Volunteering is for everyone: Inclusion and diversity to promote community participation

Volunteering Victoria, the state peak body for volunteering is advocating for investment in evidence-based and sustainable inclusion and diversity training programs for volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) throughout Victoria. Promoting cultural awareness and safety practices in the volunteer sector is essential to encourage the increased participation of communities from diverse backgrounds in volunteering.

Volunteering culture, organisations, and systems have historically been built on exclusionary beliefs, assumptions, and practices.[1] Traditionally, volunteers from dominant cultures acted from a position of power in providing aid and community support to diverse community groups, perpetuating colonial practices.[2] Contemporary volunteering structures and processes continue to privilege western systems of knowledge and social capital.[3] Volunteering Victoria recognises these structural barriers and has a commitment to promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in volunteering.

The barriers posed by systemic and institutional discrimination has led to diverse communities being underrepresented in formal volunteering[4] including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, First Nations communities, people from low socio-economic backgrounds, people with disability, and older adults. These communities are also deterred from volunteering due to bias and microaggressions from other volunteers, organisational staff, and members of the public whom they encounter in their volunteering.[5] While community giving takes place across diverse population groups, those who are excluded from formal volunteering miss out on the pronounced wellbeing and social capital benefits associated with volunteering within organisations.

The International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) has acknowledged these issues and committed to addressing the structural exclusionary practices that exist in the global volunteering sector through its commitment to social equity throughout its operations, programs, and advocacy.[6][7][8] They also identify that governments have a responsibility to promote greater inclusion in volunteering.[9]

The deeply engrained nature of exclusionary attitudes, practices, and structures means that a long-term commitment is necessary to fully address these issues and create sustained change within organisations.[10][11][12] Research within the volunteer sector highlights the need for evidence-based awareness, education, and mentoring programs to address the complex factors that pose a barrier to inclusion.[13]

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1   Recognising Racism in Volunteer Engagement. Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement. 2020.

2   Blum, A., & Schafer, D. Volunteer work as a neo-colonial practice: racism in transnational education. 2017. Transnational Social Review, 8:2, 155.

3   Recognising Racism in Volunteer Engagement. Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement. 2020.

4   Key Volunteering Statistics. Volunteering Australia. 2021.

5   How to Talk About Race & Volunteerism: Advice for Allies. VolunteerPro. 2020.

6   Being an Ally for Racial Justice. IAVE. 2020.

7   The power of volunteering to change the world: IAVE's Strategic Plan 2021-2025. IAVE. 2021.

8   Being an Ally for Racial Justice. IAVE. 2020.

9   Universal Declaration on Volunteering. IAVE. 2021.

10   Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. Why diversity training doesn't work. 2018. Anthropology Now, 10, 48.

11   Leslie, L. Diversity Initiative Effectiveness: A Typological Theory of Unintended Consequences. 2019. Academy of Management Review, 44, 3.
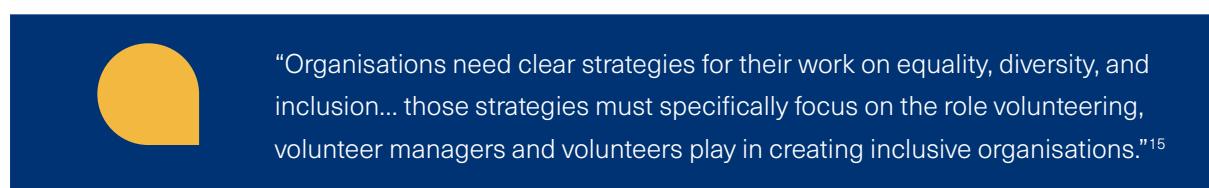
12   Cooley, Erin et al. Complex intersections of race and class: Among social liberals, learning about White privilege reduces sympathy, increases blame, and decreases external attributions for White people struggling with poverty. 2019. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 148(12), 2218.

13   Donahue, K., et al. Time well spent: diversity and volunteering. National Council for Voluntary Organisations. 2020.a

Diversity and inclusion interventions are most effective when targeted at all organisational levels, operations, and practices, including:

- » Organisational culture
- » Leadership
- » Capacity and resources
- » Volunteer management
- » Attitudes of staff and volunteers
- » Data
- » External perceptions and communications
- » Community engagement[14]

Inclusion and diversity initiatives also need to be targeted at the unique and specific issues pertaining to the volunteer sector.

> "Organisations need clear strategies for their work on equality, diversity, and inclusion... those strategies must specifically focus on the role volunteering, volunteer managers and volunteers play in creating inclusive organisations."[15]

Volunteering Victoria recommends investment in best practice models of inclusion and diversity training that include:

- » Supported self-reflection on unconscious biases and privilege that contribute to microaggressions, stigma, and discrimination[16]
- » Cultural education and learning on the history and experiences of diverse communities
- » Education on allyship and the need to actively address discrimination and systemic barriers within organisations and society[17]
- » The development of organisational practices and procedures that make organisations a safe place for all communities and actively facilitates the involvement of people from diverse demographic backgrounds[18] [19]

Long term education, mentoring, and support on inclusion and diversity practices is required to achieve genuine change within VIOs. A sustainable diversity and inclusion program could be coordinated by Volunteering Victoria and developed and implemented in partnership with organisations representing diverse community groups. Investment in evidence-based interventions is required to improve equity, inclusion, and diversity within volunteering and achieve the aim of the Victorian Volunteer Strategy for accessible and inclusive volunteer experiences for all Victorians.

This recommendation is endorsed by AMES Australia

14   Donahue, K., et al. Time well spent: diversity and volunteering. National Council for Voluntary Organisations. 2020.

15   Timbrell, H. What the bloody hell are you doing here? A comparative study of the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and White volunteers in four organisations. 2019.

16   Timbrell, H. What the bloody hell are you doing here? A comparative study of the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and White volunteers in four organisations. 2019.

17   Racism: It Stops with Me. Australian Human Rights Commission. 2020

18   Southby, K., South, J., & Bagnall, A.M. A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities. 2019. Voluntas, 30, 907.

19   Recognising Racism in Volunteer Engagement. Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement. 2020.