

Ten Insights for Organisations That Use or Manage International Volunteers

Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (2019–2026)

The **Longitudinal Study of Australian Volunteers (LSAV)** tracked 55 participants in the **Australian Volunteers Program** across a six-year period, from the start of their assignments in 2019 to five years after their return. The study investigated how their international volunteer experiences affected them personally and professionally in the years following their assignment.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in most assignments being cut short, a disruption that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Nonetheless, the study is one of the most sustained longitudinal investigations yet conducted into the impacts of international volunteering on volunteers.

This Research Briefing summarises ten insights from the study for international volunteer cooperation organisations (IVCOs) that recruit, prepare, and support international development volunteers, and for organisations that host and manage volunteers during their assignments.



Insights 1–3

Before the Assignment

Getting role fit, expectations, and readiness right

Insight 1

Approach role design and the volunteer position description as important quality assurance mechanisms.

For many volunteers, the decision to volunteer was closely related to their career aspirations. Most working-age volunteers had resigned from existing jobs to accept their assignment, hoping to gain experiences and networks that could assist their career.

The strongest predictor of volunteers' professional development and career benefits was the degree of alignment between their expertise, their actual assignment role, and the capacity of the host organisation to utilise the volunteer effectively. The accuracy of the position description and the overall 'fit' between the volunteer, the host organisation, and the role are important safeguards of assignment quality.

- Volunteers whose roles effectively utilised their professional skills developed greater capabilities and confidence, and achieved stronger long-term career benefits in the years that followed.
- Where a mismatch existed between the formal position and actual tasks, the assignment was often unproductive and professionally limiting for the volunteer. In some cases, the negative professional and personal effects of this reverberated for many years after the assignment.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Ensure that position descriptions are accurate and clearly linked to the expertise being recruited, and that any subsequent changes to the role or the host organisation's circumstances maintain this alignment.
2. Provide volunteers a realistic role preview before they formally accept the assignment. Include opportunities for them to talk with multiple host organisation staff and, if relevant, current or former volunteers.

Insight 2

Set realistic expectations about the professional costs and benefits.

Many volunteers found the assignment professionally transformative. Nonetheless, some volunteers' career-related objectives were only partially met, or were realised in ways and on timelines they had not anticipated. While the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in this, the gap between expectations and actual outcomes was, for some, a source of disappointment.

- Most volunteers found the assignment valuable to their careers. However, some experienced delayed career benefits, taking several years after their assignment to find a professional opportunity that enabled them to apply capabilities they had gained during the assignment.
- The opportunity costs of an international volunteer assignment - including forgone income, reduced retirement savings, social dislocation, and disrupted career continuity - were substantial and underappreciated by many volunteers when they entered the program.
- Volunteers came to their assignment with a variety of career expectations, goals, and personal sense of meaning. Six distinct **volunteer profiles** were identified (e.g., early-career Launchers, career-change Transitioners, and late-career Veterans), each with different support needs, in-country experiences, and post-assignment trajectories.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Communicate honestly the potential financial and career impacts associated with international volunteer assignments when recruiting volunteers. This should include setting clear, evidence-based expectations for volunteers about the likely professional benefits, including where outcomes may be indirect or delayed.
2. Normalise delayed career outcomes following an assignment and support volunteers to translate their experiences in post-assignment job markets.
3. Tailor assignment features, and assignment and career support, to the six different volunteer profiles.



[Read more about the six volunteer profiles and what drove them](#)

Insight 3

Prepare volunteers for the personal and psychological impacts of the assignment.

Many participants experienced personal, psychological, and wellbeing challenges during and after their assignments. Volunteers believed some of these could have been better anticipated through more deliberate preparation and support.

- The volunteer experience involves multiple periods of liminality, uncertainty, and disruption before, during, and after an assignment. This was most acute for volunteers whose assignments were in isolated settings and for the many volunteers who had left prior jobs to accept the assignment. Being accompanied by a partner offset some of these issues, although partners faced their own challenges.
- Assignments prompted significant personal change in some volunteers, including shifts in values, worldview, and relationships, which took time to process and articulate, particularly after return.
- Pre-departure and in-country training intended mainly to help volunteers adjust and cope during the assignment were valued. For some, the value of this training increased in the period following their return, as volunteers recognised how it could help them reflect, build relationships, and continue to learn.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Normalise the personal and psychological demands of volunteering, including uncertainty, disruption, and challenges it presents to social and family connections.
2. Prepare volunteers for the likelihood of personal change, and for the time and support required to process these changes during and after the assignment.
3. Provide structured pre-departure and in-country training and communicate its potential longer-term developmental value to volunteers.



Insights 4-7

During the assignment

Building collaboration, monitoring fit and wellbeing, and structuring reflection

Insight 4

Design assignments to enable strong, collaborative relationships between volunteers and local staff.

The most beneficial and lasting outcomes for volunteers – personal and professional – arose from their close, sustained collaborations with local colleagues. Assignments that enabled volunteers to work side-by-side with specific local counterparts created the conditions for cultural immersion, mutual exchange, and two-way learning.

- Volunteers who worked closely with local counterparts reported the richest learning outcomes, the strongest intercultural capabilities, and the most sustained post-assignment connections with their host countries.
- Many of the most transferable and enduring professional gains – particularly intercultural awareness and capabilities – were developed through everyday collaboration and immersion (e.g., informal conversations, shared problem-solving, and day-to-day work practices with local colleagues).
- Assignments that required volunteers to engage in unfamiliar tasks, navigate different organisational norms, and adapt to new ways of working ('stretch' conditions) were also particularly developmental, especially when undertaken with local colleagues.
- Volunteers believed that these conditions were mutually beneficial, offering opportunities for their colleagues to also learn, particularly where relationships were collaborative rather than transactional.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Consider how assignments can be designed to enable sustained, side-by-side collaboration between volunteers and local counterparts.
2. Create opportunities for immersive, day-to-day interactions and shared work within assignments, rather than using volunteers to perform formal training, advisory, or individual roles.

Insight 5

Monitor role fit and volunteer wellbeing and intervene with support when needed.

The conditions most strongly associated with negative outcomes in the study – role misalignment, underutilisation by host organisations, and inadequate support during periods of vulnerability – were sometimes not apparent in the early stages of assignments. Ongoing monitoring and a willingness to intervene where necessary are critical to preventing the negative consequences of these conditions on volunteers' wellbeing and development.

- The cumulative effects of poor role fit or inadequate host organisation support extended beyond inhibiting performance and professional development. Some volunteers' physical and psychological health suffered because they had few opportunities for meaningful contribution during the assignment that they had prepared so long for and forgone so much to accept.

- A volunteer role that had a balance of challenge, novelty, meaning, and social connection emerged as central to productive assignments and to volunteers' personal growth. Excessive challenge without adequate meaning or relational support generated stress and impeded learning, while insufficient challenge limited developmental outcomes.
- Support during periods of acute vulnerability, including ill health, major crises, and assignment disruption, varied considerably. It was most beneficial when it was perceived as proactive and genuine.
- Volunteers in remote or isolated placements faced additional barriers to social and professional connection, with more limited access to in-country networks, peer engagement, and support structures.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Establish ongoing monitoring processes to identify emerging issues in role fit and volunteer wellbeing across the assignment.
2. Monitor and actively manage the balance of challenge, novelty, meaning, and social connection within assignments.
3. Provide timely, proactive, and credible support during periods of acute vulnerability, ensuring that volunteers know their concerns are taken seriously.
4. Ensure equitable access to in-country networks, peer engagement opportunities, and support structures for volunteers in remote or isolated placements.

Insight 6

Invest in structured reflection and learning activities during the assignment and help volunteers articulate what they have learned.

Many of the most valuable capabilities developed during volunteer assignments were tacit, making them difficult to name or describe for use in professional contexts. Transformational personal changes were sometimes not fully recognised by volunteers until well after their assignment. Structured learning and reflection activities may help make these capabilities visible and transferable in ways that can benefit volunteers' longer-term trajectories.

- Over time, participants came to recognise the contribution of structured training activities to their learning, cultural awareness, relationship formation, and the development of transferable practices.
- Many volunteers had difficulty articulating their interpersonal and intercultural capabilities in job applications and professional settings, limiting their ability to translate these capabilities into career outcomes.
- In-country training activities were important sites of peer connection. These were the genesis for some of the longest-lasting and most valued friendships and professional networks, whose benefits continued to be felt long after the assignment.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Embed guided reflection processes within training activities to support the identification and application of learning.
2. Provide volunteers with frameworks, language, and examples to help them explain interpersonal and intercultural capabilities in professional contexts.
3. Use end-of-assignment debriefs and evaluations to connect individual contributions to both the IVCO's and host organisation's broader goals, and to help volunteers to communicate these contributions persuasively.

Insight 7

Acknowledge and support volunteers' discretionary contributions while establishing clear boundaries.

A large but mostly invisible set of discretionary contributions - activities undertaken by volunteers to help host communities beyond their formal assignment - was evident across the study. These contributions extended the assignment's reach and impact in meaningful ways, but were typically informal, unrecognised, and outside structured measurement frameworks.

- Discretionary contributions included after-hours community engagement, resource and network sharing, informal mentoring, and the facilitation of connections between Australian organisations and host organisations. In some cases, these led to substantial and ongoing collaborations.
- These activities are generally not captured within monitoring and evaluation frameworks, meaning that the IVCO's full development impact is likely underestimated.
- At the same time, discretionary engagement can introduce potential risks, including overcommitment by volunteers, ambiguity about role boundaries, dependency within host organisations, and exposure to reputational or safety concerns for the IVCO.
- Discretionary contributions were also made by some accompanying partners and family members, whose activities, while often valuable, went largely unrecognised within existing frameworks.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Recognise and, where appropriate, document discretionary contributions as part of the volunteer assignment's overall impact.
2. Provide clear guidance to volunteers on the boundaries of the formal role and the potential risks associated with some forms of discretionary engagement.
3. Acknowledge the contributions of accompanying partners and family members and consider how these might be appropriately recognised within formal measurement frameworks.



Insights 8-10

After the assignment

Supporting repatriation and sustaining volunteers' ongoing engagement

Insight 8

Treat repatriation as a period of vulnerability and provide structured post-assignment support.

Being repatriated from the assignment during COVID-19 caused particular challenges for the participants in this study. It also drew attention to this phase as one of heightened vulnerability for volunteers - especially those whose assignments might have been less fulfilling or developmental than they had hoped. Volunteers' vulnerability was shaped by identity changes they underwent and uncertainty about future pathways.

- Almost half the participants experienced difficulties readjusting, and many sought professional mental health support following repatriation. Volunteers returning without firm employment plans, those whose assignments were

interrupted by the pandemic, those who experienced significant role misfit, and those who were highly embedded in the host culture experienced the most difficulties.

- 'Career shock' – returning without employment, with disrupted expectations and/or diminished career options – emerged as a significant risk, particularly for the many volunteers in career transition phases.
- Career trajectories following assignment varied considerably. For some volunteers, professional benefits were delayed, emerging only several years after return as opportunities arose to deploy newly developed capabilities.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Recognise repatriation as a phase that requires proactive, targeted support for volunteers with elevated vulnerability, particularly those without employment or with disrupted assignments.
2. Tailor post-assignment support to different volunteer profiles, recognising variation in their personal and career needs, and the variety of support timelines that may be required.
3. Communicate explicitly that professional benefits may be delayed, and support volunteers to interpret and manage this trajectory, including guidance on managing career disruption and uncertainty.

Insight 9

Recognise and sustain volunteers' ongoing engagement with the host country.

A central finding of the LSAV is that volunteer assignments are best understood as transnational experiences, not bounded international episodes. The relationships, capabilities, and civic commitments volunteers developed and reinforced during their assignments continued to evolve after their return, creating value for volunteers, host organisations, and host communities. These ongoing transnational connections are an important part of volunteers' impacts that may not be captured by standard monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

- A mutually reinforcing relationship existed between volunteers' host-country connections, their post-assignment engagement with the country, and their awareness of the country's culture and current events. Sustained access to relationships and information supported volunteers' continued learning and contribution.
- Many volunteers continued to provide discretionary post-assignment support for host organisations over several years. The strength of the ongoing relationship between the volunteer and a key host organisation contact was the strongest predictor of sustained engagement.
- Many volunteers continued to act as bridge-builders, knowledge brokers, and informal advocates, facilitating cross-border partnerships, diaspora engagement, and policy contributions in the years following their assignment.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Recognise ongoing volunteer-host country engagement as a feature of their assignment's long-term impact.
2. Help volunteers to maintain host-country relationships and access to relevant information about the host organisation and host country after the assignment has ended.
3. Facilitate conditions that sustain volunteer-host organisation relationships, particularly by supporting key points of contact within the host organisation.
4. Identify and, where appropriate, support the role of volunteers as bridge-builders and knowledge brokers connecting people and organisations in the home and host countries.

Insight 10

Use volunteer alumni as an asset for the IVCO and invest in structured alumni engagement.

The study identified a large reservoir of experience, capability, and goodwill among former volunteers. As well as benefiting from their experiences, alumni frequently continued to make contributions to global development issues as advocates, mentors, evaluators, and participants in ongoing development-related civic activities. Continued engagement with alumni enables IVCOs to extend their developmental and community impacts.

- Several participants undertook further formal international volunteering after their assignment. Interest in future assignments fluctuated but remained high, indicating a sustained pipeline of experienced volunteers open to repeat assignments.
- Their experiences as volunteers led many participants to shift towards more internationally oriented, skills-based, and values-driven forms of civic engagement following their assignment. This change in civic participation may not be well captured in existing monitoring frameworks.
- Alumni who developed a 'positive realist' perspective, combining an appreciation of the distinct value of development volunteering with a nuanced understanding of its limitations, may be particularly effective as mentors, reviewers, and public advocates.

Implications for IVCOs and Host Organisations

1. Recognise the alumni cohort as an ongoing asset and a source of extended impact for the IVCO's activities, for instance as mentors, reviewers, and advocates, particularly those with a credible 'positive realist' perspective.
2. Invest in structured alumni engagement that supports peer connections, reflection, and continued civic participation.
3. Identify and, where feasible, incorporate post-assignment civic engagement into formal monitoring and evaluation frameworks.



Further Details and Discussion:

A full copy of the final LSAV report (2019-2026) can be downloaded at: <http://uts.edu.au/lsav>

For more details or to discuss these findings:

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Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono/Australian Volunteers Program
Australian volunteer Clinic Manager Mentor Lauren
Lidgerwood (left) with Clinic Manager Leisha Ah Sang (right)
at the Animal Protection Society (APS) Samoa in Apia.