

## **Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions**

### **Introduction**

This submission to the Joint Standing Committee of the National Capital and External Territories Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions comes from the Executive Committee of the National Gallery of Australia's Voluntary Guides Association on behalf of the Association. It addresses the way in which the Voluntary Guides of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) contribute to a range of innovative strategies that maintain viability and relevance to sustainably grow the NGA's profile, visitor numbers, and revenue. In particular this submission addresses Terms of Reference Point 2: *experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation*.

The role of the National Gallery of Australia is to create an outstanding collection of art, particularly from Australia and its neighbouring countries, and to share its art with Australia and the wider world.

The submission argues that as the Voluntary Guides focus entirely on the human capacity for individual engagement, interaction and flexibility, they currently make an effective contribution to innovative public engagement and audience participation. The Guides believe that this contribution, individual as it is, encourages considerable experimentation within the NGA and has boosted visitor numbers and continues to be a major contributor to the attractiveness of the institution to both local and interstate visitors.

### **Voluntary Guides at the National Gallery of Australia**

There are presently 162 active Voluntary Guides at the NGA with another 28 in training. The training of new Guides takes place over the period of one year requiring at least 2 full time days per week commitment, one day for face-to-face learning and at least one day for personal study.

Once trained, Guides undertake a program of on-going study. Twice each month, training sessions are provided by the NGA on the current collection, particularly for new exhibits and for special "blockbuster" exhibitions. Guides also participate in self-designed study groups where presentations are made by peers to help fellow guides extend their skills and knowledge. There are also three Guide initiated special interest groups which focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Art, Asian Art and Contemporary Art and these groups organise presentations for fellow Guides on these subject areas each month.

Training is also provided on the skills needed to be a professional Guide, aimed at engaging both adults and children, and particularly focusing on the Australian Schools Curriculum for Years 5 and 6.

### **Types of Engagement with the Public undertaken by Voluntary Guides**

As Guides are trained to encourage interaction and discussion among the visitors, each tour a Guide undertakes is unique. There is no script or previously designed tour; each tour is designed on the spot with the participation of the group, according to their interests and preferences. In

this way the NGA Voluntary Guides provide an entirely innovative and potentially experimental approach to audience engagement. By taking an individual approach to each tour the Guides substantially enhance the visitors' enjoyment of their experience at the NGA, their propensity to report this positive experience to friends, and the likelihood of them making a return visit.

The full range of different types of types of tours undertaken by Guides is described below.

### Gallery Tours

Every day the NGA is open Guides offer a free general tour of the gallery on the hour from 10.30 am to 2.30 pm, i.e. 5 tours daily, each an hour in duration. Numbers vary.

In times past a general tour might follow a prescribed list of known Gallery highlights, but several years ago the Guides initiated the innovative approach of specifically tailoring each tour to their visitors' preferences as outlined above. The visitors who take advantage of these tours may be international, interstate or local. The new approach requires the Guides to be very knowledgeable about the changing collection, and able to link disparate works of art to form a seamless experience for what can be a very diverse group. Guides pride themselves on their ability to engage directly with visitors, from whatever background, and encourage their participation in deciding what the tour will cover.

### Discovery Tours

The NGA participates in the Year 6 Civics and Citizenship education program by offering "Discovery Tours" to Year 6 school groups from around Australia<sup>1</sup>. These types of tours form the bulk of the Guides' work. The size of the school groups can vary but there may be as many as 120 students from one school. These groups are sub-divided into smaller more manageable groups of 15 students per Guide. As Discovery tours can be scheduled on the half hour in very busy periods, there can be as many as 16 groups on the Gallery floor at any one time, which highlights the need for experienced guides who can be flexible in their management of the group's visit.

Opening the eyes of school children from all parts of Australia, urban, rural and remote, to the Nation's Art collection is perhaps the most important and rewarding part of the voluntary Guides' duties, and one that they relish. Again these tours are tailored to the interests of the school, the teacher and the children. Guides are trained to work with the schools' curriculum imperatives when framing their tours, but they are also trained in how to engage the children and motivate them to participate actively in the tour. These children are often tired or have no experience of art but will usually actively engage with their Guides and often afterwards express how much they enjoyed their visit to the NGA. Follow up evaluations from teachers and the many thank you cards sent to the Guides reinforce this.

### Special Exhibition Tours

Four times each year, the NGA will stage major temporary exhibitions that usually involve a particular art movement, event or artist, often showcasing international art. Guides undertake special training for these exhibition tours. They also use electronic equipment to enable them to be heard by their tour audience in gallery spaces also crowded with visitors' not seeking a guided tour. For these tours the content of the tour is predetermined for that exhibition, but Guides are encouraged to be flexible in the approach they take to ensure the visitors interests and questions are addressed. Special Exhibition tours are offered between 2 and 4 times a day for the duration

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<sup>1</sup> All NGA Guides hold a current "Working with Vulnerable People Card" and have had a police check when they commence guiding.

of the exhibition with numbers limited to between 12 and 20 depending on the layout of the exhibition. These free tours are extremely popular with visitors and almost always all places are taken up. Feedback from the visitors who take the tours indicates their appreciation of the personal interactions on the tour.

#### Other Tours

Guides also offer tours designed for special groups, which usually require additional specialist training for those Guides involved.

- Art and Dementia Tours are designed specifically to open up the world of dementia sufferers to the world of Art. The therapeutic benefits of such tours are well documented
- Little Look at Art are tours designed for mothers and their very small children.
- Guides take local Canberra pre-school groups around the Gallery providing an introduction to art at a very formative age.
- Rendezvous with Art is a monthly program that encourages an in-depth focus on one or two artists by a group of about 10 booked participants. Guides introduce a few works and lead a discussion about them with full participation of the group. They also join their group for morning tea for further engagement.
- Quite regularly Guides are called upon to take tours of the Gallery for visiting VIPs, such as military and diplomatic delegations. In these cases Guides may need to be able to engage an audience across linguistic boundaries to determine their interests and ensure they have a positive experience of the Gallery.
- Guides also regularly provide tours of special exhibitions for Members and sponsors functions.

#### Special Events

The NGA participates in key special events on the Canberra public calendar such as the Vivid Festival, the Canberra International Music Festival, Science Week and Volunteers Week.

Guides offer tours as part of these special events coming up with new and sometimes experimental ideas for tours designed to enhance the overall event theme.

#### **The Voluntary Guides are an integral part of the operations of the NGA.**

From the above it is clear that the Guides provide a considerable contribution of human resources to the functioning of the Gallery. It is estimated that in total, the NGA Guides provide around 6,500 hours of face to face guiding each year; that is direct interaction with the public, both adults and children. However if the many hours of study Guides undertake to maintain the required level of professionalism is included, that figure is estimated to be more like 18,000 voluntary hours each year.

Guides also contribute a strong sense of commitment and loyalty to the organisation. They see themselves as an integral part of the NGA organisation and its offer to the public and they work within the organisational framework of the Gallery, adapting to ongoing organisational and administrative changes as they occur.

Each Guide is conscious of the wonderful privilege it is to introduce the NGA's great art collection to Australia and the World, especially to children, and to contribute to the successful operation of the internationally regarded NGA. The bulk of the guiding body at the NGA is drawn from the retired community of ACT and surrounding districts, and they also personally benefit from the

opportunity to be part of a group of active, involved and articulate men and women who, through their involvement in the NGA, continue to contribute to all that is Canberra.

Then there are the benefits to individual health and wellbeing. Having this opportunity helps to maintain the health, both physical and intellectual, of the group and it provides a community that supports each other at a time when some people become more isolated in the community.

While Guides give their time freely they come under the same Workplace Health and Safety provisions that apply to NGA staff and are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the organisation's values. They are given access to staff benefits such as flu vaccinations, counseling services and staff discounts in the coffee shop and NGA Shop. Guides' NGA membership and membership of the Australian Association of Gallery Guiding Organisations is paid by the NGA (about \$100 value per guide per year) and the Gallery provides an end of year dinner, a mid-year morning tea and four sandwich lunches for Guides each year. This was recently cut back from 10 lunches to enable cost savings to be made in line with the Gallery's other cost savings measures.

Guides do support the need for budgetary constraint in public institutions but argue that appropriate investment in levels of staffing and current information technology continues to be required. Guides do not function in a vacuum. Cost saving measures can impact on them in ways that may impede their capacity to successfully carry out their functions, for example:

- Guides rely on NGA staff to undertake the administration associated with tours, especially school tours where numbers are very high. This function involves both booking tours and rostering Guides and needs to be properly resourced for the successful functioning of the Guides.
- Guides are in effect a large group of un-paid staff operating within the Gallery's Education Department, and form a significant part of the management work-load of the Head of Department and the line Manager.
- The initial training of Guides taking, as it does, one full year, requires resourcing.
- Guides require ongoing training and education from NGA Curators and other staff to enable them to keep up to date with new hangs and Special Exhibitions.
- Guides need the NGA web site to be regularly updated with information about art works on display, so they can properly research the collection for the benefit of the public.
- Guides need up to date NGA's public information services in all forms so the public is aware of the availability of the tours they offer.

### **New Forms of Public Engagement and Audience Participation**

There has been discussion about the introduction of increased technological supports to visitor services within galleries across the world. Guides recognise the value of technology in providing new services and approaches to the NGA collection as well as the introduction of new technology in appropriate ways. However they would urge that such initiatives be properly resourced and not be introduced at the expense of existing technology which has already proved to be a powerful outreach opportunity for engaging the public.

However, more importantly Guides want it recognised that the individual engagement, interaction and flexibility they offer to NGA visitors is actually a highly effective way of engaging the public. Ensuring the ongoing resourcing of the NGA Voluntary Guides body and the infrastructure that supports it is in fact an extremely cost effective way of ensuring viability and relevance of the institution and to sustainably grow the NGA's profile, visitor numbers, and revenue.

## **Summary & Recommendations**

- The 162 current NGA Guides are an important element of the NGA visitor offer and contribute substantially to its ability to attract and engage visitors of all ages.
- The tours offered by the Guides are innovative, personalised, flexible and can be experimental, making each experience unique for that person or group of visitors to the NGA thus ensuring a high level of engagement and visitor participation.
- The Guides recognise the support of the NGA to maintain the Guiding body as an experienced and professional group of Voluntary Guides.
- The Guides recognise the need for budgetary constraint in public institutions, but caution that further cuts may impact on the NGA's capacity to engage the public.
- While new technological innovations may seem attractive, ensuring that existing technology is performing to its maximum potential is probably a better use of resources.
- Within the NGA there already exists a very effective mechanism for delivering innovation in public engagement, its Voluntary Guides. The provision of the support for the Guides to carry out their function is both a highly effective and cost effective strategy to sustainably grow the NGA's profile, visitor numbers, and revenue.

President and Executive Committee of the National Gallery of Australia Voluntary Guides Association, on behalf of the National Gallery of Australia Voluntary Guides Association.

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