MAKING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION THE NEW NORMAL IN EMERGENCY SERVICES
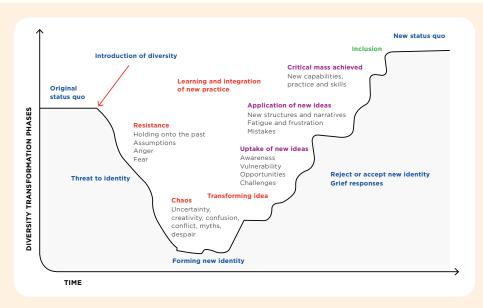
ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This research was conducted during phase one of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC project *Diversity and inclusion: building strength and capability*, which began in 2017. This phase provides a '360 degree view' of diversity and inclusion practice and understanding within emergency management organisations. The research spans organisational, economic and community contexts, and provides a basis for developing a draft diversity and inclusion framework. This *Hazard Note* covers the organisational stream of this research phase.

AUTHORS

Celeste Young and Prof Roger Jones, Victoria University. For more information contact celeste.young@vu.edu.au

SUMMARY

It is widely acknowledged that the emergency services have still not unlocked the full benefits that come from developing diverse and inclusive paid and volunteer workforces, or the potential opportunities from interactions with their increasingly diverse communities. The practice of diversity and inclusion within emergency service agencies is patchy, and the benefits diversity and inclusion provide are not yet well enough understood. A diverse and inclusive workforce that better reflects the community from which it is drawn can increase trust and help to build more resilient organisations and communities. It can also strengthen the capabilities and skills within emergency management agencies and their communities, so they can more effectively respond to social, environmental and economic drivers of change. A diverse and inclusive workforce is also a critical aspect of managing the escalating risks from these drivers, especially those from natural hazards. This makes diversity and inclusion an organisational imperative for the effective development of the emergency management sector. The research findings, based on case studies of the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, Fire and Rescue New South Wales and the South Australian State Emergency Service highlighted key characteristics that enable diverse and inclusive organisations, such as being strategic, collaborative, outward thinking, future focused, and empowerment of individuals.

▲ **Figure 1:** PHASES OF THE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION TRANSFORMATION PROCESS.

CONTEXT

Implementation of diversity and inclusion is a dynamic and at times, uncomfortable process for many organisations – this includes emergency management agencies. Mostly, implementation has been reactive and inconsistent and has not been fully integrated into organisations. For this to be achieved it needs to be embedded as part of the overarching transformation organisations are going through as they develop their future organisational strategies.

Most investigations to date have focused primarily on the problem of diversity rather than whether implementation is achieving the desired outcome. There has been limited analysis of questions such as: what is 'effective implementation' of diversity and inclusion? What makes it effective? How is this best measured? And what strategies would support its widespread adoption in a way that can ensure it will be sustained?

BACKGROUND

As a systemic issue, diversity and inclusion needs to be managed sustainably for

DECISION TYPE	SIMPLE	COMPLICATED	COMPLEX
Features	Linear, actionable, resolvable with one solution. Often static risks with known treatments and outcomes.	Systemic, may require more than one solution. Uses both known and unknown treatments. Dynamic but can usually be stabilised.	Requires many systemic, broad, inter-related actions and solutions. Dynamic. Treatment often evolves. Often high impact, low probability.
Example	A faulty piece of machinery.	Containment of a natural hazard.	Climate change, resilience, recovery.
Activator	Individuals or people responsible; may be asset owner and/or organisations.	Collaboration by parties linked to and affected by event, assuming delegated areas of responsibility.	'Whole of society' collaboration, sharing ownership through inclusive partnerships.
Thinking frameworks	Logical, analytical, prescriptive and practical.	Short to medium term, analytical, responsive. Mostly prescriptive with intuitive elements that respond to changes.	Long-term, strategic, conceptual, lateral, analytical, creative, reflexive, continuous, flexible.
Leadership actions	Direct and review.	Consult, assess, respond and direct.	Consult, facilitate, reflect, empower, guide and collaborate.
Skills	Technical.	Technical, tactical, soft skills.	Strategic, technical, soft skills.

▲ Table 1: DECISION MAKING TYPES (ADAPTED FROM YOUNG EL AL., 2017 AND JONES ET AL., 2014).

the longer term. This requires complex decision making (see Table 1, above) which incorporates diverse and systemic ways of thinking This presents a major challenge to emergency service agencies, which predominantly use either simple or complicated types of decision making in command-and-control structures. Agencies are less familiar with the complex type needed for systemic and strategic decisions; for example, planning for disasters never before experienced.

The institutional, organisational and social systems that have developed from a history dominated by tactical decision making are often hierarchical, rigid and siloed. This research found that the resulting organisational characteristics of emergency service agencies are often very different to those needed for implementing effective diversity and inclusion (Table 2, right). These characteristics shape how decisions are made and how values and narratives are interpreted, communicated and enacted in organisational contexts. It is important that diversity and inclusion is seen to complement, rather than replace, existing characteristics. Planned transitions are needed to ensure that new characteristics can be developed and integrated so they enhance service delivery and community safety.

BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH
Phase one of this project, conducted

FEATURES OF EMERGENCY SERVICE AGENCIES	FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION
Hierarchal	Valuing everyone, equality
Tactical	Strategic
Focused primarily on technical skills	Focused primarily on soft skills
Authoritative leadership directed at organisational areas	Enabling leadership at all organisational levels
Shorter-term decisions	Longer-term visions
Reactive	Reflexive
Resistant to change	Continuous change
Traditional	Forward focus
Working *for* organisation and communities	Working *with* organisation and communities
Inward thinking with organisational focus	Outward thinking across all society
Directive communication	Interactive communication
'Fixes things' within a timeframe	Does not 'fix things' – requires ongoing, longer term management
Knowing what to do and not making mistakes	Expecting the unexpected and learning from errors
Positional power	Empowerment of individuals

▲ Table 2: FEATURES OF EMERGENCY SERVICE AGENCIES COMPARED TO EFFECTIVE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION.

between July 2017 and July 2018, entailed a systemic analysis using case studies to examine the current context of diversity and inclusion within three agencies and three communities. The researchers applied values, narratives and decision making lenses across organisational, community and economic themes. The economic theme focused on the changing capabilities of the organisations. The organisational theme looked at the key influences on the organisation's decision making and practice. The community theme explored community values and community attitudes and understanding of emergency service agencies. Both the community and organisational themes examined barriers, opportunities and strengths in relation to diversity and inclusion.

The participating case study organisations were the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES), Fire and

Rescue New South Wales (FRNSW), and the South Australian State Emergency Service (SASES). The community case studies selected were Bordertown in South Australia, Bendigo in Victoria and south western Sydney in New South Wales, representing rural, regional and urban communities.

The researchers used a collaborative, mixed-methods approach for the organisational assessment which included a literature review, targeted interviews in emergency service agency case studies, a survey, reviews of publicly available documents and a visual audit of websites. Interviews were also undertaken outside of the case studies to provide additional insights and to ensure that the data was representative of the industry as a whole. Aspects of diversity examined were: culture and ethnicity, gender, demographic status (age and education), and disability (physical). Data collected was then provided to the case study organisations for review. This was then synthesised and the draft reports were reviewed by the working group and selected stakeholders to ensure that key observations were also relevant to the sector as a whole.

As the literature yielded no clear definition of effective diversity and inclusion, the research team developed the following definition to guide the project: *Effective diversity is the result of interactions between organisations and individuals that leverage, value and build upon characteristics and attributes within and beyond their organisations to increase diversity and inclusion, resulting in benefits that support joint personal and organisational objectives and goals, over a sustained period of time (Young et al. 2018, p19).*

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Diversity and inclusion activities were being undertaken in all organisations, but were not well integrated into organisational systems and processes, nor connected to daily tasks. There are many ways to undertake diversity and inclusion and its effectiveness depends upon the agency's organisational context, their ability to act and how well they can leverage resources and relationships. The largest barrier to diversity and inclusion was cultural, and the largest need was in the area of management.

The research also reinforced the finding that effective inclusion is the critical component that enables effective diversity and that integrating this into an organisational fabric is a long-term proposition.

Key findings about organisations were:

- There is a need to identify, build, value and reward specific diversity and inclusion capabilities, skills and attributes.
- Increasing the visible presence of diversity in the workforce is important. However, a positive workplace experience for individuals with diverse backgrounds is critical if this diversity is to be maintained.
- Response-based and hierarchical structures, processes and decision making with 'fix it' and 'fit in' cultures were predominant in all organisations. These are often at odds with the more strategic and people-based skills and structures required for diversity and inclusion.
- Diverse organisational cultures exist in each organisation and there are cultural gaps between these, particularly between upper management and brigades and units. This often results in 'us and them' attitudes.
- Skills to support development of increased awareness of how to respond constructively to uncomfortable situations and challenging conversations is critical. Greater awareness of appropriate language use and behaviours and how these are perceived and received by others is also needed.
- Diversity and inclusion is mostly understood as being about 'men and women'. There is limited understanding of how different types of diversity intersect and how to manage their specific needs, for example, for an LGBTIQ member of a culturally and linguistically diverse community in a rural area.
- There is a key need for facilitative approaches that guide rather than direct and for proactive management of difficult and destructive behaviours. Establishment of clear boundaries and accountability is also important.

There was limited understanding of the benefits and opportunities that diversity and inclusion offer. Community benefits are currently not measured. Emergency service agencies also had limited knowledge of the attributes and capabilities held by diverse communities and individuals. Identification

and leveraging of these is needed to develop more effective partnerships and communication between agencies and their communities.

Due to the hybrid nature of emergency management agencies and their relationship with the community, measurement and management models tailored to this specific context need to be developed.

Implementation

The context assessment revealed that many organisations had not adequately socialised or primed their workforce and past activities were often seen as reactive and resulting in poor outcomes. Myths, assumptions and stereotypical perceptions of diversity and inclusion had also contributed to negative outcomes. Visions and accompanying narratives of what diversity would look like

in future organisations were also lacking. However, at the time of this assessment, QFES were addressing these issues through visioning workshops. Many interviewees felt that diversity and inclusion activities had generated confusion, fear and resistance, particularly at brigade and unit level.

The hero narrative featured strongly in organisational and personal identities in many organisations; these were reflected in public narratives perpetuated by the media and in communities. The visual audit of agency websites found the dominant image displayed was of men of Anglo-Saxon appearance undertaking response activities. As identity has a key role in the transformation process, these images and narratives were found to be both positive and negative and required proactive management during implementation activities.

Examples of effective practice were found in all three case study organisations. These included; the Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy (FRNSW), QFES Transforms through Leadership (QFES) and a lateral entry program to increase representation in management (SASES).

Authentic actions and representation of diverse individuals (particularly at leadership level), together with long-term programs and trust were seen as key needs for effective diversity and inclusion by both organisations and the community.

HOW IS THE RESEARCH BEING USED?

Anecdotal evidence suggests the research is already contributing to diversity conversations across upper levels within the sector. Early findings were presented at the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC Research Advisory Forum in April 2018, the AFAC18 conference and the AFAC Diversity and Inclusion Group (both September

2018). Many stakeholders have told the research team they find the conversations and reflection which is part of this process valuable and useful. It has also catalysed the establishment of the Emergency Management and Defence Inclusion Practitioners' Association by one of the members of the working group. The project has also undertaken collaborative research with Women And Firefighting Australasia (WAFA) and QFES and the output from this is being used as a basis for further collaborative research activities.

The research methodology for assessment and the strategic change process for diversity and inclusion have received positive feedback from stakeholders as being useful tools for organisational management. Sharing of research outputs has also resulted in the project being approached by other government agencies to conduct research. The research to date has also been presented to a number of key stakeholder organisations during 2018 and 2019.

This research is contributing to improving diversity and inclusion practice within the sector, alongside the many programs within organisations and sector wide programs such as AFAC's involvement in Male Champions of Change.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The team is continuing to build upon the evidence based Draft Diversity and Inclusion Framework. They have devised a programmatic continuous improvement process and an organic growth model to support implementation of the strategic change process - published in *The Long Road: Effective Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management* report in July 2018. They are also undertaking further interviews to understand how diversity and inclusion is connected to tasks in

brigades and units. The economic stream will undertake case studies of selected programs and the community stream will map community capabilities and attributes.

The researchers are also synthesising the outputs from the Into the Future Workshop undertaken in December 2018 and undertaking further investigation into risks associated with this. Early findings indicated that diversity and inclusion related shocks may pose a major risk to organisations and their communities and should be listed on risk registers.

The project will continue working with diversity and inclusion practitioners in their stakeholder agencies to sustain the mutually beneficial learning process.

FURTHER READING

Rasmussen, B., Maharaj, N. (2018) Changing Capabilities of Emergency Service Organisations. Case Study Summary. Melbourne: VISES (Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies), Victoria University.

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Young, C., Pyke, J., Maharaj. N., Rasmussen, B. and Jones, R. (2018) Diversity and inclusion: building strength and capability literature review. Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne.

Young, C., Jones, R.N. and Kumnick. M., (2018) The Long Road: Building Effective Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management Organisations. Case Study Synthesis and Draft Framework. Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne.