

Improving service through valuing inclusion

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Changes in social, environmental and economic conditions and the need to partner *with* communities to build resilience, means people are the greatest resource for emergency services organisations.

Learning to leverage diversity and be inclusive is becoming a central part of organisational agendas. As such, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC researchers are working to understand how diversity can be effectively managed and measured. This work complements the Male Champions of Change initiative for the Fire and Emergency Service sector that is coordinated through AFAC.

Celeste Young, Victoria University, leads the Diversity and inclusion: building strength and capability project. She said, 'the notion of diversity is not new to the emergency services, however, achieving effective outcomes that are sustained for the longer term has been elusive.

'It's complex because there is no one way to *do* diversity and inclusion. If you want to be effective, you have to create an inclusive culture', she said.

The project has three main areas of interest. The first phase, understanding contexts in which diversity and inclusion exist, has been completed. The economic area includes the changing capabilities of organisations. The organisational area assesses how diversity and inclusion exists and the constraints and enablers at agency level. The community area investigates community values and the attitudes and understandings about agencies held by communities.

'Organisations often feel the diversity discourse has become 'stuck' as a deficit conversation that focuses on compliance and counting heads. There is a need to build greater understanding of the value of diversity and inclusion as an investment that will benefit current and future workforces,' Celeste said.

The research revealed that communities want to engage more with organisations but felt that the skills and capabilities they offer were not understood. Emergency management organisations were often seen as heroic and dominated by white males. Twenty-seven per cent of survey respondents agreed that men were more suited to front-line emergency response than women. This indicates the need for more education in this area. There was a small but significant number of women respondents who had ingrained stereotypes in relation to who should be part of emergency services organisations.

'There's a lot more work required to understand diverse communities and the capabilities that brings to the

table. This is important as it provides the basis for communication and working partnerships,' Celeste said.

Changes in capabilities of three case study organisations—Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES), Fire and Rescue NSW (RFS NSW) and South Australia State Emergency Service (SA SES)—were analysed over ten years. Research confirmed that these organisations had diversified their services and were now more focused on their communities.

Researchers worked with the case study organisations to determine how diversity and inclusion had evolved and was understood. They identified barriers, needs, opportunities and benefits of effective diversity in an operational context. The key barrier was the command-and-control culture. This indicates a strong need to develop people-based skills, particularly at management levels.

Overall, diverse cohorts are still underrepresented in most organisations. There were effective programs in each organisation, including the QFES Transforms Through Leadership program, the RFS NSW Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy as well as changes to their recruitment process and introducing lateral entry processes to increase women in management by the SA SES.

Heather Stuart, NSW SES, is an end-user for the project and feels the direction taken. 'The project is addressing areas that present significant challenges for the sector. I believe that the contributions this project will make to the sector will soon become evident,' she said.

Despite the challenges, end-users like Heather Stuart regard end-user engagement has a key contributor and supporting factor in the project. 'This research is end-user-focused, and our stakeholders are very much part of the research team,' Celeste said.

With the first phase of understanding the context complete, the project will now build upon the draft framework using the implementation process developed in the first phase. Researchers will also be mapping community capabilities and undertaking economic case studies of two programs.

Find out more about this research at www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/diversityinclusion.