

## **Developing a research agenda in volunteering**

**Speech to the 12<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Volunteering, 3-5 September 2008  
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The theme of this year's conference was "catch the new wave" and many of the presentations talked of what the new wave in volunteering was about – the way people volunteer, new forms of management, or changing demographics and the effect that this will have on volunteering. There were also some interesting discussions about partnerships within and across organisations. To understand this new context and the impact it is having on volunteering in Australia, we need researchers. It's the role of researchers within the volunteer context that I would like to discuss briefly here.

### **History of volunteer research**

First of all, it was only about ten years ago that academics with an interest in volunteering and the non-profit sector first got together in Australia at a national forum organised by Professor Mark Lyons. We were all amazed at the diversity of researchers who attended – academics from psychology, community development, history, management, religious studies, welfare, sports, accountancy, and so on.

Also in 1998, John May, then President of the Board at Volunteering Australia, posed the following question in one of the first editions of the Australian Journal on Volunteering, *is volunteering a subject fit for study?* Not long after, my colleague Catherine McDonald and I wrote an article arguing that volunteer research needed to become much more rigorous and sophisticated if we were to understand change and how to deal with it.

The answer to John May's question was, of course, rhetorical. Research into volunteering in Australia was well and truly launched.

### **Volunteer research today**

Over the past ten years, the number of researchers interested in volunteering has grown enormously. This is evidenced by the existence of senior academics with PhDs in volunteer issues, supervising students and projects. Some are involved in international comparative studies looking for differences and similarities across countries and contexts. Others are exploring the links between volunteering as an activity and social capital, health or social inclusion. This work raises the profile of volunteer research, supported by the provision of baseline data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

### **The recent Volunteer Research Symposium**

Cary Pedicini began the Conference with some comments about the need to build the evidence base around volunteering – to share and compare experiences and insights. The day before the Conference, VA convened a Research Symposium to discuss latest research in the area. It was enormously successful. This is only the second Research Symposium, and over 70 people attended, most of whom were active researchers.

This was a great opportunity for all of us to hear what was being done, develop our learning and to explore gaps in knowledge.

The day concluded with a workshop aimed at identifying common research themes. I would like to highlight three specific areas that we focused on:

1. The definition of volunteering: Not a new issue this one - what is volunteering (and what isn't it)? Certainly there was agreement that the diversity of volunteer activities needs to be reflected in our research and in our national data-gathering. The presence of volunteer researchers from New Zealand, who spoke of the inclusion of the Maori perspective, challenged us to consider the Indigenous Australian perspective in relation to volunteering.

2. What works and what doesn't work? These are critical questions in relation to evidence-based policy and practice. There is too much reinventing of the wheel, with innovations springing up everywhere to reflect the changing environment. The non-profit sector is very inventive and innovative. However, where it may not be so good is in documenting these changes and sharing them with the broader sector. Researchers can help with this process.

3. How do organisations operate within a regulated environment? The sector is now highly regulated, and some organisations, particularly smaller ones, are finding it difficult to manage these changes. It may be, too, that some of the best practice examples are those that operate "on the margins". How can research help evaluate such practice and assist with identifying the balance between risk and innovation?

### **Where to from here?**

I would argue that the growth of researchers interested in volunteer and non-profit issues is a great opportunity for the sector. The growth in senior researchers, for example, suggests that many are looking for opportunities for postgraduate projects or to become involved in evaluating, comparing, and drawing out the lessons from practice. Partnerships and collaboration are very much part of the contemporary research environment. Researchers are seeking to work with you in order that we can all learn together.

In this, we are supported by Volunteering Australia, as the peak body, committed to producing research and evidence. VA already produces a high-class journal, Australian Journal on Volunteering, and promotes researchers via its website.

Furthermore, VA is now supporting a new initiative, a **Research Advisory Committee**, which will devise a research agenda for the organisation and for the sector. The Committee already comprises key researchers such as Professor Peter Shergold (Centre for Social Impact); Dr Melanie Oppenheimer, an academic who has written several books on volunteering and who presents Vita Activa on Lifematters on Radio National; Professor Paul Smyth from University of Melbourne and the Brotherhood of St Laurence; and Dr Jo Barraket from the Centre for Nonprofit Studies at Queensland University of Technology. There will also be representatives from the sector on the committee.

As the Chair of this new group, I would like to invite you to participate in this process. We are seeking to be collaborative and involve the field. There will be opportunities for interaction and feedback, and we would really value your input.

Thank you and we look forward to your involvement.

Jeni Warburton  
5 September 2008