

HOW DIVERSE ARE OUR VOLUNTEERS?

Introduction

Who volunteers on the Australian Volunteers Program? Increasing the diversity of volunteers is a key part of the program design and theory of change. In the first year of the program, research was commissioned to look at the diversity of our volunteers to provide a baseline for measuring future changes, and inform the development of a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

The key evaluation questions asked were:

1. What are the key barriers that prevent people from diverse groups applying and volunteering internationally?
2. What are the key motivators that compel people from diverse groups to apply and volunteer?
3. How should Australian volunteers address the barriers and increase access to the program from more diverse groups?

Methodology

The evaluation drew on both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, using a mixed methods approach.

Data collection involved:

- Literature review on the barriers and motivations for diverse groups.
- Quantitative analysis of historical program data to develop a baseline of the inclusivity and diversity profile under the AVID program and how these compare with population prevalence
- Interviews and focus groups with 60 internal and external stakeholders – including returned and potential volunteers
- Survey of returned and potential volunteers (to which 322 people responded).

Limitations in the data collected made it difficult to ascertain the level of diversity of volunteers across the range of groups being examined.

Key Findings

The study found common agreement that diversity and inclusion was important, but limited understanding and articulation of exactly what was meant by achieving greater levels of diversity and inclusion across the program.

The analysis of program data resulted in the following findings:

Baseline data (from AVID)

- 70% of applicants were from major cities.



- 1.2% of applicants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.



- Less than one per cent of volunteers identified as living with a disability.



- 65% of volunteers were women.



- Women outnumbered men significantly and consistently until the 60+ age brackets where males began to outnumber female volunteers.

- 40 years old is the average age of volunteers, with two peaks in ages of volunteers, 20-35 and 55-65.

Barriers to volunteering

- Top three barriers to volunteering:



- Diverse volunteers experience different barriers.
 - Volunteers from different ethnic backgrounds have perceptions and experience of prejudice and discrimination.
 - LGBTIQA volunteers express concerns with safety and security.
 - Volunteers living with a disability identified concern with accessibility and acceptance of partner organisations, and suitability of some locations due to lack of accessibility.
- Young volunteers identified financial barriers and long-term career impacts.
- Longer assignments were a barrier for people living with a disability, Indigenous Australians and LGBTIQA people.
- The type of assignments was a significant barrier, as they may exclude people who are not university educated.

The evaluation made four broad recommendations for increasing diversity:

1. Enhance and launch the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy
2. Promote and improve diversity and inclusion initiatives across the volunteering lifecycle (with a focus on recruitment, pre-departure, in-country experience, and return home processes)
3. Improve capability within the program to promote and improve diversity and inclusion
4. Undertake further analysis and consultation

Diverse volunteers

Specific target groups considered under the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy are:

Persons with a disability

Indigenous Australians

Persons from diaspora communities and multicultural backgrounds

Persons of different ages

LGBTIQA persons

Persons of different genders

Persons with different experiences and skills

Rural and regional Australians

While the focus was on the diversity of the volunteer base, during the evaluation a number of issues and opportunities emerged related to diversity across other elements of the program. These included the level of diversity within AVI, diversity capability within partner organisations, diversity of the types of organisations involved, and the approach to partnerships with Australian organisations.

What's next?

While work to promote diversity and inclusion across the program will be ongoing, many of the recommendations have already been implemented.

- The evaluation strengthened the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.
- A Diversity and Inclusion Learning (DIAL) initiative has been started to increase awareness across the program.
- Individual Access and Inclusion Plans for volunteers to help them overcome barriers to volunteering.
- Volunteer Guidelines to Diversity and Inclusion have been developed to help volunteers address inclusion in their assignment plans.
- The online portal has been updated to encourage applications from all Australians and to better capture statistics on diversity.
- A gender equality assessment was carried out.
- A Disability Inclusion review has been commissioned.

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