

THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING



Introduction

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (LSAV) is a six-year study investigating the personal and professional impacts of international volunteering on 55 participants who undertook assignments through the Australian Volunteers Program between 2019 and 2025.

Methodology

Conducted by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), the study tracked 55 participants across five waves of interviews from pre-assignment to five years after their return, making it one of the most sustained longitudinal studies of international volunteering conducted to date.

Seven volunteer types were identified within the sample, differentiated by their career motivations and circumstances: Launchers, Enhancers, Transitioners, Career Breakers, Imposed Transitioners, Veterans, and Non-Working Partners.

The study examined impacts across four areas aligned with the Australian Volunteers Program's objectives. By the end of the study in 2025, 47 participants had provided data during all five periods, generating rich qualitative descriptions of a diverse range of experiences.

Researchers tracked how individuals and groups changed over time, and compared the experiences of different groups based on factors such as demographics, profession and volunteer assignment.

Key Findings

The program created genuine, deep and sustained impacts across all four outcome areas. Many impacts strengthened over time as participants continued to apply their learning, maintain relationships and engage in new professional and civic activities.

Volunteers were shaped by their host countries as much as they contributed to them, with some relationships evolving into enduring personal and civic connections that have continued to provide benefits to both parties.

Global literacy and connections

Nearly all participants retained strong positive feelings towards their host country and its people five years after their assignment, including those whose assignments were less rewarding. Around 90% remain engaged with their host country, primarily through social media and personal relationships.

The study identified a mutually reinforcing relationship between participants' host-country connections, continued engagement and their culture-specific knowledge, creating a cycle that sustained global awareness. General capabilities like having a flexible mindset were more transferable than country-specific knowledge and became increasingly valuable in professional and personal contexts over time.

Civic engagement and international development literacy

The program had a lasting influence on participants' civic engagement, encouraging more internationally focused, skills-based and values-driven service. Most participants remained civically active five years after their assignment, with many taking on leadership positions as board members, mentors or policy contributors.

Many volunteers continued providing informal support to their host organisations for several years after their assignment, extending the benefit of their formal volunteer role.

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"I still feel connected to [the country] for some reason. Obviously with this earthquake that's just hit the country, it's very sad. I find myself wanting to read articles about what's happening and trying to stay connected with what's happening on the ground. In a way, it's a bit of a second home. I didn't expect, actually, that I would still feel like that. I suppose I have more of an emotional reaction to what's happening."

- Volunteer

"It was a transition point in some way. I still refer to it a bit. There's a pre-[assignment] and post-[assignment] version of me. It was such a special opportunity to live and work in that country and learn the culture."

- Volunteer

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"Oh, I miss it! I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I still don't know that it contributed much to the world, but I think it was a fabulous cultural exchange. I made such good friends, and I still keep in contact with a good part of them."

- Volunteer

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Participants' understanding of international development deepened over time. Many developed a 'positive realist' outlook, combining confidence in the value of development volunteering with a nuanced understanding of its limitations and complexities.

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Personal circumstances and development

Personal development was among the deepest and most enduring outcomes of the program. Participants commonly described lasting changes in their values, worldview, self-awareness and relationships, with many reporting that these continued to develop years after their assignment.

These changes often extended beyond the individual. Participants described applying new values and behaviours in ways that influenced their families, communities and workplaces, suggesting a broader 'prosocial spillover' effect not currently captured by the program's monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

"It's always there. I mentioned it to someone just in passing this morning. I refer back to it so often as this key period in my life that had such a big influence. It tends to come out in so many interesting ways."

- Volunteer

Implications

The study found that the program generated genuine and lasting impacts for most participants, many of which continued to grow over time. The findings also identify opportunities to strengthen outcomes across the volunteer lifecycle.

Improving assignment design and alignment between volunteer expertise, role requirements and partner organisation readiness may enhance professional outcomes. As impacts continue to develop after volunteers return home, greater investment in post-assignment support, alumni engagement and reflection opportunities could further strengthen outcomes for both volunteers and the program. Alumni also remain a valuable resource as mentors, advocates and contributors to program learning.

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