

Response to

Realising the economic potential of  
senior Australians.

Enabling Opportunity

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## 1. Summary of Recommendations

**The concept of ‘work’ is expressly defined as paid and voluntary work that takes place in a range of settings – both formal and informal.**

**The definition of ‘lifelong learning’ explicitly includes voluntary work that takes place in a range of settings – both formal and informal.**

## 2. Volunteering and the economic potential of senior Australians

### 2.1 Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. Its role is to represent the diverse views and needs of the volunteering sector while promoting the activity of volunteering as one of enduring social, cultural and economic value.

Volunteering Australia welcomes *Realising the economic potential of senior Australians: Enabling opportunity* as an important milestone in creating a future where ‘older Australians continue contributing to society, the workplace and their own well being to an extent not previously experienced’ (2011, 1).

We join the Panel and the Australian Government in responding to the ageing of Australia’s population as a period of opportunity, rather than perceiving it as a threat.

We are pleased to respond to the invitation for recommendations on how to best realise the economic potential of senior Australians.

### 2.2 Volunteering in Australia

In its recent General Social Survey, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 38% of the adult population (6.4 million people) volunteer (2010). The estimated number of volunteers in Australia has doubled from 1995 to 2010.

1,953,200 (32.5%) of the 6.4 million Australians who volunteer are 55 years and over. The work undertaken by these nearly 2 million volunteers represents a significant social and economic contribution to this nation.

### 3. Response to the report

Volunteering Australia congratulates the Panel on its work.

Particular aspects of the report which we welcome are the:

- clear articulation of how the economic potential of senior Australians is and how it could be;
- value placed on healthy ageing and enabling opportunities to make this possible;
- recognition of lifelong learning experience as part of healthy and productive ageing;
- social and economic conditions that shape the opportunities and outcomes of senior Australians ; and
- recognition of volunteering as a foundation of participation.

We wish to make specific comment and recommendations about the following aspects of report:

- How work is conceptualised; and
- Lifelong learning.

#### 3.1 Thinking differently about work

Volunteering Australia welcomes the move toward a paradigm of paid employment that better supports the economic potential of senior Australians outlined in the report.

However, in constraining the way work is conceptualised primarily to paid employment the report misses a significant contributor to the economic potential of senior Australians.

Australia's volunteers, including seniors, undertake significant work that needs to be done across the country. This work makes a significant contribution to individual well-being, social capital and the economy in Australia.

The volunteer workforce in Australia was estimated to provide over \$14.6 billion of unpaid labour in 2006-2007 (ABS Satellite Accounts).

Volunteering Australia's National Survey of Volunteering Issues in 2010 showed that volunteering provided:

- the majority of volunteer respondents with an increased sense of belonging to their community, opportunities to use their skills, to make a difference to the organisation's work, and to learn and develop ; and
- 26% of volunteers said the training they received as part of their voluntary work has helped them acquire an accreditation/qualification.
- pathways or assistance to paid employment for a significant proportion of volunteers (one third of volunteer respondents).

- 80% of volunteers said their volunteer role had provided them with opportunities to learn.
- 18% of volunteers said they have gained skills useful for current or future paid employment

Volunteerism contributes to inclusion in our society. It can help reduce feelings of personal isolation, offer people skills, social contacts, support a greater sense of self worth, and challenge the stereotypes we have about different social groups.

- 83% of volunteers said their work as a volunteer has increased their sense of belonging to their community.

The General Assembly of the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) argues that people who have been involved in volunteering are less likely to be unemployed and that volunteering should be promoted as a way of avoiding unemployment (2007, 8).

In Australia, Levy (2009) found the benefits of volunteering may offset some of the ill-effects of unemployment and underemployment. Benefits cited by participants included a wide range of improvements in social and emotional indicators including a sense of purpose, inclusion and greater confidence. Levy found evidence that volunteering may be a stepping stone to employment, with participants reporting favorable employer reactions, new skills and experience and the development of work behaviours and disciplines.

### 3.1.1 What does this mean for the economic potential of senior Australians?

The changes in thinking and practice discussed in *Realising the economic potential of senior Australians: Enabling Opportunity* in relation to employment apply equally to the organisational contexts in which volunteering work takes place – often alongside paid employees who are ageing.

Job flexibility, reducing skills mismatch, using technology to add to flexibility, job redesign and workplace adaptations are key strategies for engaging and involving volunteers.

This year's National Survey of Volunteering Issues (2011) found that how and when people are able to volunteer is affected by a range of personal circumstances and organisational factors.

Family and work commitments were the most frequently mentioned (59.3% and 52% respectively). Health issues and or disability (temporary or long term) were relevant for 13.6% and 5.8% of volunteer respondents.

When asked to choose the three most important things (from a list of ten) that are important to continue volunteering in the future, the 'Availability of volunteer work that matches their interest and/or skills' was most frequently ranked in the top 3 priorities by volunteers.

Flexible volunteering i.e. 'at times and in ways that suit me' was ranked as a second priority by nearly 40% of volunteer respondents.

Access to meaningful volunteer roles was also identified as a challenge for volunteering in the State of Volunteering Report: Tasmania (2010).

Some of these issues for volunteering are addressed in the sections of the report titled 'Creating challenging volunteer roles' and 'Making volunteering easier'. However, their omission in headline areas in the report that discuss work and the workplace reduces the status of volunteer work by senior Australians and full recognition of the economic contribution made by volunteers.

**It is recommended that:**

**The concept of 'work' is expressly defined as paid and voluntary work that takes place in a range of settings – both formal and informal.**

### 3.2 Volunteering as lifelong learning

Volunteering contributes to significant formal and informal learning.

The National Survey of Volunteering Issues 2011 found that:

- 78.9% of volunteers who responded to the National Survey of Volunteering Issues in 2011 said the training they had undertaken as a volunteer had given them the necessary skills for their volunteer role.
- It contributed to the personal development of 45.1% of volunteers.
- 17.2% of volunteers said they had difficulty accessing the training they needed to perform their role.
- The most frequently mentioned things that would make accessing this training easier was more relevant training being available (41.6%) followed by relevant training being available *closer to home or work* (27.2%) and access to online training (21.8%).

Strategies to support volunteer-involving organisations with access to training and education to enable volunteers to further develop skills are critical to the sustainability and growth of volunteering in Australia

### 3.2.1 What does this mean for the economic potential of senior Australians?

*Realising the economic potential of senior Australians: Enabling Opportunity* defines lifelong learning broadly. It implies the inclusion of volunteering. However, this approach to volunteering in the report does not give volunteering full recognition as a key contributor to the lifelong learning of all Australians, including senior Australians.

#### **It is recommended that:**

**The definition of 'lifelong learning' explicitly includes voluntary work that takes place in a range of settings – both formal and informal.**

### 3.3 Other relevant submissions

The submission to the Inquiry into the opportunities for participation of Senior Australians made by Volunteering Victoria recommended a range of practical strategies.

<http://www.volunteeringvictoria.com.au/volunteering-victoria/position-papers/579-submission-inquiry-into-participation-of-senior-victorians>

We commend this submission to the Panel for its consideration in forming recommendations to promote the economic potential of senior Australians.

## 4. Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to *Realising the economic potential of senior Australians: Enabling Opportunity*. Volunteering Australia looks forward to its recommendations being reflected in the recommendations to Government made by the Panel.

## 5. References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) 4159.0 - General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia.

European Volunteering Centre (CEV) (2010) Brussels Declaration (2010) On the Role of Volunteering as a Means of Empowerment and Social Inclusion.

Levy M. (2009) 'Volunteering as a participation option for income support recipients: Unconscionable or underutilised'. *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, Vol 14, 2009. No 4, 1-12.

Volunteering Australia (2010) National Survey of Volunteering Issues 2010. Melbourne.

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Volunteering Tasmania (2010). State of Volunteering Report: Tasmania 2010. Hobart.