

WHAT'S THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON VOLUNTEERS' LIVES?

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN VOLUNTEERS (2019-22)

Australian
Volunteers

Introduction

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers started in 2019. The study explores how participating in the program influences volunteers both personally and professionally.

The study captures the experiences over time of a cohort of 54 Australian volunteers and accompanying dependants whose assignments spanned 16 different countries. The assignments ranged from 2-18 months, although most were cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This summary presents findings from the final report compiled in April 2022.

Methodology

The Longitudinal Study gathers information from 54 volunteers using three interviews over three years. The interviews were conducted at three points during participants' volunteer journey: at pre-departure; during – or shortly after the completion of – the volunteer assignment; and following completion of the assignment. Interviews were conducted by researchers independently of the Australian Volunteers Program.

The final report complements earlier reports outlining participants' pre-assignment motives and expectations (Phase One, 2019) and in-country experiences (Phase Two, 2020).

'Living in another country, particularly in a developing country, fundamentally changes everything – your whole value system really. And I think doing it as a volunteer [rather than being paid] is a really special thing and makes it easier to connect with the local community.'

– Former Australian volunteer

Key Findings

The study provides a wealth of insight into volunteers' diverse experiences and the impact of their assignment on them personally and professionally. Some of these are summarised here under four key themes.

International development literacy and civic participation

Study participants developed a deeper understanding about the values and practices that exist within the international aid and development sector. There is also some evidence of participants applying this newfound understanding, interest, knowledge, and skills to professional and civic roles.

Most participants were more engaged with international development issues than they had been prior to their assignments, demonstrated by an increase in the amount of time they spent monitoring news, media reports, social media and/or policy announcements.

The repatriation of volunteers due to the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to establish whether their international volunteering experience had any impact on their civic participation on return to Australia, as domestic opportunities were so curtailed by the pandemic.

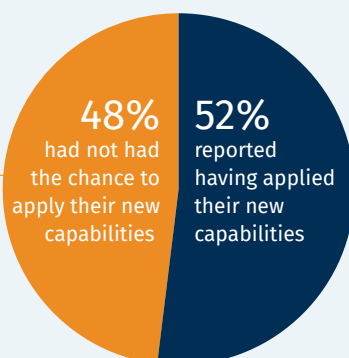
'Sitting down and really listening to what people have to say is something I've learnt from being a volunteer. You start to really appreciate other people's stories. The Australian Volunteers Program exposed me to all kinds of people with very different stories to mine.'

– Former Australian volunteer

Participants' use of cross-cultural capabilities since completing their assignment

Constraints on applying cross-cultural capabilities:

- Not working or unable to find work
- Restrictions on social contexts (COVID-19)
- Overburdened with 'routine' work
- Remote work (COVID-19) curtailing interpersonal office contact
- Other priorities (personal commitments, health)



Application of cross-cultural capabilities to:

- **Work (35%)**
Working with clients, patients or colleagues from diverse backgrounds, communicating (including better listening), more collaborative work practices, openness to differences
- **Personal life (20%)**
Welcoming to outsiders, comfort in multicultural settings, improving family relationships, relationships with friends
- **Civic engagement (9%)**
Advocating and working on internationally focused projects, sustaining relationships remotely with colleagues or stakeholders
- **Studies (7%)**
Understanding content, developing peer relationships

Global literacy and connections

All 54 participants felt that their assignment had contributed directly to developing a better understanding of the country they volunteered in and its culture. For a smaller number of participants, their assignment instigated more transformational changes to their overall outlook and ability to understand and embrace different cultures. Fifty-two per cent of participants articulated new insights, awareness, interest, or capabilities that reflect a more global perspective beyond the specific context of their assignment.

Although most participants had limited interest in their assignment country before the recruitment process began, 12 months after the completion of their assignment, all but four reported some form of ongoing engagement with their host country. For 79% of participants, their assignment also changed their view about Australia or being Australian, mostly in a positive way.

A prominent finding of the study is the strength and global breadth of new and internationally focused relationships that volunteers develop during their assignments. Participants felt their involvement with the program contributed to them being more globally connected, although the strength and diversity of some networks is limited, in part due to the pandemic.

Career progression and professional capabilities

Forty-four per cent of participants had had their careers impacted by their participation in the program; for three quarters of these the impact was positive. The career outcomes of this cohort are generally impressive, particularly considering the significant impact the pandemic had on many participants' future plans.

Volunteers' careers and professional capabilities benefitted more from developing 'soft skills' that support communication, relationships, and problem solving than technical, domain-specific knowledge and capabilities.

'Volunteering has enabled me to put myself in other people's shoes more. It really gave me a good understanding that you can't (easily) put yourself in somebody else's shoes and understand their perspective because you've had totally different lived experiences – culture, religion – everything is so different. For me, understanding this was key.'

– Former Australian volunteer

Personal circumstances and capabilities

Eighty-three per cent of participants attributed some form of positive personal development to experiences obtained during their assignment. Participation in the program can be the impetus for positive personal changes in both volunteers and partner organisations.

Fifty-four per cent of participants reported enacting change/s to their lifestyle upon returning to Australia that they linked directly to their assignment. Difficult readjustments were reported by 44% of participants. The difficulties were further magnified for some participants by the conditions of their return, being repatriated at short notice due to COVID-19.

The most important change to participants' personal relationships was due to forming strong bonds with other volunteers.

Recommendations

Findings from the study inform a set of recommendations aimed at supporting volunteers to get the most out of their assignment:

- Provide volunteers with opportunities to form, sustain and contribute to social networks offering support, friendship, information and opportunities to develop and apply newfound capabilities.
- Develop volunteer assignments with a high scope for learning in terms of the role, partner organisation, placement setting and experiences, while considering volunteers' individual needs, circumstances and objectives.
- Provide information to program staff designed to assist volunteers to benefit both personally and professionally while on assignment. This includes efforts to understand the distinctive features of different assignment modalities, and the roles of social media in connecting volunteers to partner organisations and other networks.

Next steps

The program continues to act on the recommendations of this, and previous, reports in the longitudinal study. The program is also planning on extending the course of the study and following the same group of volunteers for an additional five years.

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