

Australian
Volunteers

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International Volunteering

The experience of a lifetime





Australian Volunteers

Joining the Australian Volunteers Program is a meaningful step towards changing lives.

Funded by the Australian Government, this unique program connects passionate, skilled Australians with organisations across the Pacific, Asia and Africa — from remote villages to bustling cities. No matter your skills, whether you’re a medical professional, skilled tradesperson, sports coach or engineer — there’s a place where your experience can create a lasting impact.

But it’s not just about what you give — it’s also about what you’ll gain. People from all walks of life benefit from international volunteering, whether you’re just launching your career, a professional seeking a fresh perspective, or a retiree looking for a new challenge. You’ll immerse yourself in new cultures, build friendships across continents, learn new languages, and push beyond your comfort zone. You’ll work side-by-side with local colleagues on meaningful projects, returning home with renewed perspectives, global connections, and stories that will stay with you for life.

To understand how volunteering shapes people personally, professionally and culturally, the University of Technology Sydney carried out a longitudinal study with 50 diverse Australian volunteers across seven years. This publication draws on these in-depth findings.



You can find the full report by scanning the QR code here

Cover: Margaret Duffield is pictured with the students she supported as an English Competencies Development Mentor at Institut Keguruan Dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Indonesia. Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono / Australian Volunteers Program.

This page: Philip Thomas volunteered as an Economic Development and Fundraising Specialist at Yayasan Usaha Mulia in Indonesia, where he collaborated with Eneng Ernawati, the Health Education and Scholarship Coordinator. Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono / Australian Volunteers Program.

The power of volunteering¹

A long-term study of 50 Australian volunteers — before, during, and five years after their assignment — has revealed that the benefits of volunteering are both deep and long lasting.

Volunteers learned new skills, developed their careers, built professional networks and maintained meaningful friendships. While some volunteers faced challenges during their assignment, over time the overwhelming majority reported that it was a rewarding experience.

All participants expressed gratitude and 70% would consider volunteering overseas again.

Volunteers reported that the biggest impacts were:



Des Symes takes part in a simulation exercise with David Gesi from Touching the Untouchables, an NGO based in Goroka Papua New Guinea that brings community health education programs to rural communities. Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono / Australian Volunteers Program.

¹ Fee, A & Lizier, A. (2024). Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024)

What our volunteers told us:

- “Changed my life for the better without a doubt, 150%. I wouldn’t even have to think about it. It’s been one of the best things I’ve ever done.”
- “It gave me a real perspective of the sector that I want to work in ... what sort of work is available to me, and what sort of work I would like to do.”
- “I think self-awareness is probably a big part of it. I’m very aware of my limitations, my boundaries, but also my strengths.”
- “I felt like I was making a difference, and it was very rewarding.”





Liz's story:

Early career volunteering creates long-term impact

Name: Liz

Assignment: Business Development Mentor

Host organisation: LP2M

Location: Sumatra, Indonesia

Lessons from the long-term study: International volunteering can help people develop their career focus. A large proportion of volunteers who wanted to make a more positive social or environmental impact through their work found a new position, organisation or sector that allowed them to do so after their volunteer assignment.²

Liz's volunteer experience had a profound impact on her professional direction, particularly because it occurred early in her career. She set off for her assignment in West Sumatra at 25 years of age, having spent several years working, studying and travelling overseas.

Her assignment was as a Business Development Mentor with LP2M, an organisation supporting women through microfinance, education, disaster preparedness, and entrepreneurial training. She helped to strengthen small-scale, women-led business networks and develop LP2M's fundraising unit.

During her assignment, LP2M established *Limpapeh Handmade* — an ethical brand using naturally-dyed fabrics and traditional Minang weaving techniques to create products that fund LP2M's community work.

"My focus was on bringing the brand online and establishing partnerships for sales and development initiatives, including a short documentary and community-led workshops," Liz explains.

One of the key lessons Liz took from her experience was the importance of listening, building trust, and

forming relationships. "Often, the most valuable thing you can do is back your host organisation and community to drive the work — that's where the real impact and learning comes from," she says. "I think what makes a great assignment is when the volunteer finds ways to contribute to momentum that already exists — supporting the host organisation's goals, not leading them."

Most volunteers develop their communication and problem solving skills on assignment.³

While Liz had plenty of opportunities to build her professional skills, there was a lot of fun to be had along the way, too. She chose to volunteer in a remote area because she wanted to be fully immersed in the culture and language. "It was social, lively, and full of everyday experiences that helped me connect with people and learn the language much faster," she says. "I surfed most days, travelled, went to weddings, birthdays, dinners, and made great friends. I'm still in touch with friends from Sumatra."

Of course, there were challenges to face as well, including adjusting to the local culture, which was

quite conservative. "Without an expat community, it could feel isolating at times — especially when cultural practices felt unfamiliar or when English wasn't commonly used. But I found that embracing it, learning quickly, and following local norms made a huge difference. You have to be open-minded — you're not there to change anything through imposition. I also leaned on my cohort of volunteers — we became close friends even if we weren't in the same city."

Since returning to Australia, Liz has steadily built on her skills and experience through a Masters in Disaster Management, with a focus on resilience through community-building and cultural systems in West Sumatra. She now chairs *DisasterWISE*, a national network supporting community-led disaster resilience.

She also joined a social enterprise development in Western Australia, which directly built from

her assignment and led to her supporting *Loop Upcycling*, a social enterprise for which she is now a board member.

For the last two years, Liz has been leading the *Pilbara Innovation Partnership*, a public-private investment into community-led research and projects across the pastoral industry in northern Western Australia. She credits her volunteer experience with helping her develop a lot of the skills she relies on to be successful at work.

"Volunteering helped me clarify what kind of work I wanted to do and gave me practical skills, experience and confidence that I still use. It also shifted how I think about leadership and contribution," she says. "That experience gave me a foundation for the kind of complex, long-term, community-led work I now do in remote parts of Australia. I honestly don't think I'd be doing this work if I hadn't volunteered. It also taught me how to adapt quickly, work in uncertainty, and navigate cultural complexity — skills I rely on every day."

72%
of volunteers agree
their assignment
made them better
at their job.⁴

Liz immersed herself in life in West Sumatra, forming strong friendships and building life-long skills. Photo: Supplied.

² Ibid., p 45.

³ Ibid., p 51.

⁴ Australian Volunteers Program (2024). *Volunteer Impact Survey Summary Analysis*.



Sarah's story:

Taking a career from local to global

Name: Sarah
Assignment: Ambulance Clinical Support Officer
Host organisation: St John Ambulance
Location: Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Lessons from the long-term study: Participants who volunteered mid-career to enhance their skills reported the strongest positive impact on their professional life, benefiting greatly from the knowledge and capabilities gained during their assignment. They noted increased confidence, overall career benefits, and a strong likelihood of applying their experience at work. These volunteers also demonstrated a strong ability to sustain relationships with their host organisation and the networks developed during their assignment.⁵

When emergency nurse Sarah arrived in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG), she never imagined that a short volunteer stint would completely change her life.

"I initially went on a self-funded volunteer placement with St John Ambulance PNG to support them during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting," she says. "It was only meant to be a month, but I loved it. When I returned to Australia, I couldn't stop thinking about it."

That initial one-month experience sparked something bigger, and Sarah soon found out about the Australian Volunteers Program. "Self-funding made it hard to sustain long-term, so the chance to go back with the Australian Volunteers Program was ideal," she explains.

Supported by the program, Sarah returned to Port Moresby to work with St John Ambulance during a pivotal time of growth and reform. What she didn't expect was how deeply the experience would reshape her, influencing her career and outlook on life.

"I loved being an emergency nurse, and at that point I thought I would work in the emergency department

forever," she says. "But my time with St John opened my eyes to how versatile nursing can be — it's not just about patient care, but also roles in education, project management, and more."

Sarah's role with St John was broad, allowing her to engage in everything from developing standard operating procedures to training local staff. During APEC, St John received a donation of 21 ambulances, which marked the beginning of a significant expansion. "My first visit focussed on preparing things for APEC. When I returned with the Australian Volunteers Program, it was about considering, 'Ok we've had all these donations and hired new staff. How can we make these investments last?'"

She found it deeply rewarding to work on systems and procedures to ensure long-term sustainability. "It felt like I was stepping back from direct patient care of a few people to support the workforce level. That sense of scale and feeling like I could have a bigger impact on patients was really meaningful."

As Sarah's interest in workforce development grew, she began to build a professional network to support

her new direction. While on assignment, she met an Australian doctor working on triage systems, and she still works with him today. "That connection really shaped what came next for me."

Many mid-career volunteers establish valuable professional networks during their assignments, leading to partnerships, consulting opportunities and collaboration.⁶

What followed was a deeper dive into global health, resulting in a Master of Global Health, a series of Pacific-focused roles, and now a PhD in strengthening Pacific health systems.

"I always knew that there were clinicians doing interesting international work, but before I did the Australian Volunteers Program, I didn't know it could be a career, or how satisfying it could be," she says.

Now based in Darwin, Sarah credits her time with the Australian Volunteers Program as a turning point in her life. "It's played a deep role in everything I've done since, and it's given me the confidence to make a career out of this."

While Sarah was in the midst of her volunteer assignment, the future benefits weren't always clear. She faced the realities of life in Port Moresby including limited mobility, security risks and a fragile healthcare system. However, she ultimately found value in overcoming each of these obstacles.

"We were restricted in what we were allowed to do and where we could go. We needed security to go

to the supermarket, so it's not easy, but being there with other volunteers made all the difference. We supported each other a lot."

Sarah found the reality of the healthcare environment in PNG intense and often heartbreaking. "There were a lot of sad cases ... In Australia, patients would have had access to more resources and may have very different outcomes," she reflects. "But the local team was so eager, willing and keen to learn. In Australia, we sometimes take it for granted. When you're told to attend an education session, there are eye rolls. But in PNG, it's, 'Can I come as well? How do I sign up?' I really loved their enthusiasm."

For Sarah, the most valuable lessons came from managing challenging situations. "I learnt when to speak, when to stay quiet, when to get involved, and when to step back. Those are far more useful skills than any clinical skills that I've ever had, and I think they're often undervalued."

Her advice to others considering a volunteer assignment? "Go for it! It'll change your life," she says. "For some, it's a short experience that creates amazing memories. For others, it can change everything and lead you down a totally different path. Either way, it's a truly incredible experience."



Sarah's assignment with St John Ambulance in PNG ignited a passion for strengthening Pacific health systems. Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono / Australian Volunteers Program

⁵ Fee, A & Lizier, A. (2024). Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019-26): Interim Report (July 2024) p 7.

⁶ Ibid., p47.

⁷ Australian Volunteers Program (2024). Volunteer Impact Survey Summary Analysis.



Bala's story:

Giving back a lifetime of knowledge

Name: Bala
Assignment: Information and Communication Technology Mentor
Host organisation: Canaman Local Government
Location: The Philippines

Lessons from the long-term study: Participants who volunteered towards the end of their career reported very positive experiences. They were motivated by personal rather than professional goals — the biggest impacts they reported were creating new friendships, feeling a sense of personal satisfaction, and improving their intercultural awareness. Many went on to complete further volunteer assignments.⁸

Bala's love of travel and passion for change have taken him around the globe, working in the US, UK, France, New Zealand and Australia as a software engineer and project manager. With over 40 years of experience, most would be winding down their careers — but not Bala. When a friend mentioned the Australian Volunteers Program, it reignited his sense of adventure.

"I saw an opportunity in the Philippines that was right up my alley," he says. "The more I talked to people, the more I felt the value of doing it."

In 2019, Bala and his wife Lakshmi — who was supported by the program to join him as an Approved Accompanying Dependent — set off on their first journey to the Philippines, settling in a remote town in Canaman, 400km southeast of Manila.

After setting up their apartment, Bala prepared for his first day in the Canaman Local Government offices, where he would develop an IT strategy to identify key risks and requirements and establish priorities for urgent implementation.

"It was a remote area, but the organisation still had about three or four different locations. One

of the things we needed to do was to get these locations connected so they could all work off shared infrastructure like email."

Within six months, Bala and his team had rolled out essential infrastructure, including servers and connectivity. This had an immediate impact on local government offices, like the births, deaths and marriages department, which had previously relied on paper documents.

While work kept him busy, Bala and Lakshmi embraced every opportunity to dive into the local culture, cuisine and language.

"We were excited to live and work somewhere new and really understand their culture, language and way of life," he says, giving credit to his supervisor for helping him navigate cultural and workplace norms.

In an enthusiastic attempt to adopt the national language, Bala even attempted a speech in Tagalog at a local ceremony, only to discover that the community actually spoke Bicol. "I wrote a little five-minute speech in English, translated it, and read it out ... but it completely missed the mark!"

Despite the language mix-up, Bala found joy in exploring and connecting with locals and fellow volunteers. "We had regular jeepneys ... you could go into town, explore, and catch buses to nearby towns, three-to-four hours away," Bala says. "In small towns, people know you before you know them," he recalls, laughing about how a stranger on a bus reminded him when he missed his stop. "People are very helpful and very happy!"

When COVID-19 cut the assignment short, Bala returned to Australia but continued to support his host organisation remotely. Soon after, he and his wife took on another assignment with the Australian Volunteers Program — this time in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, working with an NGO focused on social welfare programs.

"We were only in Cambodia for three months, but it was a great experience," Bala said. "I'd worked with the NGO remotely for six months, so when we arrived, the office was already well set up."

Bala helped define policies and implement processes to support the NGO's operations. His work made such an impact that it led to an opportunity with another local NGO, and he's now planning his third assignment with the program. "We'll do three months remote, up to three months in-country, and then another three months remotely, to wrap it up."

With two volunteer experiences under his belt, Bala feels a deep sense of fulfilment and is excited about what lies ahead. "I get greater satisfaction knowing I'm helping somebody who can't afford these services otherwise ... I don't think you get the same feeling in a paid job."

While proud of his professional achievements, it's the people who've had the biggest impact on Bala.

"I come from India, so I know there are countries with fewer opportunities than Australia. However, having lived here for 30-plus years, you still need a reality check."

80% of volunteers say they deepened their awareness of global inequities and privileges.⁹

His advice to others considering the journey is powerfully simple: embrace it fully.

"Take every opportunity to understand the language and the culture. Enjoy the place that you're visiting," he says. "The best part is spending time with people, whether it's in the office, the community, or travelling around ... It's the camaraderie and sharing the journey together."



Lessons from the long-term study: The stand-out benefit for those accompanying their loved one on a volunteer assignment was experiencing a new culture.¹⁰

97% of Australian Volunteers agree that cultural knowledge and skills are among the greatest benefits of their experience.¹¹

Bala and his wife Lakshmi have completed two volunteer assignments and are planning a third. Photos: Supplied.

A world of opportunity

Every year, around 300 Australian volunteers travel to over 25 countries across the Pacific, Asia and Africa to support the development goals of their host organisations.



In 2024, Australian volunteers undertook assignments in:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Bhutan | Lesotho | Solomon Islands |
| Cambodia | Mongolia | South Africa |
| Eswatini | Nepal | Sri Lanka |
| Federated States of Micronesia | Palau | Tanzania |
| Fiji | Papua New Guinea | Timor-Leste |
| Indonesia | Philippines | Tonga |
| Kiribati | Republic of the Marshall Islands | Tuvalu |
| Laos | Samoa | Vanuatu |
| | | Vietnam |

The Australian Volunteers Program continuously assesses assignment locations, opportunities, and risks, prioritising where the need is greatest.

Scan here to discover our current partner countries.



Australian Volunteers

Your path to becoming an Australian volunteer

Choosing your assignment

Explore the current list of assignments on our website — click Apply Now to submit your application.

If your skills and experience align with the role, our recruiters will invite you for an interview and compliance check.



Before you go

Our Onboarding Coordinator will guide you through your pre-departure tasks, like securing medical clearance and obtaining a visa.

You'll also take part in online training and a three-day pre-departure briefing in Melbourne.



We've got you covered

- As a volunteer, we'll pay for your assignment flights, visas and insurance, and the program will support you with living and accommodation allowances.
- Depending on the length of your assignment, you may be entitled to a settling-in allowance and a resettlement allowance to help with your transition.
- You can apply to have your dependents join you.
- We have services to support your mental, physical and social wellbeing while you're on assignment.



We care about inclusion

- If you live with a disability, we'll work with you to ensure your needs are met.
- The Australian Volunteers Program welcomes people with diverse gender and sexual identities.
- We provide a flexible and culturally safe way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in international volunteering through our Indigenous Pathways program.

Starting your assignment

Your in-country team will welcome you and help you settle in. They'll be there to:

- provide you with an orientation, which may include language lessons
- deliver a safety briefing
- introduce you to your partner organisation, with whom you'll develop an assignment plan with clear goals
- stay in touch with you and your partner organisation throughout your assignment.

Want to explore your new home away from home? You'll get at least four weeks of leave per year.



Returning home

We'll help you transition back into life at home with:

- a post-assignment medical check
- a psychological debrief
- an online learning course and post-assignment workshop to help you reflect on your growth.



Simoa da Silva Tilman (right) volunteered at Bairo Pite Clinic in Timor-Leste as a Nurse Unit Mentor and worked alongside nurses Ricardina Manuela Boavida (middle) and Ines Rosa (left). Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono / Australian Volunteers Program.

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The Australian Volunteers Program acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We recognise the continuing connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People have to their lands and waters, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.

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