

Researching VET and the Voluntary Sector: Getting Started

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BACKGROUND

In considering vocational education and training for work, we usually concentrate on work that generates income. But what of work undertaken by volunteers? If we consider their products and services, and the resulting increased wellbeing of individuals, together with increased social cohesion (social capital), and the sense of fulfilment gained by the volunteers themselves, their work has significant worth. Using a broad definition of voluntary work, Ironmonger concludes

If the households and organisations paid the full cost of the benefits they received in the form of voluntarily provided goods and services received, the money involved would be equivalent to about eight percent of GDP (\$31 billion in 1992) (Ironmonger 1998, 23).

The (then) Industry Commission (1995, 121-124), on the other hand, in its report *Charitable Organisations in Australia*, considers estimating to be problematic and chooses not to do so. Albeit, the work of volunteers constitutes a significant wealth contribution to the community.

Accordingly, CEET took the view that analysis of the economics of VET needed to be broad enough to encompass the contribution of volunteers.

Were volunteers not mentioned in the National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training (Australian National Training Authority 1998) because their learning needs had been adequately addressed in other ways, or because they had lost out to what were judged to be higher priorities, or because provision had been implicitly subsumed in that for the market economy? Or had volunteers not been considered? Neither the mainstream research literature in economics nor in vocational education and training has given much attention to the work of volunteers. Managing volunteers finds a place in the management literature. There is also a research literature on the economics of households as sources of capital and labour, whether relationship-based, voluntary or paid. But reports on the work of volunteers are few outside the specialist journals.

Developments on a number of fronts suggested to us that the training of volunteers might be deserving of the attention of policy makers and therefore an important area of potential research. Jeremy Rifkin, in his book, *The End of Work*, suggests that we face a world in which the demand for products and services from the market economy, will be inadequate to meet people's need for fulfilment through socially useful activity (Rifkin 1996). Rifkin argues that the voluntary sector has the potential to utilise this excess productive capacity to the benefit of society as a whole. In Australia, we see governments decreasing their delivery of support services and instead contracting them out to not-for-profit organisations, work that may involve volunteers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that, in June 1995, 46,000 volunteer workers were looking for paid employment, 43,000 of whom sought full time work (Trewin 1996, 9).

Perhaps most significant of all, is lifelong learning policy. The notion of learning for work is no longer of an intense period of study undertaken on leaving school; instead it is of a lifetime process of change, development and fulfilment where the boundaries between learning and contributing, and indeed, being, are not easily distinguishable. To suggest that work in this context means paid work but not voluntary work would be contrary to the holistic intent of lifelong learning policy.

We therefore included a small project within CEET's research program for 1999, in which we would attempt to conceptualise the issues involved with respect to VET and the voluntary sector.

Our particular interest was the training of volunteers; but in order to examine their training needs and the social and economic implications of their work, it has been necessary to look more broadly, by

investigating the organisations that employ them. However, the voluntary sector is composed not only of voluntary organisations employing volunteers. Many not-for-profit organisations have some paid employees, especially in management. Volunteers operate within public instrumentalities such as schools and hospitals, where the majority of personnel are paid.

We have not circumscribed our initial investigations by defining our project so as possibly to exclude some of the organisations that employed volunteers. Even then we have set boundaries. By accepting the ABS definition of a volunteer as 'someone who willingly gives unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills through an organisation or group' (Trewin *ibid*, 31) we have excluded all work falling outside structured bodies.

METHOD

As a review of the literature was unlikely to provide an adequate basis upon which to conceptualise any training issues, it was necessary to undertake some face-to-face research. We conjectured that by bringing together key people as speakers who had an interest in the area, and providing opportunities for interchange, an overview of the issues and complexities would be gained. Given the size and diversity of the voluntary sector, it was impossible to have participants from all major groups. However, we sought to ensure that speakers from the sector, together, constituted a fairly representative sample of the sorts of organisations making it up.

In order to give direction to proceedings, the day was structured around a series of questions:

- In an ideal world, what training would be provided and by whom, how would it be provided, and in what way would it be recognised both within the employing voluntary organisation and externally?
- How do volunteers currently gain their training?
- To what degree does training currently meet the needs of the organisations for which volunteers work?
- Do volunteers want more or a higher standard of training?
- What are the current constraints on training of volunteers?
- What would be the funding implications?
- To what degree does voluntary work provide a path to paid work, and might a different approach to training increase passage along this path?
- Are the National Strategy for VET and Training Packages applicable to the needs of the voluntary sector?

Table 1 details the invitees who attended as speakers at CEET's one day seminar conducted in November 1999 entitled *VET and the Voluntary Sector: conceptualising the issues*. In addition, Professor Meredith Edwards, Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra, undertook the summing up.

Table 1: CEET Seminar — invited speakers

Name	Organisation
Ms Margaret Campion	Volunteer Co-ordinator, 3 RPH Radio for the Print Handicapped
Ms Georgie Cane	EO, Business Skills Victoria (ITAB)
Ms Sha Cordingly	CEO, Volunteering Australia
Ms Dianne Cowan	Volunteer Involvement Program Officer, Australian Sports Commission
Mr Tony Duckmanton	Senior Consultant-Program Development, Country Fire Authority Victoria
Mr Michael Gibbs	Manager, South Australian School of Volunteer Management
Mr Rex Hewett	Federal TAFE Secretary, Australian Education Union
Ms Linda McGuire	Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University
Ms Kath Nicholls	President of CAMCARE (a Community Information Centre)
Ms Rena Pritchard	School Council President on behalf of Victorian Council of School Organisation
Mr Stephen Quirk	Principal Project Officer, ANTA
Professor Andrew Strickland	Adjunct Professor, University of South Australia
Ms Dianne Weidner OAM (opening address)	Chair of Australian Council of National Trusts
Ms Liz Wright	Manager-Projects and Priorities, Victorian Community Services and Health ITB (ITAB)

FINDINGS

The seminar provided some initial, albeit incomplete, answers to the questions we had set.

An ideal world

In an ideal world, organisations would have the best mix of volunteer and paid personnel. It was said that volunteers "provide a distinctive capability for the organisation". Management's understanding of the respective roles provides a basis upon which the best mix can be established-voluntary organisations, like enterprises in the market economy, need to be strategic.

An ongoing theme in the presentations and discussion was the ambiguous nature of the volunteer role. Volunteers give of themselves and expect that their skills and contributions will be valued without what are perceived to be threatening assessments. One speaker said: "We also need to ensure that training is not perceived as insulting." Notwithstanding, duty of care, and/or potential for litigation, and/or the hazardous nature of tasks mean that work must be competently performed. Nor is the recipient satisfied with 'second best'. As was said for fire fighters, "People just want a BRT (big red truck)"-people whose property is aflame are not interested in whether those in the truck are paid personnel or volunteers. For many of the one and a half million volunteers working in sporting groups, child protection responsibilities have learning implications. In an ideal world, a balance would be found between the validity and reliability of assessment and the expectations of the volunteer.

In an ideal world, too, volunteers and potential employers in the market economy would be aware of the relevance of volunteer learning to employment in the market economy. For instance, volunteers in community radio are commonly highly skilled in the key competencies as well as having more industry specific skills; but few volunteers recognise the transferability of their capabilities. Employers in firms and the public sector seldom do either. Ideally, volunteer work would sit alongside paid work in CVs, and be treated as of equal reliability as an indicator of employability. Furthermore, firms that employ people who also work as volunteers-about sixty-five percent of volunteers are in paid employment (Trewin *ibid*, 9)-would gain prestige from supporting their personnel in their voluntary work, rather than viewing the work as a potential liability and distraction.

Current training arrangements

Given tensions between the voluntary nature of the work and the need for competence, the tendency is for some training to be provided but learning not to be formally assessed. In sport, there is a dual system where most volunteers undertake informal training through a Volunteer Improvement Program yielding a certificate of participation, whilst about ten percent choose to undertake the Certificate II in Sport and Recreation. Similarly, in fire services, some have undertaken the Certificate II in Fire Operations whilst the rest have undergone only informal training. But an objective of fire services is that every fire fighter in the country will be formally qualified. Those who work in community advisory services also undertake various more or less informal courses. In Victoria, public provision of recognised training for volunteers has a relatively long history. A course was first statewide accredited in 1984 as a certificate for volunteers working in Citizen Advisory Bureaus. As was said, "Volunteers have to deal with almost any situation, including when the drunken aggressive walks in; they have to be trained!"

Trewin concluded from the ABS survey that 'the nature of a person's voluntary work was closely related to their type of employment' (Trewin *ibid*, 4), though scrutiny of the data suggests only a weak relationship. But if it is so, many bring to their voluntary role, skills that they have already acquired through paid employment. However, one person at the seminar queried whether there are duties and tasks which volunteers perform that would not normally be part of the job profile of a paid worker. The question, put rhetorically, was never addressed, but remains fundamental in considering training issues.

Recruitment processes were said to be important in ensuring that volunteers are already capable in aspects of the work to be performed, or at least are of a suitable physical or emotional disposition. For instance, the National Trust pre-tests would-be volunteers and the Radio for the Print Handicapped assesses the reading skills of those applying to be readers.

It seems that many of the skills exhibited by volunteers, especially the general ones, have been acquired before commencement of voluntary work. Induction training, informal short courses and in some cases, formal training, are employed to skill the worker further, as they are in firms and public sector enterprises.

Training needs

It was suggested that a need for a higher standard of training does not always mean a higher level of outcome. Rather, it can mean that training delivery should be of a higher standard. It was felt that a better standard of delivery would go some of the way to overcoming the tensions associated with the training of volunteers by making training more satisfying.

Volunteering Australia, with nearly four thousand organisational members, has a Code of Practice that requires organisations that adopt it to provide volunteers with adequate training to perform work effectively, and to provide professional development. But volunteers must, it seems, first see the relevance. It was said that volunteer radio workers willingly undergo radio-specific training, but few have been willing to undertake general training in assisting the visually impaired person.

Regardless of how successful recruitment and induction have been in providing a pool of skilled volunteers, organisational change means there will, sooner or later, be a need for further training, if the requirements of the organisation are to continue to be met. This, of course, can result in loss of services where the volunteer does not wish to undertake the new duties or adapt to the new technology. Given that volunteers are not dependent on their work for financial income, they are freer to resign than are paid workers. Conversely, those things that caused them to volunteer, such as a wish to contribute or a desire for social contact (Trewin *ibid*, 19), may induce them to stay.

However, the new skills required may be very different and not amenable to brief periods of training. In Victoria under the previous government, school boards and committees were being expected to adopt a management role complementing the community-input role that they had performed previously. It was said that, not only have many volunteer members felt unable to do so as they have lacked the necessary skills, many have walked away suffering from burnout. (It was claimed that there are now "too many experts on committees, with a loss of people with a civic consciousness").

Constraints on training/path to paid work

Most speakers referred to the constraints on training of volunteers. Financial constraints were, naturally, a major one. It was claimed that, for many small organisations, provision of the ideal level of training would be beyond their resources and would amount to self-destruction.

Volunteer organisations face a similar investment question to firms when it comes to training-will the person in receipt of training stay with the organisation long enough to deliver a return that justifies the investment? The opinion was that many young volunteers who train, leave the organisation because, in contrast to most older volunteers, they are using volunteering as a path to paid work. Certainly, it is an important observation that deserves further exploration. It is not possible to confirm this from the ABS study, though sixteen percent of the 15-24 age group reported gaining work experience/reference as a reason for undertaking voluntary work, with smaller percentages for older age groups (Trewin *ibid*, 19). If well founded, it may be an incentive to government to provide more training to young people through the voluntary sector. However, the issue is problematic. Cordingly, elsewhere, critically examines the issue of involving the sector in provision of volunteer work as part of labour market programs (Cordingly 1997, 5-6). She judges that not only do volunteer organisations lack the resources to act as on-the-job training providers, they may experience disharmony amongst volunteers as the result of creating two groups-those whose attendance is formally monitored and those who are treated more trustingly.

The seminar also revealed that training can create resentment between volunteers and paid workers.

There are other constraints too. Voluntary organisations commonly lack people with the skills to train others. Setting up new centres distant to existing ones was mentioned as problematic: there is no one already located who can pass on the skills. Furthermore, volunteers typically are busy people. It was suggested that training should be provided at times during which volunteers normally work. For class-based training this may be impracticable because volunteers are often rostered round the clock with few on the job at any one time.

Funding

There was general agreement that the amount of training for volunteers falls well short of that required for the sector to function most effectively. It was considered that a strong case can be made for provision of public funding to support volunteer training and especially, for trainers of volunteers. One participant remarked, "If government is withdrawing from service provision, it should be training the organisations to train, that pick up the contracts", given that governments are increasingly contracting voluntary organisations to deliver services that may involve unpaid personnel.

It was suggested that, should the sector argue for funding support for training, the whole of the education budget should be considered, not only that for VET. There is a need to know how much of publicly and privately funded education and training ostensibly delivered for or by the market economy, effectively contributes to volunteer performance. Not only are there those who transfer their learning from their paid job, presumably there are others who enrol in mainstream courses to assist them in their volunteer role.

The seminar supported there being some segmentation of volunteers by age. As discussed above, young people are more likely to use volunteering as a path to paid work. The ABS found that the peak age group for volunteering was 35-39, but there was a smaller peak at around 65-69. Accordingly, numbers in sport and recreation and in education, training and youth development peaked at 35-39. But numbers in welfare and community services were highest amongst older people (Trewin *ibid*, 2). The seminar confirmed the intuitive conclusion that much of the work in sport and recreation, and in education, training and youth development flows from parenting. By contrast, work in welfare and community services is more disinterested.

At the seminar, volunteers altogether were said to provide about five billion dollars in services, a figure much less than that of Ironmonger's, with sport and recreation contributing about two billion dollars or about \$330 per household. About one and a half million people were said to be working in sport and recreation, nearly twice that found by the ABS in 1994-95. The ABS had estimated the numbers working as volunteers in welfare, community and health to be of a similar order to numbers working in sport and recreation. Altogether, about a fifth of the adult population had been estimated as working as volunteers during the year 1994-95 (Trewin *ibid*, 1,10).

THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR VET AND TRAINING PACKAGES

For some voluntary services, Training Packages are viewed as a suitable resource in the training of at least some volunteers. For fire protection personnel it was said, "There is only one standard-the fire competencies". These are now being incorporated into the Training Package for emergency services. Competencies are finding a place, not only in training, but also in identifying people skilled to undertake a particular task, and in evaluating brigade performance. Competencies for Community Information Centre workers, too, are being made part of a Training Package.

Seminar participants pointed out that voluntary organisations' adoption of competencies as a resource allows them to be customised and they can be used in different ways. A scheme was described that brought together competencies from a range of sources as a basis for training of volunteers and supervisors in Red Cross retail outlets.

Notwithstanding, the complexities of the VET system were considered to remain a hindrance to acceptance of recognised training by volunteers. As one speaker said, "Give me something easy to understand so that I can promote it!"

The view was expressed at the seminar that there is no fundamental reason why ANTA's National Strategy could not include the voluntary sector within its priorities, and address training of volunteers.

CONCLUSION

One seminar participant said, "All the requirements of the workplace in the market economy for paid workers are also the requirements of voluntary workers". But meeting those requirements with volunteer workers has similarities and differences to doing so with paid workers.

Further research is required to start to address questions such as:

- What criteria should be used to determine whether governments should be involved in training for the voluntary sector and volunteers?
- Is there a role for peak bodies to champion the training interests of voluntary organisations?
- What role should governments and public sector training providers play in training for the voluntary sector?
- How can we measure the worth of the sector so as to fully reflect its contribution to social capital?
- To what extent do businesses gain a return from support for voluntary organisations and the volunteer work of their personnel?

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