Indigenous elders of the community. We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the development of the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA).

The submission follows our previous advocacy efforts on behalf of the First Nations People, which includes our submission to the Indigenous Voice Consultation[3] calling on the government to honour the Uluru Statement from the Heart in public policy development and enactment. It also builds on our submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry[4], highlighting volunteering as an important means of economic inclusion.

Currently, we are working on the redesign of the Volunteer Management Activity in collaboration with the Australian government, which includes focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and a commitment to empowering their participation in volunteering in Australia.[5] As a part of this endeavour, Volunteering Australia as well as the state and territory peak bodies are in the process of developing Reconciliation Action Plans, in coordination with Reconciliation Australia[6], to examine existing barriers to Indigenous participation within their organisations and to develop a strategy for a more inclusive engagement. Our internal engagements and external advocacy will feed into the

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[2] Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP), National Indigenous Australians Agency
https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/employment/indigenous-skills-and-employment-program-isep
[3] Submission to the Indigenous Voice Consultation, Volunteering Australia, March 2021
[4] Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, Volunteering Australia, April 2021
[5] Volunteer Management Activity Summary | Department of Social Services, Australian Government (dss.gov.au)
[6] https://www.reconciliation.org.au/

development of a National Volunteering Strategy[7] which will retain a similar focus on the recognition
and inclusion of Indigenous communities within the volunteering domain.

Introduction

We have considered the Discussion Paper on the new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program
(ISEP).[8] The proposed program aims to match the distinct needs of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander
Australians by incorporating the best features of existing indigenous-specific employment programs
and devising new features through broad-based consultations. The Discussion Paper has highlighted
a commitment to 1) addressing barriers to indigenous employment 2) increasing access to skills
acquisition and 3) building the cultural and community capital of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
people.

We note, however, that the Paper has made no reference to volunteering. Volunteering is a valuable
pathway to employability from the perspective of first-time job seekers as well as transitioning and
returning workforce. Accumulated evidence from organisations and peak bodies suggest that
volunteering can impart valuable transferrable skills and signal important capabilities to employers. It
can also provide critical experience and professional exposure to different work sites, akin to the
process of 'shadowing' or 'on-the-job training' in many organisations.[9] Voluntary activities are
particularly salient in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Considering the collective
expertise of Volunteering Australia, this submission highlights the critical interface between
volunteering and economic inclusion with respect to the Indigenous communities.

Volunteering Australia believes that a recognition and promotion of the Indigenous volunteer
ecosystem will cater to the key objectives identified in the Discussion Paper. In partnership with the
community elders of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia, we emphasize
that the new Indigenous Skills and Employment Program (ISEP) should explicitly articulate
volunteering (in general) and Indigenous volunteering (in particular) as crucial pathways to
employability and economic participation. We recommend a consideration of the following issues in
the development of the new program.

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[7] Work has recently commenced on a sector-led National Volunteering Strategy, funded by the Australian
Department of Social Services and facilitated by Volunteering Australia. The National Volunteering Strategy will
provide strategic direction for the sector and enable volunteering across Australia to be effective, inclusive,
and sustainable.

[8] Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP) Discussion Paper, National Indigenous
Australians Agency, 13 July 2021,

[9] See for example,
https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf; and
Volunteering could be your pathway to employment, My Future, 2 June 2021; Proof that Volunteering Pays
Off for Job Hunters, Forbes, 24 June 2013

Indigenous Volunteering as Valuable Cultural and Social Capital

The principles of volunteering are integral to the cultural life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1994 found that Indigenous communities engage in voluntary work at a higher rate at 26.9 per cent than non-Indigenous Australians at 19 per cent respectively.[10] Considering the methodological limitations of survey research and the centrality of volunteering in Indigenous lives, it is important here to recognise that the full scope of voluntary activities within Indigenous communities may exceed official estimates.[11] Research indicates that volunteering is a primary means through which community is constituted and ownership to place is established among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.[12] Indigenous forms of volunteering constitute a unique form of social capital in Australian society and deserve recognition in their full breadth.

While embodying the principle of 'working for the common good without financial gain,'[13] Indigenous voluntary activities are seldom articulated through the nomenclature and more as a form of collaborative action or cultural obligation and reciprocity.[14] Research into three North Australian Indigenous communities, for instance, found that the word 'volunteering' was new, even if the work itself was regularly done as part of their identity.[15] In some communities, the practice was known through the verb "räl-manapanmirr" which used the metaphor of hunting to suggest the act of pooling together in accordance with individual capacities for the collective good. In several other communities, it meant mutual responsibility to work on behalf of their kin, their relatives who were sick, the elderly, the homeless, and those within the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regularly contribute with their voluntary time and effort on a range of issues from health, education, arts, sports, youth, tourism, economic development, and criminal justice.[16] They serve on various boards, committees, government inquiries and consultative bodies at local, state, and national levels as a form of cultural obligation.

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[10] The 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey, Findings and Future Prospects, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, p 67

[11] Strengths and Weaknesses of Online Surveys, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 24, Issue 5, Ser. 5 (May. 2019) 31-38
https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%2024%20Issue5/Series-5/E2405053138.pdf

[12] Spencer, M., & Christie, M. (2017). Collaboratively rethinking the nature and practice of voluntary service in three North Australian aboriginal communities. Third Sector Review, 23(1), 9–27.

[13] https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/

[14] Kerr, L., Savelsberg, H., Sparrow, S. & Tedmanson, D, Experiences and perceptions of volunteering in Indigenous and non-English speaking background communities. Adelaide: Social Policy Research Group, 2001, University of South Australia.

[15] Ibid

[16] National Volunteer Skills Centre (2007), Subject Guide: Indigenous Australians and Volunteering – Take a Closer Look, Volunteering Australia, Melbourne

As a result of their voluntary activities, they possess privileged knowledge and embedded insights on cultural tourism, land management, water management, wild food harvesting, pest control, as well as community care and rehabilitation.[17] At the same time, Indigenous voluntary activities also imbibe valuable transferrable skills in project management, team building, leadership, and organisation.

Indigenous Volunteering Structurally Disadvantaged Vis-à-vis Formal Volunteering

Despite the sheer breadth and scope of Indigenous voluntary activities, they are seldom recognized or accorded due status by mainstream employers. The lack of recognition stems, in part, from the nature of Indigenous volunteering as typically spontaneous, informal, extra-institutional, or kin-based - falling outside the framework of structured volunteering through organisations.

Definitions of volunteering have become institutionalised due to a need to confer protection to volunteers under professional standards of organisational practice which include supervised training and management, screening checks, and a commitment to Occupation Health & Safety Standards.[18] While this has protected the interests of volunteers working within formalised institutional structures, it has, inadvertently, solidified the conception of volunteering as one that occurs within corporate or not-for-profit organisations.

As a result, conceptions of formal volunteering (within organisations) have become more dominant and Indigenous forms of volunteering may not always be recognised for their social and economic value. [19] More recently, there has been a push to recognise 'informal' volunteering by peak bodies, and an effort to better capture these activities in ABS Data.[20] Still, more work is needed to ensure that 'informal' volunteering is recognised across the spectrum of different employers - and in particular, Indigenous voluntary activities as a unique form of social and cultural capital.

A foundational lack of recognition of Indigenous volunteering - from land maintenance to community well-being groups - has also resulted in inadequate material support for Indigenous

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[17]Kerr et. Al (2001); Not So Simple: Enhancing Indigenous Economic Opportunity, ACTU Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, January 2020

[18] Nelson, G., & Gruhn, A. From research to practice: Increasing the Diversity of Australian Volunteers, Commissioned by NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet

[19] See Kerr et al. (2001) and Indigenous Australian Participation in International Volunteering, Report on Exploratory Research, June 2008

[20] State of Volunteering in Australia, Volunteering Australia, April 2016; and see:
https://www.abs.gov.au/research/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/collection-volunteering-data-abs

volunteer organisations to ensure community empowerment in keeping with the principles of self-determination.

Lack of Cultural Sensitivity and Competency Within Mainstream Organisations

Although Indigenous volunteering imparts crucial capabilities and transferrable skills, young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australians routinely feel the need to build their credentials and connections to further their employment prospects.[21] Formal volunteering in mainstream organisations can contribute to upward mobility through networking and exposure.

Several barriers inhibit Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australians from full participation within mainstream organisation. Kerr et al (2001) found that a lack of cultural competency and sensitivity among employers can contribute to attitudinal inhibitions among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.[22] Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australians have reported a sense of feeling excluded from the work culture in several organisations. Research findings of the report, *Talking Together* project, *One Way or Another* indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce may experience heightened self-consciousness due to prevailing cultural insensitivities.[23]

Research indicates that many Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander, therefore, opt to volunteer in known environments. The natural outcome of this is that organisations may be deprived of the expertise and local knowledge possessed by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders, while the latter, in turn, may lose out on the exposure provided by mainstream organisations.

Structural Barriers of Access to Formal Volunteering Opportunities

Whereas volunteering is time freely given for the common good without financial gain[24], enabling volunteering requires an investment of time and finances. The development of a volunteer ecosystem requires attention of the government itself. Barriers of access to formal volunteering – related to isolation, remote working conditions, or lack of inclusion for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities - can also affect access to paid employment.

Structural barriers of access include lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate information and training, and financial costs of participating in formal volunteering activities. Research indicates that Income levels directly influence Indigenous volunteer participation in mainstream

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[21] This was articulated in research in three North Australian Aboriginal Communities by Spencer et. al.

[22] Kerr et al (2001) found that a common issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents was a sense of the cultural exclusivity of formal volunteer arrangements

[23] Living in Harmony: Talking Together Project, Volunteering ACT 2000
Westcombe, R (2003) Indigenous volunteering: 'parallel worlds and the invisible community'. Australian Journal on Volunteering v.8 no.1: 69-71

[24] https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/definition-of-volunteering/

organisations. Indigenous Australian volunteer participation increased with income from 21.7 per cent of the lowest income quintile to 39.7 per cent of the fourth and fifth quintiles.[25]

Screening checks for organisations and Centrelink restrictions can also pose hidden costs for the communities. Respondents from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities have cited a lack of support from their organisations and respective government agencies in these processes. [26] Given the high number of conviction rates among youth from Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities, police checks add a further structural barrier to their reintegration into the mainstream through volunteering. [27]

Respondents from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have also cited additional challenges of balancing work commitments with communal obligations that constitute a large part of their cultural life.[28] Inflexible working arrangements and lack of childcare facilities can further inhibit Indigenous 'volunteer' engagement within mainstream organisations.

Finally, infrastructural limitations in remote country areas – pertaining to internet, appropriate workstations, or transportation – can pose major barriers to volunteer participation in the mainstream.

Pressures of Digital and Technological Literacy in a Changing Work Landscape

Covid 19 has been reshaping the nature of employment and volunteering, with greater emphasis on remote and hybrid forms of work.[29] This presents opportunities and additional challenges for the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities. As the nature of work becomes more flexible, there is an opportunity to enable greater participation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders who manage multiple voluntary commitments at the same time.

However, the changing landscape also makes further demands of digital and technological literacy on paid and volunteer workforce. Feedback from Indigenous elders have already indicated digital illiteracy and internet outages as major obstacles to Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander participation in training and existing programs, such as VTEC. Almost 50% of Indigenous households are reported to not have home internet access.[30] As more work shifts online, this places an additional burden on

[25] Biddle, N. 2009. 'Location and segregation: The distribution of the Indigenous population across Australia's urban centres', *CAEPR Working Paper No.53*, CAEPR, ANU, Canberra.

[26] Indigenous Australian Participation in International Volunteering, Report on Exploratory Research, June 2008

[27] Based on consultation with Indigenous Elders of the community in the drafting of this report.

[28] Giving and Volunteering in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Indigenous Communities, The Cultural and Indigenous Research Center (CIRCA), June 2016

[29] Australians want to work from home more post-Covid, The University of Sydney, 28 September 2020

[30] New Training Seeks to Narrow Digital Literacy divide in Indigenous Communities, National Indigenous Times, 8 November 2019

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to up-skill amidst infrastructural limitations, and an onus on mainstream organisations to cater to their needs.[31]

Recommendations

In consideration of the issues identified above, Volunteering Australia makes the following recommendations for the Indigenous Skills and Employment Program

1) The ISEP should explicitly articulate the importance of volunteering (in general) and Indigenous volunteering (in particular) as a pathway to employment and stronger economic participation of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities.

- Indigenous volunteering should be recognised as a unique form of cultural and social capital with concurrent value for the Australian workforce and economy.
- Indigenous skill set inherent in volunteering should be appreciated in its full breadth through a locally embedded co-design process, since each Indigenous community is different in its social and political constitution. This includes its recognition as a form of privileged, local knowledge on issues ranging from land and water management, and economic development to community building and rehabilitation. It also entails a recognition of its transferrable value in project management, team building, leadership, and organisation.
- A language should be developed, in consultation with local representatives of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders from across Australia, that articulates Indigenous volunteering in a manner that is consistent with their cultural understanding and their social roles. It should further be recognised that the notion of 'work' (vis-à-vis paid and volunteer activities) may be differentially conceived within Indigenous communities.[32] For instance, Indigenous elders may engage in activities classified as 'voluntary', but their proper designation may be that of 'managers' rather than 'volunteers' in their own community.[33] Furthermore, this language should be made available to mainstream employers and employment service providers in recognition of Indigenous social and cultural capital.

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[31] Covid-19: The need to boost digital literacy in Indigenous Communities, The University of Western Australia, 17 June 2020

[32] Not So Simple: Enhancing Indigenous Economic Opportunity, ACTU Submission to the Pathways and Participation Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Employment and Business Inquiry, January 2020

[33] Helping and Caring, not only our family: Northern Territory Indigenous Perspectives on Volunteering, Australian Red Cross, 2015

2) The NIAA should incorporate consideration of, and investment in strengthening the Indigenous volunteer ecosystem of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- Consistent with the principles of self-determination, Indigenous volunteer networks and organisations should be provided due recognition and material support to realise their full potential.
- The Indigenous volunteer ecosystem should be promoted to mainstream organisations. Efforts should be made to increase the cultural competency of employers on the value of Indigenous skill set through volunteering.

3)The NIAA should enhance Indigenous access to formal volunteering opportunities. Mitigating barriers to employment also requires reducing structural barriers to volunteer participation in mainstream organisations.

- **V**olunteer recruitment practices should be developed in a culturally sensitive manner through the dissemination of linguistically appropriate information and training.
- A full integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth into mainstream employment and volunteer opportunities requires an adaptation of mainstream screening protocols. For instance, 'spent convictions' (that have reached a set period defined by the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974) may be considered as an alternative to police clearance to screen for eligibility. Hidden costs of mainstream screening processes should be assessed in consultation with representatives of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Considering their commitment to voluntary work as cultural obligation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce (paid and volunteer) should be provided flexibility to attend to their parallel communal engagements within mainstream organisations.
- In view of the changing nature of the volunteer and employment landscape, mainstream organisations should consider providing material support and digital up-skilling to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, especially in remote areas of the country where infrastructural limitations are most dire.

Conclusion

Volunteering offers an effective pathway to employment and economic inclusion. As volunteering is central to the cultural lives of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people, its value should be recognised as a unique form of social and cultural capital. In communication with Indigenous members of the community, we propose a co-design process that is locally embedded and aligned with the principles of self-determination of the First Nations People. A two-way traffic that 1) promotes the value of the Indigenous volunteering ecosystem to mainstream employers, and 2) provides Indigenous communities with access to formal volunteering within mainstream organisations, would be well suited to meet the objectives of ISEP in closing the gap in employment and catering to the distinct needs of the First Nations People.

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.
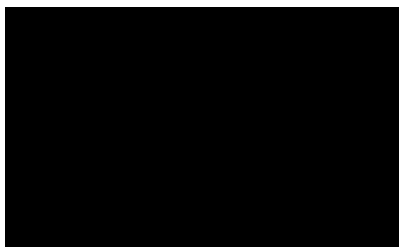
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.

About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

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