

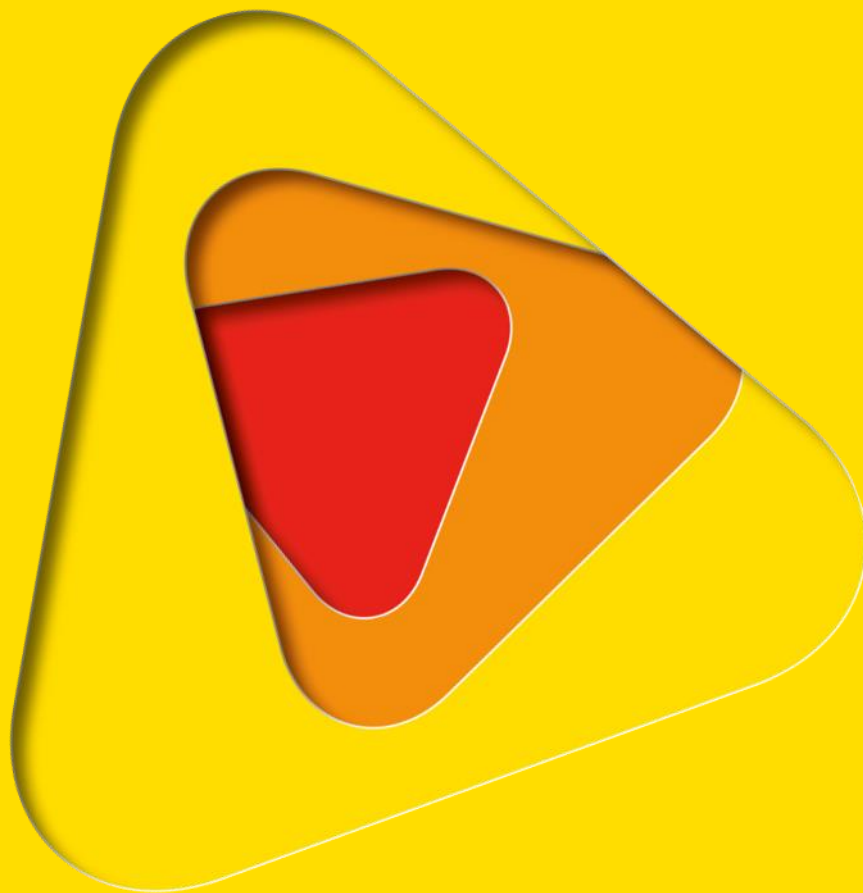


# IMPROVING THE RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS IN EMERGENCY SERVICE AGENCIES

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University of Wollongong  
Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

**Annual Report 2014**





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**Publisher:**

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

January 2015

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## Introduction

This project will address an area of organisational strategy that has been largely overlooked in both practice and in research, that is, hosting organisations such as emergency response agencies may not be effectively managing endogenous elements of their organisational practice, the impact of which is sub-optimal volunteer retention. The organisations themselves seek to properly understand the forces at play within their workforce and the strategic effect these have on the engagement of new recruits. This project will help volunteer-based organisations to better utilise and manage both their resources and their volunteer workforce. In particular, implementing this project will assist the NSW SES to achieve their goal of raising volunteer retention rates from 45% to 60% (over five years). This will have immediate financial benefits for the organisation and enhance their capabilities and the quality of the services that they provide to their recipient communities. Findings arising from the project can then be used by comparable organisations across Australia to similarly optimise their workforce and financial strategies and thereby also better serve their communities. The research publications arising from this study will also benefit academia by addressing areas of organisation strategy and social marketing that have been overlooked in extant literature.

The project is based on grounded qualitative research and will address three core volunteer issues: Retaining volunteers beyond their initial training period would enable a more even distribution of training resources to meet a larger variety of training needs. This would help to ensure emergency response readiness across the spectrum of SES capabilities.

An increase in the skills acquisition of SES units across NSW and Australia means that each unit will be better equipped to handle its own emergencies, meaning faster and more efficient deployment, and will result in reduced impacts on federal funding (paying for rescue workers to travel across Australia to assist in emergency situations). A larger volunteer core also means that work can be distributed more evenly among unit members, permitting volunteers to maintain a work and life balance during emergency situations, instead of feeling an obligation to take every shift due to the absence of qualified workers.

A reduction in turnover would increase the return on investment, relieving budgetary constraints, and returning value to the community.

## Staff

The following people are engaged in the project's research:

Dr Michael Jones	BNHCRC Project Leader
Dr Yoke Berry	Project Manager
A/Prof Andrew Sense	Chief Investigator
Mr William Calcutt	PhD Candidate
Mr Nick Popov	PhD Candidate
Ms Hui-Ling Wang	Research Assistant
Mr Haidar Alduffadar	Research Assistant until mid-May 2014
Mr. Arnab Roy	Research Assistant from mid-May 2014

## Research sub-projects

In the course of the development of the research scheme and discussions within the cluster, four immediate sub-projects were identified. Listed, for each sub-project, is the research context, the research questions, the expected outcomes and progress made as per 30 June 2014.

### **Sub-Project 1: Understanding and managing the interaction between individual and group motives and different organisational structures-Volunteer Expectations & Experiences**

#### *Research context and rationale*

Volunteers constitute an invaluable resource that enable various emergency service agencies to quickly and effectively respond to and minimise the human and property losses from major natural events. ABS data from the 2010 census reveals that 36% of the adult population volunteered in the previous twelve months, with 2.5% (or 421,600 people) volunteering for emergency service roles.

Emergency service volunteering is fundamentally different to many other volunteer roles where participation is characterised by the element of choice and free will. The intrinsic demands of emergency service roles, in particular the often hazardous nature of emergency and crisis situations for both the community and volunteers, the obligation to respond urgently and effectively to protect life and property at any time, the demands for all operational members to have a minimum level of training and competency in certain skills, and the level of commitment and personal sacrifice involved in often arduous and sometimes dangerous roles, means these roles are effectively a volunteer-based public service with many of the characteristics of conventional work.

The literature reflects considerable ongoing discussion about the changing nature of volunteering in Australia due to increasing demographic heterogeneity, an aging population, the growing demands of a market economy, technology-enabled changes to social participation and a reported shift from collective to reflexive modes of volunteering. Much of the (limited Australian) research on the reasons for a relatively high turnover amongst emergency service volunteers tends to focus either on individual motivation or organisational context. Individual motivation can range from altruism to egotism, while organisational structure can range from organic to mechanistic. There is a pressing need for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the interaction of these two forces within the unique constraints of emergency service roles, and their influence on volunteer satisfaction, retention and performance.

#### *Research questions & methodology*

- RQ1: Why do people volunteer for emergency service roles and what are their expectations of the experience?
- RQ2: Are particular individual motives reflected in distinct volunteer sub-groups, and what are the possible implications for effective volunteer management and maintaining individual commitment?

What is the workplace experience for volunteers in emergency service roles and why is that so? Are particular organisational cultures reflected in distinct volunteer workplaces, and what are the implications of this for mobilising and managing effective teams in emergency situations?

How do these different individual motives and organisational cultures interplay in the workforce, and what are the implications for effective leadership, training, teamwork, commitment and morale?

In stage one of the research, reliable contemporary data on issues such as individual volunteer demographics, primary motives, experiences, expectations and intentions will be obtained through an extensive organisation-wide survey of members, followed by wide face-to-face consultation with local units and brigades to develop a portfolio of representative case studies on the key issues of concern. In stage two of the research expressions of interest will be sought from several (at least three) different local units/brigades willing to participate in a series of participative action research investigations of unit-generated alternative human resource management strategies over three month periods, with a total of nine interventions over twelve months.

**Anticipated outcomes**

- A more comprehensive understanding of the composition, individual and group motivations and organisational management preferences of the emergency service volunteer workforce.
- The identification of the motives and preferences of distinct volunteer sub-groups will provide emergency agencies with options to tailor management strategies to maximise both response capabilities and volunteer retention at the operational unit level.
- The development of more informed approaches to volunteer recruitment, training and support.

**Progress as per 30 June 2014**

William Calcutt manages the project which is the basis of his PhD study. He is the recipient of a BNHCRC scholarship and is supervised by Dr. Michael Jones and Assoc. Prof. Andrew Sense.

Mr Calcutt has finalised the bulk of the literature review and is in the process of designing his study approach (Figure 1). He will be presenting a poster at the AFAC 2014 conference in Wellington.



Figure 1: Progress chart for project “Understanding and managing the interaction between individual and group motives and different organisational structures-Volunteer Expectations & Experiences” (with permission from William Calcutt).

## **Sub-Project 2: Redesigning Leadership – Self-determination theory and emotional Intelligence**

### ***Research context and rationale***

Effective leadership is a critical success factor for any organisation. However, in the place of defective or absent leadership in for-profit organisations, an employee may be willing to trade labour for income, and in so doing, will submit to authority. This is not the case in volunteer-based organisations. In organisations where people volunteer their time, the exchange is much more precarious, and tolerances for poor leadership do not endure. As stated in the recent NSW Auditor-General's Report (2014) which examined the management of volunteers in the NSW SES, leadership is a key factor for the retention of volunteers: "Leadership, recognition, communication and training are the most important issues that SES needs to address to improve the management of volunteers and reduce turnover." This report goes on to discuss the importance of leadership training in retaining and attracting volunteers: "The quality of volunteer leadership is an important factor in attracting and keeping volunteers but unit controllers receive little induction or training." It is this element – leadership training – that this project will address.

### ***The program***

The research will provide state-of-the-art leadership training – in terms of leading edge theories of leadership development – to enable Bushfire & Natural Hazards CRC (BNHCRC) collaborators to understand their own leadership deficits and possibilities, and to refine a program of enhanced leadership training for creating the next generation of emergency service volunteer leaders.

Many leaders agree that it is important that volunteers are happy and want to continue volunteering, but they are frequently unsure what they should do to motivate and engage volunteers constructively or how they might interact with volunteers to promote positive volunteer experiences. This program explores the leadership skills necessary to create optimally motivating and supportive work environments for emergency volunteers. This is facilitated through evidence-based approaches to leadership that are well researched and have been shown to improve wellbeing, job satisfaction, volunteer work effort and retention of employees and volunteers. During the program leaders will experience leadership development, alongside others in similar role.

The Leadership Development Program (LDP) is being developed by a team of academics of the University of Wollongong (UoW) from a variety of disciplines and consists of Dr Michael Jones (Faculty of Business and BNHCRC Project Leader) Dr Dominique Parrish (Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health), Dr Joakim Eidenfalk (Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts), Dr Senevi Kiridena (Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences), Mrs Vivien Forner (PhD candidate in the Faculty of Business) and Mr David Rae (Assistant Commissioner and Director Human Services NSW SES) who were awarded a University of Wollongong Global Challenges Seed Grant in November 2013.

### ***Research questions & methodology***

- RQ1: How can leadership be developed through the application of SDT and EI?
- RQ2: How effectively is followers' engagement and retention increased as a result of an SDT and EI intervention on their leaders?

The LDP team will deliver the Leadership Development Program and examine its effectiveness by surveying leaders attending the two day program at the University of Wollongong (20 September and 22 November) as well as the volunteers who report to those leaders (direct reports). It is anticipated that the surveys disclose whether the program improves the leadership skills of leaders

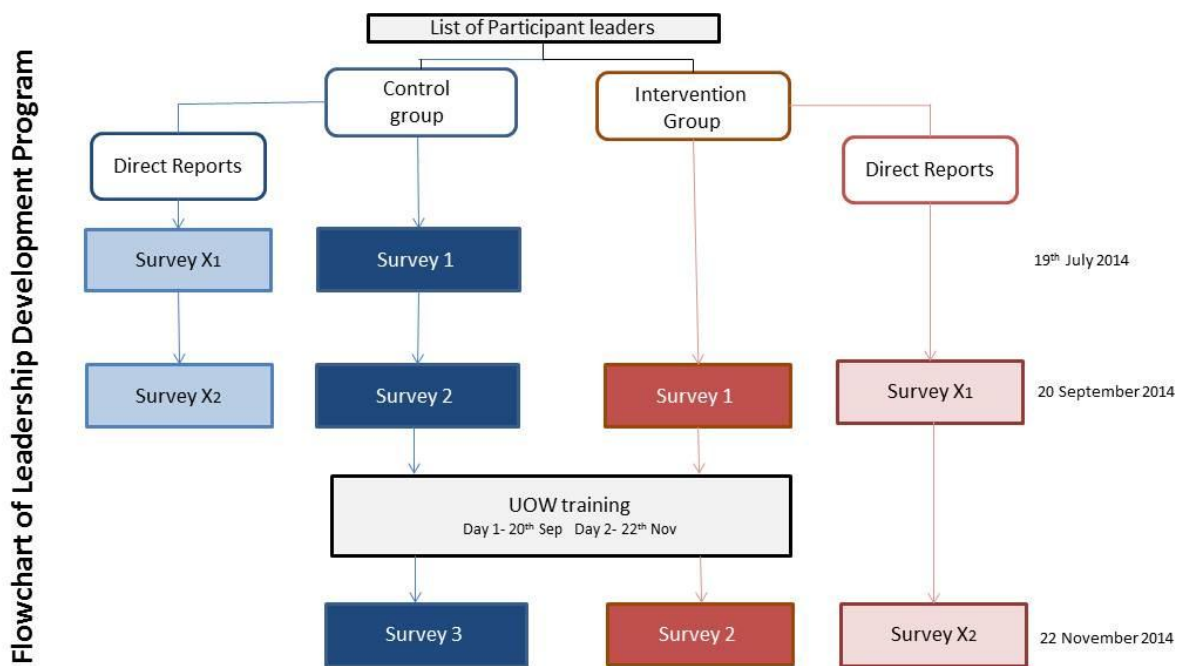
and/or benefits the volunteers who report to these leaders (direct reports). Optional online content will be made available for the duration of the program for participants who would like to broaden their knowledge about leadership.

**Anticipated outcomes**

- Participants will learn what a leader can do to improve the quality of the volunteer experience and increase the motivation, wellbeing and retention of the volunteers in a unit.
- The leadership skills that are learned in this program are transferrable and can also be applied in any role or organisation where the volunteers are responsible for leading others.

**Progress as per 30 June 2014**

Recruitment of leaders and their direct reports has commenced. While all end users in the cluster had been notified of the program and some had expressed interest initially, only the NSW SES and NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) have offered the program to their leaders. The human ethics application has been submitted and is awaiting approval. Figure 2 gives a schematic overview of the LDP.



**Figure 2: Overview of the Leadership Development Program. Participants and their direct reports will be divided into two groups (for the purpose of the surveys) and attend two training days at the University of Wollongong. Online content is made available for the duration of the program.**

**References**

- NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament (2014) Management of volunteers, Performance auditing.



## **Sub-Project 3: Gender Balance – Understanding the causal factors**

### ***Research context and rationale***

Gender diversification is a nation-wide challenge in the emergency services sector. In a study reported almost a decade back, Beatson and McLennan (2005) used reports concerning gender issues in emergency services (both paid, and volunteer based) to conclude that: (1) women were under-represented in Australian volunteer-based fire services, (2) they faced significant barriers to volunteering and (3) were likely to experience both passive and active discrimination. Also of interest is the work of McLennan, Birch, Beatson and Cowlshaw (2007) in which they reviewed research conducted by the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project pertaining to the recruitment and retention of women volunteer fire-fighters. They also found that the upper echelons of management in most emergency service organizations were largely populated by males. These findings stand in stark contrast to the more general observations of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2009) which states that “women volunteer more commonly than men in general. In 2006, 36% of women aged 18 years and over were volunteers compared to 32% of men”. Gender balance is thus a particular challenge in the volunteer-driven emergency services sector.

All Emergency Service Agencies in Australia face gender imbalance. This project seeks to develop an understanding of the underlying causal factors that contribute to this imbalance and to leverage this understanding to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations concerning interventions that might redress the situation.

### ***Research questions & methodology***

This project will address two overarching research questions:

- RQ1: What are the key factors responsible for gender imbalance in these organizations?
- RQ2: What specific interventions might these organizations deploy to redress gender balance, and improve both the attraction and retention of female volunteers?

Clearly, answers to RQ1 will directly lead to the formulation of interventions that address RQ2.

A number of initial hypotheses might be formulated to address RQ1:

- HYP1: Organizational structure contributes to gender imbalance.
- HYP2: Organizational culture contributes to gender imbalance.
- HYP3: Gender imbalance is self-perpetuating (i.e., organizations that are imbalanced in the first place remain so).

Comparative case studies are likely to generate insights relating to HYP1. Data about voluntary emergency service organizations in other geographies that have achieved greater gender balance might provide pointers as to which organizational structures work (especially if these organizational structures are significantly different to those in the target organizations of this study).

Organizational culture (the focus of HYP2) is often manifested in organizational and social norms. Focus groups can help surface such norms, which are often tacit. These norms can then be held up to scrutiny (using the focus group mechanism) to identify those that might have a causal connection to gender imbalance.

### ***Anticipated outcomes***

This project will lead to the following outcomes:

- A detailed understanding of the factors contributing to gender imbalance in volunteer-driven emergency service organizations.
- A set of specific interventions to redress gender imbalance.

- The integration of these interventions into a comprehensive gender mainstreaming program.

#### ***Progress as per 30 June 2014***

Ms Hui-Ling Wang, PhD candidate in the Faculty of Business manages this project. She attended, together with Dr Michael Jones and Dr Yoke Berry, a round table discussion at Parliament House, Canberra on 24 June 2014 which was organised by the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) and Economic Security 4 Women. Several women's organisations were present which gave the team an excellent opportunity to network. The organisers are planning another round table meeting in Ipswich, Queensland, in October 2014 with women affected by the 2011 floods in Queensland to which the UoW team is invited to hold face to face interviews with participants for research purposes. This will be a pilot study that will give valuable insights as to possible reasons why women who have lived through a natural disaster currently do or do not volunteer in local emergency organisations. Data from the NSW SES and NSW RFS have been analysed to determine research sites which will provide the team with contrasts in practices, based on high relative gender balance versus units/brigades with low relative gender balance.

#### ***References***

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009), Australian National Accounts: Volunteering Rates, ABS Voluntary Work, Australia, 2006-2007, (cat. no. 4441.0), Canberra: ABS accessed 15/04/2014, <http://www.abs.gov.au>.
- Beatson, R. and McLennan, J. (2005), Australia's women volunteer fire fighters: A literature review and research agenda, Australian Journal on Volunteering, vol.10 (2), pp.18-27
- McLennan, J., Birch, A, Beatson, R. and Cowlshaw, S. (2007), Recruiting and retaining Australia's women volunteer firelighters: Some research evidence. Australian Journal on Volunteering, vol.12 (2), pp.59-69.

### **Sub-Project 4: Emergency Management Cadetship programs – An examination of Best Practice**

#### ***Research context and rationale***

Successful and well-managed youth volunteering programmes provide five organisation and community benefits. First, youth volunteering has the potential to make a strong contribution to individual and youth development. Second, youth volunteering provides a constructive vehicle for the channelling of youthful energy and harnessing of it for community good. Third, a programme which successfully integrates young people into an emergency organisation, through well-managed socialisation and engagement has the potential to create emotional and social bonds which may guide later preferences towards volunteering in the person's future. Fourth, youth who are exposed to emergency training at a young age, are likely to develop positive attitudes towards emergency preparedness for themselves and their families which can lead to increased community preparedness and resilience. Fifth, engaging youth is an exercise in marketing, which builds community awareness and opens the door to many more potential volunteers, increasing the volunteer pool and strengthening engagement of current volunteers through better community buy-in, support and recognition.

#### ***Research questions & methodology***

- 1) Effectiveness:
  - a) How does the member/cadet perceive the effectiveness of the cadet program?
  - b) In their opinion, why are they so effective (ineffective)?
- 2) Socialisation:

- a) What role does socialisation play?
  - b) How is socialisation achieved?
- 3) Belonging and identity:
- a) How does the program create a sense of belonging?
  - b) How does the program contribute to identity?
  - c) What role does leadership, responsibility and social integration play on belonging and identity? And how do these contribute to creating an inclusive environment?
- 4) Motivation:
- a) What motivates cadets to contribute their time and energy to a program?
  - b) What motivates unit/brigade member to contribute their time and energy to a cadet?
  - c) What do cadets get/want out of the program?
  - d) What do units/brigades get/want out of the program?
- 5) Culture:
- a) How does the cadet perceive the unit/brigade's culture? What is the impact of this on them?
  - b) How does the unit/brigade member perceive their culture? What is the impact of this on them?

The study will be data driven and empirically grounded. The study will be led with a pilot case study examining successful instances of good practice in units and brigades in Western Australia. This pilot study will guide second phase research through an understanding of what does and does not work in WA, and what may and may not work in other states.

The aim of the research is to delve beyond surface elements like course curricula, to get into the psychological and sociological issues pertaining to cadet volunteering to discover the key drivers for success.

#### ***Anticipated outcomes***

- Developing a refined and informed understanding of cadet programs and their strengths and weaknesses.
- Providing a best case scenario for successful and sustainable cadet programs, with a value-based inventory of elements which contribute towards success.

#### ***Progress as per 30 June 2014***

Jo Scardigno, the State Coordinator of Volunteers and Youth Services of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) in WA, has been most helpful in setting up a series of interview appointments with units within DFEA which have an outstanding cadet program. Mr Haidar Alduffadar helped the project get off the ground and recently the new research assistant, Mr Arnab Roy has taken over the responsibility of the project. A human ethics application was accepted just prior to the writing of this report, pilot research can now begin.

#### ***References***

- Johnston, F., Grogan, K. and Savelsberg, H. 2004. *Young People and Volunteering*. Prepared for The Office for Volunteers. [report] South Australia: University of South Australia.

## **Additional developments**

### ***Website***

An informative and current website <http://www.uowblogs.com/evp/> was created in the first quarter of the year to communicate the status of our research to the BNHCRC cluster and other stakeholders.

### ***Cluster engagement***

A teleconference with cluster end-users was organised by the Lead End Representative David Rae in April 2014. Following on, all cluster end users were approached to gauge their interest in the Leadership Development Program.

### ***Conferences and meetings attended***

Dr Michael Jones:

- Attended and presented the research proposal at the Research Advisory Forum in Adelaide in March 2014.
- Presented the project at the AEMVF Forum in Parliament House, Canberra on 3 June 2014.

Dr Michael Jones, Dr Yoke Berry and Ms Hui-Ling Wang:

- Attended round table discussions organised by the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) and Economic Security 4 Women at Parliament House, Canberra on 24 June 2014.

## Cluster end-users

Name	Organisation
Jill Edwards	AFAC
Raelene Thompson	Attourney Generals Dept
John Richardson	Australian Red Cross
Kate Harrap	CFA
Tony Brown	CFA
Ali Martin	CFA
Martin Embery	CFA
Gavin Thompson	CFA
Robert Dougdale?	CFA
Rebecca Tidey	CFA
Sonya	CFS Volunteer Association SA
Andy Woodlaw	CFS Volunteer Association SA
Peter Jeffrey	DCS&EM, Qld
Gloria Caruso	MFB
David Rae	NSW SES
Joy Wintour	NZFS
Neil Gallant	QLD Fire & Emergency Services
Narelle Koteff	RFS
John Davis	RFS
Josh Whittaker	RMIT
Blythe McLennan	RMIT
John Handmer	RMIT
Toni Richardson	SA Fire and Emergency Services Commission
Adelaide Cooper	SA SES
Georgina Goodrich	State Recovery Office SA
Lucas van Rijswijk	TAS Fire
Andy Wood	CFS Volunteer Association
Roger Flavell	Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations
Karen Roberts	WA
Samantha Colwell	Fire and Rescue, NSW
Peter Jeffrey	Queensland Fire and Emergency Services
Madonna Day	Queensland Fire and Emergency Services