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Personal submission

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/philanthropy/makesubmission#lodge>

Productivity Commission

I am writing this brief submission in response to the Federal Government's Productivity Commission's draft report and direct my comments in particular to the removal of tax deductibility for the initiative of Special Religious Education in Government Schools.

I write as a parent, as a grandmother, as a volunteer SRE teacher, as an educationalist as well as an informed observer of socio-cultural trends particularly affecting challenged communities.

As a parent I have noted the faithfulness of many volunteer SRE teachers who have given freely of their time with students from first entry at school in Kindergarten until year 6. These teachers volunteered their time regularly for training which has become more rigorous and professional in recent years, have been willing to apply for and acquire Working With Children Checks and have completed SRE education training with Approved Providers as required, completed specific Child Safe Training as required by Churches (Safe Church, Safe Spaces, Safe Ministry) and faced classes of students many years since they had left the classroom with the completion of their own formal education. The reason is that their beliefs and faith provide a way to show that children are valued; SRE in the school's timetable is able to represent the faith background of the local community in a balanced and sound educational environment; such SRE teachers' instruction is educational and not missional; many such SRE teachers are able to relate to students in the classroom as well as in the community on less formal occasions and students are able to relate to an adult whom they can trust. To equip such volunteers, training is necessary as well as detailed and professionally produced curricula. For one teacher to be equipped with reputable curriculum materials from Kindergarten to Year 6 is at least \$250. It is for donations to purchase and for publishers to produce such materials that Tax deductibility is valuable. Volunteers in this space are no longer in the full-time work force and are often challenged financially. Tax deductibility make limited funds work better.

As a grandmother, I can see another generation of students who benefit from the volunteer SRE programs in Government Schools not only in the Primary School but in my community in the Shoalhaven where the SRE programs are provided in the High Schools by THREE16 Shoalhaven and their employed SRE teachers. SRE Teachers in the Secondary schools are valuable members of the school staff; on occasions such teachers have brought a perspective to challenge students to think beyond their own community. I remember on one occasion when the SRE teacher was teaching students one of the Christian stories about Jesus who was at a well where a woman went to draw water; the teacher showed photos of wells in similar climates and contexts that exist in contemporary times. Some time later the students initiated a fundraiser to fund a well in India through a Not-for-profit charity group. Sound educational practice and teaching students with integrity has enabled students across the school to be challenged in the face of this fundraiser initiated by students and well supported by their parents. Government grants have not provided the funds for the entity over 31 years apart from a COVID supplement when the teachers were unable to actually attend the schools. By continuing Tax deductible status to the Employer of the Teachers, THREE16 Shoalhaven (The Shoalhaven Employers of Christian Education Teachers, Inc) will contribute to the financial stability and viability of the entity which has been supported totally by donations and quite often sacrificial offerings of members of over 30 Churches in the Shoalhaven for 31 years.

As an educationalist and previous permanent teacher in the Government School system in NSW, as a former teacher at TAFE as well as having input into teacher training and now a Volunteer SRE teacher I am well aware of the time for training, the time for attendance at schools, the time for lesson preparation, the rigour of the legal requirements WWC check, Safe Church Training requirements and specific SRE training which involves classroom management, lesson preparation, understanding the legal mandate and the requirements of the *Education Act 1990* as well as lesson observation and evaluation. But I am also aware of the benefits of a sound curriculum which has been approved by a number of the Approved providers. Such curricula provide balanced teaching and education and avoid the threat of extreme or radical viewpoints. Training in the curricula avoids extremism and provides stability and reliability. I am also aware that Curricula in other Faiths (not Christian) value the rigour of a balanced curriculum and accountability to their communities and faith leaders. Media reports and political statements at Parliament House, Sydney acknowledged the valuable contribution made by faith leaders, SRE teachers and the faith communities, particularly during and after the lockdowns and social upheaval during the COVID pandemic. The access to schools via the SRE program benefits not only the students, their families and the recognition of the faith of the community but the wider positive outcomes of stability and less extremism comes through balanced curricula. Please keep the Tax Deductability Status for the developers of such curricula because it has a wide positive community flow-on effect.

I have contributed personally over the last 31 years to THREE16 Shoalhaven and have benefitted from its Tax Deductible status. It has meant that I had more money to sponsor children, provide donations to Indigenous projects within Australia. I have also donated to a large Christian producer (CEP) of SRE Curriculum materials and have benefitted by the use of those materials now as I volunteer as an SRE teacher.

I understand that the largest weekly (school weeks!) volunteer labour force in Australia is the provision for SRE in Government schools. I urge the government to maintain at the very least the support systems such as the GDR status of Religious charities such as the Employers of SRE teachers as well as the producers of SRE curricula.

For the community wide benefits that come from stable, well educated and informed school students with balanced and approved curricula I would urge the Government to value the faith communities because they value people, historically with the provision of schools, hospitals and compassionate charities providing homeless shelters and to Australia's credit - the establishment of The Royal Flying Doctor Service and Lifeline are contemporary expressions of care, and value with their inspiration and impetus originally from outworkings of faith and practical outcomes of faith communities.

I urge the Government to maintain the GDR status for "charities that provide religious education in government schools".

I urge the Government which recognises in this report the invaluable contribution that both the giving of financial donations, and people volunteering their time, make to the fabric of Australian society –to recognise that an enormous proportion of this is undertaken from members of faith communities and in particular the contribution made by volunteer SRE teachers – the largest weekly volunteer labour force in Australia. Special Religious Education (SRE) in Government Schools provides well-researched benefits for social cohesion and key psychological benefits for young people. It promotes multiculturalism, social acceptance, and reduces the risk of student radicalisation because the education is based within the school system, instead of an unregulated environment (for example online).

I urge the Government to recognise that members of faith communities are more likely to have helped the needy, and religious practice is linked to greater generosity in charitable giving and volunteering. Many people in faith communities volunteer their time and skills to benefit others – bringing large scale community-wide benefit. Was not the Amar Singh, founder of Turbans 4 Australia, recognised as 2023 Australian of the Year Local Hero? A faith led response which exploded after the COVID lockdowns . A practical 450-500 hampers per week delivered from Clyde in Sydney's west, with other programs in Victoria and Queensland has come from a faith-based community which publicly delivers and is publicly recognised. Here is a community-wide benefit from a faith-based practice.