

Increasing the participation of First Nations Australian Tertiary Students in Volunteering

Overview

- Current situation: How many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students currently volunteer?
- Existing research: What is best practice for volunteer-involving organisations wanted to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) tertiary students in volunteering?
- Research techniques: What surveys have been used by other researchers collecting information about volunteers?

A note on the language used in this literature review: while the term ATSI has been utilised when in the context of the study, “First Nations”, “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” have also been used, depending on the terminology utilised in each referenced paper.

Introduction

Young people are the fastest growing group of volunteers in Australia, and organisations are increasingly looking towards this group to support their longevity and success (Cibich, Winner & Strickland, 2012). However, while the prevalence and benefits of volunteering have been studied, there is a lack of information about the engagement of ATSI students in volunteering, as well as what organisations can do to support this involvement. This literature review will identify information about the prevalence of ATSI students who volunteer, and common barriers to volunteering. It will also make recommendations about further research that needs to be conducted to find out the prevalence of ATSI youths engaged in formal volunteering, as well as best practices to engage this group.

Background

Young people often participate in volunteering because it has a variety of benefits, including giving back to the community and gaining skills (Heath, 2007, cited in Sikora & Green, 2020). It may also improve students' academic performance (Astin & Sax, 1998, cited in Smith et. al, 2010) and offer a pathway to employment (Al Adawy, 2021b). One study found a positive correlation between volunteering and studying for or completing a university degree (Eley, 2003, cited in Smith et. al, 2010; Sikora & Green, 2020). ATSI people are often motivated to volunteer by the opportunity to improve their skillset (Department of Social Services, 2016), with young ATSI Australians often wanting to “build their credentials and connections to further their employment prospects” (Spencer et. al, 2017, cited in Al Adawy, 2021a, p.7). ATSI people may also find that formal volunteering “can contribute to upward mobility through networking and exposure” (Al Adawy, 2021a, p.7).

In 2015, Volunteering Australia released new, more inclusive definitions of volunteering with it now defined as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain” (2015, p.2). This definition encompasses both formal volunteering, or

structured volunteering that occurs within organisations; and informal volunteering, which are volunteering acts that take place apart from an organisation (Volunteering Australia, 2015). The previous definition of volunteering often excluded the contributions that are made to communities, often by ATSI Australians or culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Volunteering does occur widely in these communities and may include practices such as caring for children, older relatives or people who have long-term illnesses, coaching sports teams, fundraising, and providing interpretation services (Department for Social Services, 2016). However, the value of informal volunteering, particularly in Indigenous communities, often goes unrecognised as a valuable form of contribution to society, even if the type of volunteering performed is similar to that of mainstream organisations (Kerr et. al, 2001).

If organisations do not support the involvement of Indigenous Australians, they will miss out on the expertise that this group has to provide, while Indigenous Australians will not be able to benefit from the experiences provided by mainstream organisations (Al Adawy, 2021a). While informal volunteering should be recognised as having at least as much value as formal volunteering, mainstream organisations should refine their practices so that Indigenous youths who want to volunteer with them can.

Prevalence of volunteering amongst ATSI Australians and youth

Volunteering is becoming increasingly prevalent in Australia, with the 2014 census finding that 5.8 million people in Australia had volunteered in the last year (ABS, cited in Department of Social Services, 2016). Volunteering amongst young people has increased over time, with 30% of 18–24-year-olds volunteering in 2006, compared with 17% in 1995 (ABS 2007, cited in McCabe et al., 2007). In the four weeks prior to a 2020 survey conducted by Volunteering Australia, 830 500 (36.5% of) young people (18-24) had volunteered informally in the community, and 592 300 (28.8% of) young people had volunteered for an organisation (2021b). However, there was a decline in volunteering for 15–24-year-olds

following the COVID-19 pandemic, with the formal volunteering rate falling from 28.8% in 2019 to 19.4% in 2020, and the rate of informal volunteering decreasing from 36.5% to 27.2% over these years (Volunteering Australia, 2022).

Tertiary students regularly volunteer alongside their studies. A 2007 study of 121 Australian university students found that 43% of this group had volunteered in the past year (McCabe et al., 2007). A study of 4000 university students across multiple countries found that 58.7% of the 609 Australian students surveyed had engaged in formal volunteering over the last year, with 31.1% of this group volunteering weekly or monthly (Smith et al., 2010).

While there was little information about the prevalence of ATSI students' volunteering, 2013 study completed by Mission Australia included 534, (3.8%) of respondents who identified as ATSI between the ages of 15-19. The study found that this group was less likely to engage in formal volunteering than non-Indigenous people. however, it was noted that this data was "lacking in contextualisation or explanation" (Walsh & Black, 2015, p. 17). This was inconsistent with data collected from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survey which suggested that Indigenous Australians engage in volunteering more often than non-Indigenous Australians, with participation rates in volunteering for those aged over 15 at 26.9% and 19% respectively for the time period studied (Altman & Taylor, 1996, cited in Kerr et al., 2001).

While a large amount of Indigenous volunteering occurs informally, Indigenous Australians also regularly volunteer for mainstream organisations, particularly for "sporting organisations, schools, hospitals, playgroups, PCYCs and Surf Life Saving", as well as "essential services in rural and remote communities, such as the Fire and Emergency Services" (Department of Social Services, 2016, p. 48). Indigenous people under the age of 30 are more likely to have engaged in formal volunteering with mainstream organisations than those who are older (Department for Social Services, 2016).

Best practices for volunteer-involving organisations wanting to engage ATSI tertiary students in volunteering

Best practice for engaging youth volunteers includes providing mentoring, being flexible around youth volunteers' other commitments, and creating young volunteer committees within organisations (Cibich, Winner & Strickland, 2012; Volunteering Queensland, 2011). Gen Ys also lost motivation if their contributions were not recognised, or they were not able to increase their skills base (Cibich, Winner & Strickland, 2012). University students who had volunteered in the past identified the reasons for this as wanting to help the community, personal relevance of a cause to their lives, and convenience of volunteering opportunities (Hyde & Knowles, 2013). Conversely, students who had not volunteered identified time constraints, a lack of interest in volunteering and a lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities as the predominant reasons why (Hyde & Knowles, 2013).

There are multiple structure barriers to volunteering that impact Indigenous Australians, as “[m]ainstream volunteering programs are typically not tailored for [the] specific needs and aspirations that Indigenous people might have” (Volunteering Australia, 2021a, p. 3). The screening checks such as police clearances that many organisations require of their volunteers may provide a structural barrier for ATSI volunteers. Firstly, the identification documents required for these checks are not always easily accessible by Indigenous Australians (Chia, 2022). Secondly, criminal records in ATSI communities create another barrier to passing these screening checks (Indigenous Elders in the community, cited in Al Adawy, 2021a; Chia, 2022). These clearances and checks also have hidden costs (Al Adawy, 2021a & b). Given that financial status can impact the prevalence of volunteering, with 21.7% of Indigenous Australians in the lowest income quintile volunteering, compared with 39.7% of this group in the fourth and fifth quintiles (Biddle, 2009, cited in Al Adawy,

2021a), this should be considered when trying to increase the prevalence of ATSI volunteering in formal organisations.

ATSI Australians often regularly volunteer in their communities and another barrier to formal volunteering is a lack of flexibility from mainstream organisations that does not recognise these commitments (Al Adawy, 2021a; Department for Social Services, 2016). Multiple studies also mentioned the importance of cultural awareness or sensitivity within mainstream organisations for Indigenous Australians who were looking to formally volunteer (Department for Social Services, 2016; Kerr et. al, 2001). Indigenous Australians were concerned at facing both racism and a lack of cultural awareness from those within mainstream organisations (Department for Social Services, 2016). Culturally sensitive education and training systems lead to more positive outcomes for Indigenous people (Davies et. al 2010, cited in Wilson et. al, 2018), and this may be reflected in volunteering organisations.

The Department for Social Service's 2016 report "Giving and volunteering in culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities" identified other barriers to Indigenous Australian's volunteering as lack of time to volunteer, transport issues (particularly in rural and remote areas, or when paying for petrol is a challenge), lack of appreciation from organisations, and limited awareness of volunteering.

To engage Indigenous youths in volunteering, organisations may need to adapt their practices. This may include providing flexibility to Indigenous volunteers so they can also participate in community responsibilities, and offering skill-building and further employment opportunities to volunteers (Al Adawy, 2021a; Department for Social Services, 2016). Mainstream organisations may need to adapt their screening protocols so that "spend 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" (Al

Adawy, 2021a, p. 10). The costs of these screening processes should also be assessed alongside Indigenous Australian community members due to their potential to restrict volunteering (Al Adawy, 2021a).

Organisations that successfully engaged young people, including Indigenous Australians, as volunteers found that they promoted a sense of belonging and inclusion (Walsh & Black, 2015), had meaningful and relevant volunteer activities, had skilled community workers who were able to act as mentors to the volunteers, and allowed volunteers to identify their own areas of concern and work to improve them (Black et. al, 2011; Kimberley, 2010, cited in Walsh & Black, 2015). Furthermore, programs were more likely to succeed if they empowered those involved (Wilson et. al, 2018). Chia, on behalf of Volunteering Victoria, found that Aboriginal community members in Gippsland First Nations communities were deterred from volunteering for organisations that did not already have community members volunteering, and were more likely to volunteer for an organisation if other community members were already volunteering there (2022). Additionally, Indigenous Australians are more likely to participate in volunteering if it is directly servicing and beneficial for Indigenous communities (Department of Social Services, 2016).

Research techniques

The methods of collecting information in these studies included surveys, focus groups, one on one interviews, forums, yarn ups, literature reviews and analysing previously collected data. Some studies utilised surveys or online questionnaires to collect qualitative and/ or quantitative data (Wilson et al., 2018; McCabe, White, K.M. & McCabe, White, K.M. & Obst, 2007; Wang & Chen, 2013; Hyde & Knowles, 2013). The study “Empowerment is the Basis for Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for Aboriginal People in Remote Australia” utilised a quantitative survey to collect information from 841 Aboriginal people across 4 communities (Wilson et al., 2018). In addition, the study “What predicts

Australian university students' intentions to volunteer their time for community service?" utilised quantitative responses alongside open-ended qualitative survey responses (Hyde & Knowles, 2020), while one survey used a mix of hard copy and online questionnaires to gain quantitative information (McCabe, White, K.M. & McCabe, White, K.M. & Obst, 2007). While some studies utilised one method of collecting information, it was more common for studies to collect information in multiple ways. The Cibich, Winner and Strickland study collected data from both online surveys and focus groups to support their study "Engaging Gen Y Volunteers".

Conclusion

Current literature suggests that Indigenous Australians volunteer more regularly than non-Indigenous Australians and provide some ways that the volunteering of this group can be supported. However, there is significantly more research needed into how volunteer-involving organisations can recruit, support, and retain First Nations tertiary students, as well as to examine the prevalence of volunteering among this group. Overall, volunteering is a beneficial activity and so more should be done to support the involvement of First Nations Australians in formal volunteering, if they chose to engage in it.