

PHASE 1 - LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS 2019-20

Australian Volunteers

Introduction

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (LSAV) aims to understand how volunteers are affected as a result of their participation in the Australian Volunteers Program.

The study is following over time a small group of Australian volunteers, broadly representative of the range of Australians who volunteer through the program. From this, the study seeks to gain insights into the volunteering experiences and the personal and professional impact of volunteering on volunteers.

The first phase of the longitudinal study had two main aims:

- To identify relevant characteristics and experiences of volunteers to provide a baseline against which future changes in volunteers lives can be assessed.
- To understand volunteers' experiences of their contact with the program before they went on assignment, to get feedback on how the recruitment and mobilisation phases of volunteers' journeys might be improved.

Methodology

The primary data collection method is qualitative, through semi-structured interviews with the volunteers, preceded by a brief online survey. The first phase of the study was from April to September 2019. The first round of interviews were conducted by researchers prior to, or soon after, the participants' commencement of their assignment.

The study recruited 54 participants. The sampling strategy was not to seek statistical relevance but instead to provide detailed qualitative data. All volunteers who attended pre-departure briefings in Melbourne between April and July 2019 were invited to participate in the study. Volunteers who were interested in participating contacted the researchers directly to take part in the study.

Phase one interviews focused on participants' personal details (e.g. background experiences, career plans, motivations), and their initial experiences with the Australian Volunteers Program. Participants were also asked about their current (at that time) attitudes, behaviours and capabilities, and future plans. The second phase of the study will track the same group of volunteers over time, asking similar questions to identify trends.

The study is being managed according to strict ethical principles. This means only the researchers will know the identity of the participating volunteers. The project has been approved by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee.

Key Findings

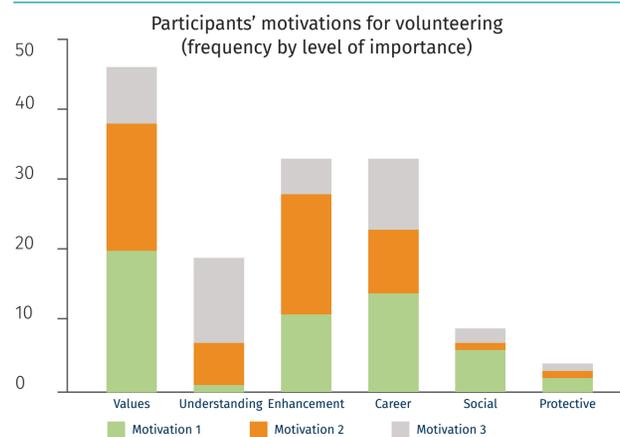
How do people find out about the program?

- 34% were introduced to the program via friends, networks or family, typically through direct contact with former volunteers. This initial contact was indirect and instigated well before applying for a volunteer assignment.
- Commonly, there was a lengthy incubation period prior to participants inquiring about their assignment. For some, this involved years or even decades of reviewing positions until the right one was found and/or the right enabling 'conditions' were present.

What motivated people to apply for volunteer role?

- 32% of participants were attracted to the program as a legitimate and government-backed volunteer agency, and 28% were attracted by the nature of support that was believed to be available.
- Typically participants reported multiple reasons for applying for a specific role. Most commonly volunteers applied for a position that matched their current skillset, or represented a desired future role and allowed for.

Motivations for volunteering



1. Values

Express/act on important values like humanitarianism, social justice (give back/help/make a difference and/or address social justice/human rights).

2. Understanding

Learn more about the world or exercise often unused skills (apply theory/study/unused skills and/or learn other language/culture).

3. Enhancement

Grow and develop personally/psychologically (new challenges; e.g. applying knowledge in new setting and/or new experiences/adventure/space to slow down/reflect).

4. Career

Gaining career-relevant experience (as stepping stone/getting more experience at start, or building on and using strong skills in new context).

5. Social

Strengthen social relationships and networks (friends, colleagues, family are engaged in this and/or value this).

6. Protective

Reduce negative feelings like guilt or addressing personal problems/issues (feel fortunate, desire to give up or share resources or expertise).

Opinions on selection process

- 51% of participants reported generally positive experiences of the selection process with 27% reporting generally negative experiences, and 22% reporting neither strongly positive nor negative experiences. In general, first-time volunteers were more likely to report positive experiences.
- Overall, respondents found the online application process impersonal but relatively straight-forward.
- The concern most commonly reported was the limited information received, and long periods of not being updated about progress both prior to conditional offer and mobilisation.
- Contact with partner organisation staff was the most beneficial feature reported by participants, either as part of the selection process or after the conditional offer.
- A common concern for many, although not all, was a sense of isolation felt prior to their pre-departure briefing due to the nature of the online self-service portal and learning modules, and uncertainty due to periods of no contact or relatively limited detail about their role, the partner organisation, and the host country.

Experience of online & pre-departure learning

- Participants had mixed experiences with online learning materials. With some exceptions, the content was seen as 'sensible' and well-structured, and the depth and currency was 'really informative' which 'got you thinking'.
- Overall, participants were favourable of the content, design and facilitation of the pre-departure briefing. The importance of the range of content covered was recognised, even by participants critical of the content or approach, and/or sceptical of the need to (re)attend training.
- Several participants reported that the pre-departure briefing changed their views about their assignment or set new expectations, particularly those with no prior 'development' experience or training.

Recommendations

- Experience of repeat volunteers could be utilised to make pre-departure briefings more meaningful.
- Availability of country-specific information prior to the mobilisation of volunteers could be very helpful.
- Volunteers could be informed to discuss their assignment description with partner organisations in order to tweak them in case there is a change in the context.
- Program could regularly communicate vacant position/s to potential volunteers, which will help to prepare them for future assignments and contribute towards a more literate and connected Australian.
- Program could provide more guidance to volunteers and partner organisations to support productive engagement at, before and after the selection stage.
- Program could consider ways to align volunteers' motivations about a role to specific features of the partner organisation or the assignment.
- Program could engage a wider potential applicant pool beyond those currently associated with the program using social or electronic networks.

What's next?

The program has been able to address many of the recommendations from the LSAV report, which are detailed in the management response in the full report.

The second phase of the study focuses on interviews with the participants while in-country to collect their experience of the assignment and how they are tracking against expectations. While COVID-19 and the repatriation of volunteers has impacted the study, it is still continuing and will follow the same group of study participants.

Acknowledgements

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