

Introduction

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers started in 2019. The study explores how participating in the program influences volunteers both personally and professionally in relation to four outcome areas: civic engagement and international development literacy; global literacy and connections; career progression and professional capabilities; and personal circumstances and capabilities.

The study captures the experiences over time of a cohort of Australian volunteers and accompanying dependants whose assignments spanned 16 different countries. This summary presents findings from the latest round of interviews conducted in 2024.

Methodology

The Longitudinal Study is tracking a cohort of 50 volunteers. Data is being collected via periodic semi-structured interviews prior to, during, and after their volunteer assignment. Interviews were conducted by researchers independently of the Australian Volunteers Program.

This report outlines findings of the study's fourth round of interviews, focusing on the period 2021-2023 that bridges the second wave of the pandemic and the initial post-pandemic period. It builds on earlier reports outlining participants' pre-assignment motives and expectations (Phase One, 2019) and in-country experiences (Phase Two, 2020), and post-assignment reflections (Phase Three, 2022).

Key Findings

This was a time of great change for many of the study's participants. One valued participant died. Others underwent dramatic personal and professional changes that include marrying, becoming first-time parents or grandparents, ending or starting relationships or jobs, relocating to new countries, cities or states, undergoing major surgery, overcoming health setbacks and economic hardships, and taking on demanding new caring responsibilities.

Against this background, most participants reflect favourably on their volunteer experiences, and all are benefitting in some way from personal and/or professional impacts of their assignments. For some these have been transformational. Although some benefits are unevenly distributed, these are evident not just in participants' reflections of their experiences across the course of the study, but also in objective changes in their careers and lives in the three years since their assignment finished.

"What I've come to know is that that [their volunteering] experience really made a lasting impact on everyone's lives that I'm in touch with and it has shaped and changed the ways in which I think that they go about life, even in terms of having a really solid friend group now or having more confidence to take an overseas position or travel more with work. Or on the flipside, it has shown them what was really important to them" - Volunteer

Civic engagement and international development literacy

Since their assignments, volunteers' civic participation has become more impactful and internationally oriented, thanks to the skills, interests, and relationships developed during their volunteering. The proportion of participants involved in voluntary service has increased.

Although ongoing contact with partner organisations has slightly decreased, it remains widespread. Participants maintain a strong interest in and understanding of international development complexities, and their appreciation for the unique contributions of development volunteering has grown.

"I don't think I had much knowledge or understanding of what the aid program was before. Definitely, having been a part of it I now think about how aid works in conjunction or as a part of that political structure. Like how having aid going into [the host country] feeds into political goals in the Pacific area. So that has helped me understand that bigger picture side of things and I definitely did not have that before at all." - Volunteer

Global literacy and connections

Volunteers retain positive feelings and connections with their host country, although these may fade over time. Their in-country experiences and program support, including volunteer learning activities, have significantly contributed to making them more globally oriented and informed. These changes in outlook, friendships, interests, and cross-cultural skills continue to benefit them in their work and civic activities.

"I've got eyes on a bigger world and my eyes have been moulded by more than what's under my nose. I live in the middle of a big white city and I know that a lot of the world's not like that. That's really valuable to me, it's my world view, it's the change in my world view." - Volunteer

Career progression and professional capabilities

The program provides numerous professional benefits, helping volunteers build confidence, expand their knowledge and skills, and explore new career paths. Young volunteers with career-related motivations have seen the most significant gains. Since the previous interviews, the sample group's career positions have generally improved compared to their pre-assignment roles.

The program has been particularly effective in enhancing participants' soft skills rather than their technical expertise. It has been professionally beneficial for most participants aiming to transition to 'prosocial' careers.

"[My assignment] gave me direction, definitely helped me nail down my passion and a clearer vision of where I could be effective. Now I have a tangible pathway for getting there and the networks and people to draw on for support and advice to be able to make this happen. It gave me an opportunity to broaden my skillset and confidence and then also just to think about the impact of things, like the value of research, the value of connecting with people and networking and all of those types of things and how it all feeds back into each other." - Volunteer

Personal circumstances and capabilities.

The personal changes triggered by the volunteer assignment may take time to become evident and can be hard for some volunteers to describe. Maintaining relationships with like-minded volunteers remains a key part of the volunteer experience for many.

The results support the earlier conclusion that participating in the program can lead to positive personal changes for volunteers. These changes, both small and transformational, arise from the challenging and novel settings they work and live in.

"I think it was a really formative time for me, maybe more personally than professionally ... [it] has really lodged itself in my mind and in my heart. I was there for just under a year, but I think it's such a complex place and I felt really lucky to do the work that I was doing, to get to dig into that." - Volunteer

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