

**Submission
No 16**

VOLUNTEERING AND UNPAID WORK PLACEMENTS AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

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Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee,

RE: Submission to Inquiry into Volunteering and unpaid work placements among children and young people in NSW.

Youthconnections.com.au supports young people aged 13-19 on the Central Coast to access employment, education, training and recreational opportunities. Our mission is to lead communities in creating environments where young people can achieve purposeful futures through economic, social and civic participation. We support approximately 6,000 young people annually across the Central Coast, Hunter and North Sydney by providing flexible learning options for Years 9-12, case management, apprenticeships and traineeships, structured work placements, and job readiness programs that include voluntary work experience placements,. And we work closely with at-risk youth in the Central Coast region to help overcome the barriers they face with their education and gaining employment.

We see the benefits of young people volunteering in the community as myriad. However, we also believe that the ways in which young people are actively engaged in volunteering within our community can be undervalued. Young people care about people and planet. Their voluntary contributions are often linked with their social networks and aligned with their passions and interests. Just drive past any sporting field on the weekend and you will see young people helping to coach or umpire team sport activities on a voluntary basis. Or helping out down at the beach with surf lifesaving responsibilities. They support organisations such as World Vision's 40 hour famine, or Clean Up Australia Day or Get Up Australia with its membership of around 400,000 that is predominantly of young people. We see young people in our day-to-day work who are facing some very significant challenges in their own lives and who still strive to reach out and help others in ways that inspire us.

Young people not only volunteer because of its intrinsic value to the community, they contribute freely of their time to organisations or causes aligned with their sense of identity and social networks within a rapidly changing world. We would advocate that there needs to be greater collaboration with young people about how to support them in this endeavor, and a higher value be placed on volunteer activities that they are attracted to and find meaningful.

We also understand that globalisation has a strong impact at every social, economic and cultural level, and this is no less true when it comes to young people's engagement with volunteering. Young people experience globalisation on a daily basis through their activities, friendships and particularly through their social media networking. It is therefore not surprising that many of the organisations that adhere to traditional volunteering practices foster a growing disconnect with young people.

Engaging young volunteers through a dynamic social media strategy has significant scope for development. We see strategies that include an investment in mapping and engaging with social media influencers as being one of the key elements of engaging young volunteers. Social media influencers are already conversing with significant numbers of young people in authentic and meaningful ways. Some influencers have a strong commitment to using their online presence to promote causes or mobilize people into activities that promote social benefit to the community. From our point of view, there are some natural synergies that could be explored in this field and that the NSW Government is ideally placed to implement some innovative policies that link young people to volunteering through social media influencers.

Social Media influencers are people who start public conversations, set trends and give voice to ideas across audiences of large sizes through a digital medium. They have significant interaction and connectedness to their digital communities around shared values and interests. Sometimes influencers are widely recognised celebrities. However there are a growing number of influencers whose well established identities thrive in niche areas. These individuals may not be known to the wider community, but have deep roots in specific passions, cultural sub groups, and identities that give them access to the hearts and minds of demographics such as young people. Influencers are not only heard, they mobilise. This is a fact well understood by corporate Australia as part of their digital marketing strategies. This fact is less well understood in the community and not-for profit sector.

By way of example, we offer two hypothetical scenarios that match an influencer to a volunteering opportunity for young people based on shared values and interests:

1. Well known comedian and singer/songwriter Tim Minchin has 685,000 followers of his @timminchin Twitter account. Describing himself as *"a musician with a swollen sense of my ability to articulate my insignificance."* His occasional address to a cohort of graduates at the University of Western Australia in October 2013 went viral on social media, with 1.6 million hits on Youtube. During this address, Minchin entreats his audience to *"Play a sport, do yoga, pump iron, run... whatever... but take care of your body. You're going to need it. .. There is an inverse correlation between depression and exercise. Do it. Run, my beautiful intellectuals, run.."*

With this in mind, Minchin's endorsement of exercise for wellbeing could be matched to an event like The Swisse Color Run which is a 5 km marathon held Australia wide in capital cities and regional centers. These events held across the country are a volunteering opportunity par excellence, having both direct and flow on benefits to individuals and communities. Celebrate Life Foundation is the primary beneficiary of the Swisse Color Run. With only 2,400 Twitter followers for @TheColorRunAUS their social media footprint is decidedly small. Imagine if Tim Minchin advocated to young people following his twitter feed to volunteer at a Swisse Color Run event.

2. In another example, Sheridyn Fisher has 80,000 Twitter followers for her @sheridynfisher account. She describes herself as a *"Model & Actress, Creative Director, Animal Lover, Vegan, Soccer Player, SciFi Geek & Movie Dork, Peace & Love"*. Fisher is noteworthy for her distinctly Australian look, and for her progress from local model to the global stage. Fisher

blogs on fashion and lifestyle, and promotes *“respecting our planet and all its occupants”*. Contrastingly, well known volunteering group WIRES has only 13,400 facebook likes. Their mission to *“actively rehabilitate and preserve Australian wildlife and inspire others to do the same.”* is entirely reliant on an Australia wide network of skilled and dedicated volunteers. Fisher’s ability to leverage her engagement with her audience towards the mobilisation of young people to support WIRES could be achieved with sincerity due to her very genuine empathy and compassion for animals.

The importance of integrity in the values match between influencer and organisation cannot be understated, because it is the authenticity of the communication going to the social media audience that is key spurring people to act.

As part of our interactions with high schools in our region, we have observed that running a Certificate I in Volunteering that has strong partnerships with organisations such as the NSW Fire Service and State Emergency Services has been quite successful in engaging young people with volunteering activities. One example from our region is Brisbane Water Secondary College Umina Campus who has engaged in this practice and also has an innovative partnership where their students support a local aged care facility. One of the barriers they have faced is that the course costs \$125 per student, and this is not normally included as a line item in the schools budget.

Our recommendations include:

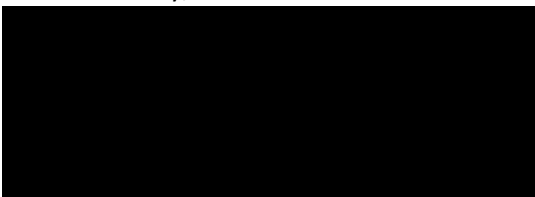
- Identifying and supporting youth oriented volunteering activities
- Broker partnerships between volunteer organisations and social media influencers that encourage participation of young people in volunteering activities
- Provide incentives for schools to run Certificate I in Volunteering in partnership with volunteer organisations that appeal to young people

It is important to note that mapping of major social networking sites to identify influencers and their core values could be extremely valuable to the volunteer sector. Equally, time should be spent consulting with volunteer organisations around their narrative and volunteer needs. Any existing research done on the interests and values of young people could be incorporated into building a picture of the likely connecting threads between organisations and target groups of young people. Sensitive thoughtful matching of influencer to volunteering cause or organisation is essential.

Consultation and brokering would be required between organisations and influencers on the appropriateness and desirability of connections, and an independent third party who had established the values match is in an ideal position to initiate communication between the two, and foster these connections.

We submit to the committee these recommendations in the hope that they are useful in guiding measures to support young people to grow their volunteering.

Sincerely,



Maggie MacFie
CEO Youthconnections.com.au