

Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters submission: Inquiry into the formation of a national volunteer incentive scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia

February 2025

Key contacts

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Acknowledgement of Country



Our work takes place across Victoria.

YACVic's head office is on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). YACVic also have offices on the lands of the Gunditjmara Nation in Warrnambool, and on the lands of the Wemba Wemba and Wadi Wadi Nations in Swan Hill.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present for their wisdom, strength, support and leadership. Bunjil's lore states that those who walk on this land must care for Country and the waterways as well as care for the children and young people.

We stand in solidarity to pay respect to the ongoing culture and continued history of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations. Sovereignty was never ceded.

This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.



Contents

About the Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters	4
About YACVic.....	4
About YACVic Rural.....	4
About Victoria University.....	5
Victoria University's (VU) Youth and Community Research Group	5
YACVic and VU's past work in disasters	5
Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters Submission	7
a) Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)	7
b) Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture	8
c) Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations.....	9
d) Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors	10
e) Investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers.....	12
f) The structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).....	14
g) Comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices.....	15
h) Any other related matters.....	15

Our key recommendations:

1. We recommend educational reforms that seek to provide more extensive programs with a place-based focus that are linked to communities and the specific disasters that that community experiences.
2. We recommend Child Safe Standards be prioritised as a requirement of any Volunteer Scheme being established.
3. We recommend a zero-tolerance approach to child abuse and neglect, and these safeguards extend to volunteers.
4. We recommend additional resources and supports for organisations/initiatives reliant on volunteers as they are meeting increasing compliance obligations.
5. We recommend the establishment of a National Youth Disaster Advisory Group.



About the Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters

The Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters ('the Centre') is a partnership between Victoria University's Youth and Community Research Group, and YACVic.

Funded by the Commonwealth, the Centre champions the inclusion and active involvement of young people to contribute to all aspects of disasters. The Centre brings together expertise around young people (12-25 years), youth participation and disasters, and takes a strengths-based approach, recognising the capabilities and contributions of young people as active citizens in disaster readiness, resilience, and risk reduction.

The Centre champions whole-of-community approaches which are needed to create solutions to ensure Victorians are prepared and resilient for future natural disasters¹. Young people have been systemically excluded from decision making and need to be actively engaged to ensure that Victoria's future is protected, and communities remain resilient.

About YACVic

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate for young people aged 12-25 and the youth sector in Victoria. Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities. As a peak body, we work closely with young Victorians, and the sector that supports them, to deliver effective advocacy, events, training, resources and support. We're driven by our valuable members and their vision for a positive future for young Victorians.

About YACVic Rural

YACVic Rural is a key delivery agency of Youth Affairs Council Victoria. YACVic Rural works in partnership with young people, youth practitioners, key stakeholder and partner agencies throughout rural and regional Victoria to provide targeted advocacy, strengthen youth participation, and support those who work with young people.

YACVic recognises that young people and sector professionals in these areas face particular challenges and offer specific insights that differ to their metropolitan counterparts. YACVic's presence across the Great South Coast and Southern Mallee regions are funded by the Victorian Government through the Rural Presence Program. YACVic Rural also coordinates and implements a range of targeted projects across regional and rural Victoria including in response to disasters, which have been funded by the Australian Government.



YACVic has worked with young people across disaster-affected areas in response to the Black Summer bushfires, and throughout the COVID pandemic, and the 2022 Victorian Floods to inform and support disaster response and recovery using a youth participation model. YACVic has also worked to support youth service providers to identify, develop and support locally relevant and youth-led response and recovery activities to meet community needs.

About Victoria University

Victoria University (VU) is a world-class teaching and research institution committed to lifechanging research that positively impacts the wellbeing of people, place, and planet. For VU, research with impact is more than knowledge but ethical knowledge, more than strengths but solutions, and those values have informed the creation of the Centre of Excellence.

VU see the alignment of many of the issues young people have raised regarding their involvement in emergency management and community resilience with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which are a key focus of VU research. VU is well positioned as a dual-sector university across higher education and TAFE to consider all aspects of education, training and skills development for young people.

Victoria University's (VU) Youth and Community Research Group

The Youth and Community Research group encompasses academics from the youth and community teaching programs within the College of Arts, Business, Law, Education, IT, and researchers focused on Young People & Social Inclusion within the Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities (ISILC).

The Youth and Community Research Group has been deeply involved in establishing the 'Centre of Excellence – Young People and Disasters' funded by the Federal government, in partnership with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

YACVic and VU's past work in disasters

YACVic and VU have undertaken and partnered on a range of projects across Victoria, all of which have a strong focus on young people and disaster readiness, response and recovery.

Much of our work can be found on the YACVic Young People and Disasters [Resource Hub](#). Key projects include:

- ***Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters***
- ***Future Proof: Young people, Disaster Recovery and (Re)building Communities*** - in 2022 YACVic secured a \$10 million Commonwealth Government grant to deliver a 14-partner, collective impact project. The



project delivers youth-led activities and youth-led community decision-making and capacity building in response to the 2019-20 bushfires.

- **The Umbrella Project** – following the flood disaster in 2022, YACVic was commissioned by the Victorian Government’s Office for Youth to establish a youth-focused flood response and recovery program using a grants-based model. The Umbrella Project funded and supported 17 projects across flood-impacted areas to deliver work that connected and included young people in flood recovery activities.
- **The Activators program (2020-21)** YACVic Rural Activators Program sponsored by [RSPCA Victoria](#) provides young people with skills and supports to develop a project aimed at helping their local community. This program focused on supporting people affected by the 2019/20 summer bushfires to care for their animals during the recovery period.
- The **Evidence from Experience** report produced as part of the black summer bushfire consultations for the Inspector-General for Emergency Management (2020)
- **A Seat at the Table** and **Speaking Up** with the Victorian Department of Education and Emergency Management Victoria (then Bushfire Recovery Victoria) (2020-22)

For more information, please visit our [disaster hub](#) and the Centre’s [information page](#).



Centre of Excellence: Young People & Disasters Submission

We welcome the opportunity to provide this submission to the Inquiry to **the formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia**. We welcome the opportunity to meet with the committee, along with young people who inform and contribute to our work, to address the concepts raised in this submission.

Young people are uniquely impacted by disasters, often at critical moments in their development and life cycles. They are experiencing multiple and cascading disasters which affect their work, study, social connections and critical resources like phone reception, internet and roads, which keep them connected to their communities.

Young people are also often well-positioned and eager to play an active role in disaster resilience efforts but are often excluded from decision making spaces and positioned within a vulnerability lens. Over recent years we have been increasingly called on to lead projects across regional and rural Victoria focused on maximising young people's inclusion in such efforts and ensuring they play an active role in the resilience of their communities and for themselves.

This submission will address the Terms of Reference of the *Inquiry into the formation of a national volunteer incentive scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia* as follows:

a) Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

In 2020 we commenced partnering with Victoria University's Youth and Community Research Group on a number of projects responding to young people and disasters, including the Future Proof project. In 2023 we were successful in securing Disaster Ready Fund Round 1 funding to establish a Centre of Excellence: Young people & Disasters ('the Centre'). We have consulted with a range of organisations as part of the first phase of the project including youth and community organisations, emergency management organisations, NGOs and government bodies.

We received a range of feedback in relation to the establishment of the Centre, with overwhelming support and excitement. Researchers and practitioners in the disaster sector, nationally and internationally, identified that young people's voices and contributions are missing and excluded from current disaster resilience, recovery and preparation, highlighting the need and broad support for the Centre. We have included related findings from the consultations throughout this submission.



b) Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture

Our consultations conducted with key stakeholders throughout 2024/25 for the Centre found the following;

Traditional systems and organisations

There is a shift in volunteering from traditional organisations and long-term volunteering, to **volunteering episodically**. Young people want:

- shorter commitment terms and project-based opportunities
- quick and easy registrations and systems to navigate
- recognition and career building opportunities

The emergency management sector is viewed as slow at adopting this and there are deeply entrenched, systemic barriers to new approaches.

Policy, strategies and practice must acknowledge that any contribution is impactful - even if someone volunteers for a couple of days or months, their dedicated commitment has made a great difference, and they can implement innovative ideas. The key here is wrap around support. Strategies that change the narrative and accept that short term volunteering can be just as impactful are being called for.

Generational differences and volunteering ‘communication’ problem

The volunteering sector is generally struggling with generational change, with young people forming their own identities and not having the same passion for institutions that someone else has built. They are also issues focused and see ‘volunteering’ as being undertaken when it aligns with their values and provide a sense of purpose beyond traditional volunteering roles. Young people want to be ‘owning’ their actions and taking charge. Young people want to ‘do’ and don’t necessarily resonate with the word ‘volunteer’.

The Centre champions strategies that focus on the shared responsibility of disaster resilience, as outlined in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience. The strategy describes disaster resilience as “the collective responsibility of all levels of government, businesses, the non-government sector and individuals.” This strategy has stood the test of time, but the message is being lost. Communication strategies should bring back that sense of community and looking after each other and lean into the shared responsibility we all have.

Formalisation of volunteering

Volunteering systems uphold and protect people’s rights, responsibilities and prioritise child safety, but it’s meant a lot of barriers have been put in place. There’s a disconnect between contemporary culture and young people in these expectations and this formalisation results in community organisations



increasingly struggling due to the burden of legislative requirements without additional resources or supports to reach compliance.

We recommend additional resources and supports for organisations/initiatives reliant on volunteers as they are meeting increasing compliance obligations. This support could outline the minimum legal requirements for involving volunteers, complimented with requirements that can enhance an experience, rather than being legally required. This will clearly communicate what organisations/initiatives are legally required to do, so those with limited resources can focus their attention there.

c) Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations

Schools

As recommended in our response to the Colvin review in December 2024:

Integrate Disaster Education into Schools and Youth Programs

We recommend educational reforms that seek to provide more extensive programs with a place-based focus that are linked to communities and the specific disasters that that community experiences. These programs should be delivered consistently across schools and be impactful and tangible in their outcomes, creating real learning experiences and knowledge of locally focused disaster risks.

These programs could be co-designed with young people in a specific community to ensure their voices are included in the curriculum, prioritising what young people feel they need to know in relation to disaster cycles. This pilot could create a blueprint for communities and schools nationwide for their disaster resilience programs, equipping young people with the skills and knowledge to respond effectively during crises.

We acknowledge schools can be a barrier to participation for many young people due to young people becoming increasingly disengaged from educational institutions, as well as constraints and increasing demands on curriculum. We support broader program reform by including youth and community program development in local councils and local youth and community groups.



d) Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors

Findings from our Future Proof project

Young people in rural and regional communities were supported by coalition partners in our federally funded Future Proof project to undertake accredited short courses, certificates, and diplomas throughout the life of the project. This process was place-based, meeting young people where they were and addressing the ways they would like to support their communities. The focus was on disaster resilience, (re)building and recovery.

To date, Future Proof has supported 1,899 young people to access qualification pathways. This included 1,707 young people completing accredited short courses such as chainsaw licenses, First Aid & CPR, Mental Health First Aid, 'Working at Heights' courses and obtaining their 'White Card' (construction induction training).

Various partners, particularly Alpine Shire Council, had great uptake of young people accessing accredited short courses. Alpine Shire Council have stated "[we] have evidence that several young people are accessing multiple short courses to build a base for future employment or education. Some of these young people have pursued employment opportunities directly because of undertaking the training offered". (Youth Worker/ Alpine. Future Proof Research Review)

After feedback from our coalition partners and young people, we pivoted from the initial certificate and diploma qualification and expanded funding for short courses, single ticket qualifications and other qualification-based pathways that were better suited, more accessible and effective for the cohort we were working with.

This is a key learning for a nationally recognised qualification scheme. The decision to adjust our approach was reached as many of the planned courses were not available in local and regional areas. This included courses on the Victorian Governments 'free TAFE list.' This is a key barrier that a national scheme could address. Many courses were only offered in large cities or big regional centres, creating barriers for young people to access due to transport constraints, and large distances to travel. Those hardest hit by the Black Summer fires were the ones unable to access courses to build their capacity due to structural barriers.

Qualification outcomes achieved through Future Proof:

Certificates & Diplomas: 192

- Certificate II Auslan
- Certificate II Conservation and Ecosystem Management
- Certificate II Maritime Operations- Coxswains Grade 1
- Certificate II Public Safety and Firefighting
- Certificate IV Community Services



- Certificate IV Environmental Sustainability
- Certificate IV Youth Work
- Diploma Community Services
- Diploma of Public Safety (Emergency Management)
- Diploma of Youth Work

Accredited short courses: 1,707

- Chainsaw course
- First Aid & CPR
- Mental Health First Aid
- Skid Steer and Excavator
- White Card
- Working at Heights

An example of a young person from Corryong upskilling with short courses:

"Through Futureproof, Oliver was also able to complete a short course in biology which supported his environmental knowledge and will provide credits towards his course when he is able to commence university."

A nationally recognised qualification scheme acknowledges that not all young people wish to pursue a formal education pathway, and that access to short courses/qualifications is a great way for some young people to increase their career and/or volunteering opportunities.

Quotes provided by embedded research partner, Victoria University

Future Proof was fortunate to have an embedded research partner, Victoria University, who conducted a number of stakeholder interviews. We have included some key quotes from respondents related to qualification pathways that were offered as part of the program.

General

"Every week when we're seeing more numbers coming in from training courses, and then having our YAG reactivated, and at the same time we've had FReeZA groups reactivated, and actually just - there were days where, at the end of the day, we were all like, "That was a really full day. There was 50 young people in here doing things." I think that's kind of just been the driving force of everything, that we're actually achieving things for the people that we should be" (Future Proof Youth Worker).

"We have had really significant interest and engagement in qualification pathways" (Future Proof Manager)



“And in terms of the qualifications, it’s one of them ones that’s a little bit tricky to measure due to the fact that a lot of them won’t be finished their training until after the program’s finished. But in terms of the ones that have finished the Cert IIs and things like that that we set up, they’ve gone on – a lot of them are going onto other training opportunities which has been really positive particularly with that white card stuff that [you] mentioned earlier, that we set up. They’re all now enrolled into other qualifications that they’re going to continue on that path as well” (Future Proof Youth worker).

Barriers

“Young people are finding it hard to do online studies and we don’t have access to the courses that young people wanted to do here. It was a great idea to have young people training here to do Cert IVs in youth work or community work or emergency management or even natural resource management but they couldn’t do that here, they couldn’t go to Wodonga or Wangaratta to do that. They’d have to do it online. It was a real barrier.”(Future Proof Manager)

Short Courses

“I have my own young person who is sitting there at the moment going, “I don’t know what I want to do. I don’t know what I want to be,” but if we can build them up with a whole bunch of other random skills, it gives them some confidence that they’ve got a bucket of stuff which they can go, here, give that a go” (Future Proof Manager).

e) Investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers

The Centre champions meaningful youth participation, and the health and safety of volunteers.

Volunteer rights

Volunteers have rights that are often overlooked. [Volunteering Australia](#) and [Volunteering Victoria](#) have great information around rights as a volunteer including the rights to:

- Work in a healthy and safe environment.
- Be covered by equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation.
- Be adequately covered by insurance.
- Be given accurate and truthful information about the workplace and receive an appropriate training.
- Be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses.
- Not fill a position that a paid worker has done before you.
- Not do the work of paid staff during industrial disputes.
- Have a job description and agreed working hours.
- Have their personal information dealt with confidentially.



Volunteers should also receive organisational policies and procedures which often include:

- Volunteer agreements
- Volunteer induction forms
- Staff code of conduct
- Child safe code of conduct
- Child safe policies and procedures
- Grievance policy and procedures
- Working from home policy and procedures
- Complaints policy and procedures

These can differ depending on the organisation type. Anyone who is 18 and over who is working with children and young people should have a valid Working with Children Check and we also recommend an up-to-date Police Check.

Child Safe Practices

The Centre recommends that as a minimum, Child Safe Standards be prioritised as a requirement of any Volunteer Scheme being established. Promoting the scheme as a child safe space with rigorous child safeguarding policies and procedures will have the added benefit of acting as a deterrent to people who may view such a scheme as a potential access point to children and young people. The Child Safe Standards exist to prevent child abuse and harm from happening in organisations. They are necessary because they drive improvements and cultural change across the youth sector, as well as for agencies who have a responsibility working with children and young people regardless of the setting.

The Child Safe Standards work together to provide a framework to create a child safe organisation.

The standards aim to:

- Promote the safety and wellbeing of children and young people
- Prevent child abuse
- Ensure organisations and businesses have effective systems and processes in place to respond to and report all allegations of child abuse.

The Centre recommends a zero-tolerance approach to child abuse and neglect, and **these safeguards extend to volunteers.**

Child safe risk assessment

We encourage organisations engaging volunteers to conduct a child safe risk assessment and any specific projects should have rigorous risk assessment and child safe risk assessments.



Remuneration

Paying young people is a way of acknowledging that they are professionals. It shows you value and respect young people's time and contribution to your projects and opportunities.

Payment acknowledges the potential consequences that some young people face as a result of participating in opportunities such as missing a shift at work and recognises the emotional labour of sharing lived experience.

It also breaks down some of the power dynamics that exist between organisations and young people.

While paying volunteers for on-the-groundwork may be difficult to navigate, we strongly recommend paying all young people who contribute to the co-design, governance and development of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme.

f) The structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Broadly, the Centre encourages and champions an approach to governance structures that enables the full participation of the target group, in this instance young people. Meaningful youth participation is about young people being involved at all levels of decision making, including governance structures. Some examples of how to include young people in governance structures include:

- Establishing a Youth Advisory Group for the Climate Army
- Embedding the requirement for a minimum number of young people to be included on the Board of Governance for the Climate Army

In YACVic's response to the Colvin Review we supported the recommendation to establish and convene a Disaster Management Advisory Council provided it included a diverse group of young people to bring their lived experiences and expertise to the table. If this body is created, its scope could include the initiation and development of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme. The Centre strongly encourages such governance arrangements to include representation of:

- Young people
- First Nations communities
- Non-government members, including those from industry, the not-for-profit sector and academia, including social researchers.
- Representation groups who are disproportionately impacted by disasters, for example; disabled young people, young people from rural and regional areas, young people living in poverty, CaLD communities

We recommend the establishment of a **National Youth Disaster Advisory Group**. The Centre would specifically be able to assist and advice on this approach given our expertise in youth participation and having just set up the advisory group for the Centre.



The formation of a National Youth Disaster Advisory Group should be considered as part of the governance arrangements. This national group would help to grow the next generation of young people to guide disaster policy and could directly incorporate those with lived experiences and fostering decision-making aligned with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which states that children have the right to express their views and have them considered when decisions are made that affect them.

g) Comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices

We recommend looking at [The Student Volunteer Army](#) (SVA) in New Zealand. We have contacts with New Zealand academics in the disaster space who have been involved with the development of the SVA, and we welcome the opportunity to work with the Inquiry to connect with SVA and learn from their model.

h) Any other related matters

Our consultations emphasised how much research is lacking when it comes to young people and disasters. We have identified numerous gaps:

- A rights-based framework should be developed for young people to be involved in disaster response and recovery.
- Funding and opportunities are lacking for youth-led initiatives related to disasters cycles. Ensuring that the Scheme creates youth led opportunities will be of high importance.
- Bridging the gap in literature between climate and disasters should be considered as part of the Scheme.
- Research is needed on the cumulative impacts of bushfires and COVID-19 on families.
- Lack of understanding of intersectionality – sectors still tend to group people into their groups and cohorts, there is work to be done around true intersectionality and linking other identities.
- Data should be collected on how long young people stay with emergency management organisations.
- Research should be done into disasters and their connection to class and poverty.

These issues and identified gaps should be considered when developing and co-designing any scheme.

Youth focused disaster recovery protocol

In 2020, following the Black Summer Fires, YACVic established and promoted the *youth focused disaster recovery protocol* for use by Federal, State and Local Government emergency and recovery services, as well as local youth services, youth workers and others who engage with young people in disaster affected areas. It aims to provide guidance on key matters for consideration/inclusion in



post-disaster recovery and rebuilding, to ensure positive outcomes for young people aged 12-25 who have been affected directly and/or indirectly by a disaster. YACVic would support the protocol being adopted by the federal government in its coordination role, more information can be found here:

www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Uploads/Youth-Focused-Disaster-Recovery-Protocol-February-2020.pdf

The protocol presents a framework to ensure meaningful participation of young people (aged 12-25) in disaster management at local, state, and federal levels. It includes youth councils to advise on disaster policies, standardised consultation frameworks, leadership training, and equity measures to represent marginalised groups. A protocol to support youth-led initiatives, foster inclusive engagement, and mandate accountability through regular progress reporting. By empowering young people as key stakeholders, this protocol could enhance community resilience and ensure disaster strategies are more equitable and effective.

YACVic's Recommendations for the Colvin Review

In 2024, YACVic made a submission to the Colvin Review, our recommendations that are relevant to the scope of this inquiry are outlined below.

Recommendation 6: We would specifically request that young people be included as a key and distinct group to be measured within any enhanced national training and exercise regime that tests local capabilities, but also encourages better information sharing, continual improvement, cross-Local Government Area (LGA) and jurisdiction collaboration, and the identification of gaps or weaknesses in local disaster management capability and capacity.

Recommendation 22: We strongly support that reporting of the Outcomes Policy to inform requirements associated with international obligations is tied to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction as the framework specifically recognises young people as active agents of change in disaster risk reduction and seeks to build partnerships with them.

Recommendation 28: We encourage that where the Commonwealth requires state and territory governments to develop local or regional Disaster Management Plans, that young people are specifically consulted, engaged and included in the development process. In addition to other key information listed in the recommendation we would specifically include young peoples lived experience and capabilities are both recognised and accommodated for as a valuable contribution to this process.

